

## **Intelligent Design & Theology: What Place for the Creator?**

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In *Intelligent Design: The Bridge between Science and Theology*<sup>1</sup>, the ID-theorist William Dembski argues that ID basically has three characteristics: first it is a scientific research program, next it is an intellectual and cultural movement, and third it is a way of understanding divine action. In this paper, I respond to Dembski's third characteristic: that ID is a way of understanding divine action. I will doubt the validity of that claim.

### **How does Dembski know the designer is God?**

What is the basis of his inferences from the so-called irreducible complexity in biological systems (if such complexity exists at all) to the God that is worshipped in Christianity? Such an inference requires two steps: first, one has to identify a biological system as a design, and second, one has to identify the design with its designer.

How do we recognize design? Dembski has argued that one can construct an intricate procedure or algorithm, an 'explanatory filter' as he calls it, in order to identify something as a design. This explanatory filter is backed up by a complex statistical analysis of the likelihood of some systems to emerge spontaneously, that is by chance. I leave it to the community of statisticians and natural scientists to establish whether or not Dembski's filter works; that is not a theological matter. One thing, however, is clear and that is that Dembski's filter works with background knowledge. To identify something as design (i.e. not the result of random processes) depends (a) on knowledge of what random processes *can* establish, and (b) on knowledge of designs. The inference to design depends on well-established scientific knowledge. It is on the basis of that knowledge that a biological system is excluded as being the result of chance and being the purposely created result of a designer. In other words, we recognize design when we see it.

The cosmologist Fred Hoyle argued years ago also that life on earth was the result of design. But he was no Christian. He argued that 'God' was an entity in the universe, and not the transcendent God of Christian faith. Dembski cannot exclude that possibility. Yet, in his books he speaks about God using concepts from Christian theology, thus suggesting that the designer of life on earth is the Christian, transcendent Creator-God. This is strange. On the one hand Dembski argues that ID is 'theologically minimalist,' but he also argues that it is the task "for the theologian – to connect the intelligence inferred by the design theorist with the God of Scripture."<sup>2</sup> Yet, in all his books, Dembski constantly speaks about God as if it is already clear that God *is* the designer.

### **Can we know the designer is God?**

This raises a question: Can we know the designer is God? Is it possible for human beings to make inferences from the world to God?

Inferences from the world to God were popular amongst natural theologians during the so-called 'Baconian era', from 1830 to roughly 1870. Historians call it the 'Baconian' era, because natural philosophers and theologians during that time adopted in their work the inductive method of

Francis Bacon. The Baconian era was an age where American theology was influenced by Scottish Enlightenment thinkers such as Thomas Reid. Reid was a so-called ‘common sense’ philosopher, arguing that under normal circumstances what we perceive to be there, *is* actually there the way we perceive it. In Baconian theology, common sense thought was used to establish that through reading the Bible humans could gain genuine knowledge of God. The Bible was a “storehouse of facts” according to the Princeton theologian Charles Hodge.<sup>3</sup> And since the Bible told as a matter of fact that God created heaven and earth, it was considered possible to make inferences from nature as to the existence and attributes of God – although such inferences should always be anchored in the Bible as the true word of God. Theology and the natural sciences shared a similar inductivist methodology, but ultimately the Bible gave the background knowledge for making inferences to the nature of God.

I am unable to pursue this theme in extenso, but it seems to me that Dembski’s inference from design to ‘God a.k.a. the Designer’ is rooted in Baconian methodology. For me, reading about Baconian natural theology immediately resonated with ID. How else than from a Baconian natural-theological framework can Dembski (a) make the inference from irreducible complexity in nature to design, (b) make the inference and from design to a supernatural Designer, and (c) identify the supernatural Designer with the God of whom the Bible speaks as being the Creator of heaven and earth? In other words, Dembski’s identification of the Designer with God rests on background knowledge: Dembski recognizes design when he sees it, and concludes from this to the existence of a Designer, since he knows about God.

We can formulate some answers now:

1. How does Dembski know the designer is God? – Dembski knows that the designer is God from the Bible. The Bible tells that God created heaven and earth. And since some biological systems apparently cannot be described to be the effects of randomness, one has to conclude to design. For Dembski the designer resonates with the God of the Bible.
2. Can we know that the designer is God? Is it even remotely possible for human beings to make inferences from the world to God? – According to Baconian natural theology, it is possible to know about God if one carefully reads the Bible and then looks at nature. From nature inferences can be made to the existence and attributes of God.

But we still need to cover a third question: whether it is theologically warranted to conclude that the intelligent designer of ID can be the God of Christian theology. In other words, one can ask whether believers *should want* the designer of ID to be the God they worship. I doubt whether that is the case.

### **Barthian critique of natural theology**

First of all we can ask whether natural theology can give us true knowledge of God, as Dembski apparently assumes. The Swiss theologian Karl Barth forcefully rejected natural theology as a valid way of theologizing.<sup>4</sup> Barth’s critique of natural theology has often been interpreted as a critique of Nazism which used arguments based on natural theology to support the superiority of the German *Volk*. This interpretation is undoubtedly true. But to focus solely on this aspect of Barth’s critique is to reduce it to an ad hoc response. In my opinion, Barth’s critique goes much further than that.

For Barth natural theology was the attempt to know God without revelation. Natural theology is the attempt of humans to come clean with God on their own. Through natural theology, humans

want to have God at their disposal; natural theology entails the “domestication of transcendence.”<sup>5</sup> But can humans succeed in their attempt? Barth believed not. Barth’s point not only is that natural theology is both a refusal to surrender human self-sufficiency as well as a longing to stay in control, but moreover, that if God’s revelation is at humanity’s disposal, then “it is obviously no longer the revelation of God, but a new expression ... for the revelation *which encounters man in his own reflection.*”<sup>6</sup> Barth argues that humans may think that they are able to come to know God on their own, but instead what they hold to be God is merely a self-reflection of their own wishes and longings. If they worship this image of God, which is the self-reflection of humanity, then they are worshipping an illusion, an idol.

Barth thus argues that human beings are caught in a vicious circle in which everything that appears before their consciousness is a reflection of their own being. In his criticism of natural theology, Barth incorporates the critique of Feuerbach and Marx. Moreover, Barth proves himself to be a student of the epistemological idealism of the neo-Kantian Marburg school. According to neo-Kantian philosophers such as Hermann Cohen, scientific knowledge is a creation of the human mind. Nature cannot be known as it is in itself, but only in so far as it can be grasped by the human mind. As soon as humans gain knowledge of nature, they are dealing with creations of their own minds. Knowledge of nature, according to neo-Kantianism, is merely a mirror of the human mind. In gaining knowledge of nature, humans merely encounter themselves. Nature’s structures and connections can thus never contain any reference to God, since those structures and connections themselves are a matter of human comprehension, constructions of the mind.

Natural theology thus can never lead to knowledge of God, since all ‘knowledge of God’ derived from nature reveals more about human beings than that it reveals God. In worshipping such a God, humans in effect would be worshipping themselves, which is heresy and idolatry. How can those adhering to ID, who claim that in nature we can find traces of the intelligent and transcendent cause Christians worship as God, preclude that it is *not* their own reflection they are worshipping? The God of ID is a god that is measured to human proportions. I am no Barthian and disagree with Barth’s theology in many ways, but I find Barth’s arguments for rejecting natural theology very convincing, which is why I reject ID as a valid road to knowledge of God.

### **Taking God’s transcendence seriously**

Barth in a sense warns us not to confuse our human standards with God’s standards of which we can have no knowledge (although Barth admitted that God himself could give us that knowledge *senkrecht von oben* – a claim I don’t find plausible). A second theological argument for the theological unsoundness of ID makes a similar point, but focuses more on the logic underlying ID’s speaking and thinking about God.<sup>7</sup>

Dembski argues against methodological naturalism, meaning that “that to understand nature scientists must only invoke ‘natural processes.’ In this context the term ‘natural processes’ means processes operating entirely according to unbroken natural laws and characterized by chance and necessity.”<sup>8</sup> Methodological naturalism, according to Dembski, “insists that it is most logical, most scientific, if one pretends [that the empirical possibility of design in nature] is logically impossible. Instead of holding methodological naturalism as a working hypothesis, methodological naturalists hold it as a dogma.”<sup>9</sup> More theologically formulated, Dembski writes: “Call those who are blind to God’s action in the world ‘naturalists,’ and call the view that nature is self-contained ‘naturalism.’”<sup>10</sup>

Dembski thus claims that methodological naturalists – which would include most scientists – assume that the natural order is causally closed and that supernatural causation should not be taken into account in the explanation of empirical phenomena. Dembski argues that methodological naturalism blinds scientists from the possibility of design in nature. Apparently, design in nature has a supernatural origin, although I have been unable to find that claim explicitly in Dembski's writings. At least Dembski argues that the assumption of the causal closure of the natural order cannot be scientifically established. This entails that if scientists were to take methodological naturalism seriously (and not dogmatically), they would or should acknowledge the possibility of the openness of the universe to supernatural causation.

Dembski is not the only one arguing for the openness of the universe for divine causation. Many working on the topic of divine action – which includes many working in the field of science and religion – try to establish the scientific inability to establish the causal closure of the universe so that divine action cannot be ruled out in principle. This is not a God-of-the-gaps strategy, since many, such as for example John Polkinghorne, argue that the gaps in the causal texture of the universe are not of an epistemological nature, but ontological.

Nonetheless, I have great problems with this kind of argument. The major presupposition of such arguments is that God and world are competing with each other. If everything is scientifically explainable (in e.g. causal or mechanistic terms), then there is apparently no room for God to act. As Andrew Porter writes: "It is as if for God to act in the world, something in the world has to move over to make room for God to act. ... For God to act, he has to push on something, and for that to happen, ordinary forces have to stop pushing on that something, or he has to add his own force on top of whatever natural forces are also pushing on the thing that he has to move in order to act."<sup>11</sup> Porter calls this kind of doing theology *theological naturalism*, "for it seeks to describe divine action in the same terms that in other parts of life are used to describe natural phenomena."<sup>12</sup> Moreover, Porter calls this kind of doing theology 'cause laundering': "In money laundering, drug lords put their money in bank accounts where it (or its sources) cannot be traced, and then it can be withdrawn and invested in 'legitimate' businesses. Cause laundering is like money laundering. If causes can be traced to places where they cannot be traced any further, then a theologian is free to use them for his own purposes, such as ascribing them to 'acts of God.'"<sup>13</sup>

The point is this: if God and the world are in competition with each other, then God and the world are on the same ontological level. In that case, God's transcendence – God's otherness – evaporates. God may be supernatural, located somewhere 'outside' our universe, but he is not ontologically other than the universe, for if God wants to act in our universe, something in our universe has to stop working, which implies that the 'logic' of divine action is the same 'logic' as natural causation. If God and our universe share the same ontological nature, God's transcendence is no longer defined as being *other than* the universe, but as being *somewhere else*. In other words, God is not omnipotent and omnipresent, but God *is limited*: God can only act in our universe when other forces stop acting, and God can only be in our universe if something else makes room for God. The consequence is that God is limited by the nature and existence of our universe. As a theologian, I find such an assumption simply outrageous, although I admit that many theologians and religious believers apparently share this assumption.

I am not saying that God *could* not be limited by our universe. Of course, God may have decided to limit himself so as to make room for our existence and free will. No problem with that! My point is that *we don't know* whether this in fact is so. Theologians and believers use language to speak

about what transcends our language and cannot be spoken of. The language used has its source in the realm of human experience. That is not problematic, as long as one remains aware of the source of the language: human experience. This language has a preliminary structure and is relative to a specific social and temporal framework. Our language reflects and thus is relative to our experience of the world. But ID makes that language into an absolute: God *is* how humans speak about him. By absolutizing our language, ID in a sense claims to know God – and I can then ask: *how* do you know?

## Conclusion

To conclude, we think and talk about God using ideas and concepts borrowed from human experience. However, I believe Barth's argument against natural theology should make theologians extremely cautious of making too much of our human ideas about God and the language used to talk about God. If believers and theologians measure God to our human proportions, we may be deceiving ourselves and build our faith upon an illusion we ourselves created. It is my firm conviction that theologians should reject ID as exactly that: an illusion, built to blind the faithful.

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<sup>1</sup> W.A. Dembski, *Intelligent Design: The Bridge between Science and Theology*, Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press 1999.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 107.

<sup>3</sup> C. Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, New York: Charles Scriber's Sons 1872, Vol. 1, 10.

<sup>4</sup> Some of the arguments that follow have been more extensively worked out in T.A. Smedes, 'Dead or not yet? Barth's Critique of Natural Theology and the Relation between Science and Theology', submitted to *International Journal of Systematic Theology*.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. W.C. Placher, *The Domestication of Transcendence: How Modern Thinking about God Went Wrong*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press 1996.

<sup>6</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics* II/1, ed. G.W. Bromiley and T.F. Torrance, Edinburgh: T&T Clark 1958, p. 139; emphasis added, TS.

<sup>7</sup> Some of the arguments from this section have been developed more thoroughly in T.A. Smedes, *Chaos, Complexity, and God: Divine Action and Scientism*, Leuven: Peeters 2004, and T.A. Smedes, *God en de Menselijke Maat: Gods Handelen en het Natuurwetenschappelijk Wereldbeeld* [God and the Human Proportion: Divine Action and the Scientific Worldview], Zoetermeer: Meinema 2006.

<sup>8</sup> W.A. Dembski, *The Design Revolution: Answering the Toughest Questions about Intelligent Design*, Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity Press 2004, 170.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 171.

<sup>10</sup> W. Dembski, *Intelligent Design: The Bridge between Science and Theology*. Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press 1999, 99.

<sup>11</sup> A.P. Porter, *By the Waters of Naturalism: Theology Perplexed Among the Sciences*, Eugene OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers 2001, 2.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.