

Signature in the Cell comments

Anyone familiar with Objectivism knows that Rand was an atheist. While Rand didn't write specifically on intelligent design (ID) I'm sure she would have dismissed this argument because of its support for a supernatural being. Although I know it's blasphemous (to use a religious term) to give any credence to the intelligent design argument I believe we need to test our beliefs and principles by facing the best arguments of opposing viewpoints. Thus I recommend seriously reading books like Michael Behe's *Darwin's Black Box: The Biochemical Challenge to Evolution*, William Dembski's *The Design Inference: Eliminating Chance through Small Probabilities* (Cambridge Studies in Probability, Induction and Decision Theory), Anthony Flew's *There Is a God: How the World's Most Notorious Atheist Changed His Mind* and Stephen Meyer's *Signature in the Cell: DNA and the Evidence for Intelligent Design*.

Behe's book started the current resurgence in the intelligent design argument by introducing the idea of irreducible complexity that is displayed in various components of living organisms. Behe contends that evolutionary processes as envisioned by Darwin cannot explain the development of this complexity. Dembski's approach is more philosophical, offering a scheme for identifying the causes of events as the result of natural law, chance or design. Flew touches on a number of factors that lead him to abandon his life-long atheism.

While I won't discuss Dembski's or Flew's approaches here I do want to take a second to discuss how Behe uses a mousetrap to illustrate irreducible complexity. Even though it is a relatively simple device the mouse trap won't work until its pieces are assembled in the right order and in the right configuration, making it irreducibly complex. Behe shows how many of life's features such as the bacteria flagellum, the blood clotting mechanism or the chemistry of vision are much more complicated than a mouse trap. Behe contends that the development of these complex mechanisms could not have

evolved by a step-by-step process because the components will not work until they are fully assembled.

Stephen Meyer's *Signature in the Cell: DNA and the Evidence for Intelligent Design* takes a different approach by focusing on the special characteristics of DNA. I have provided some key quotes below but I want to mention that I recently learned of philosopher Thomas Nagel's pick of Meyer's book as Book of the Year for Times On Line (The Times Literary Supplement). Nagel is primarily known as for his work in ethics and surely is not noted for being a mystic.

As Nagel says:

Stephen C. Meyer's *Signature in the Cell: DNA and the Evidence for Intelligent Design* (HarperCollins) is a detailed account of the problem of how life came into existence from lifeless matter – something that had to happen before the process of biological evolution could begin. The controversy over Intelligent Design has so far focused mainly on whether the evolution of life since its beginnings can be explained entirely by natural selection and other non-purposive causes. Meyer takes up the prior question of how the immensely complex and exquisitely functional chemical structure of DNA, which cannot be explained by natural selection because it makes natural selection possible, could have originated without an intentional cause. He examines the history and present state of research on non-purposive chemical explanations of the origin of life, and argues that the available evidence offers no prospect of a credible naturalistic alternative to the hypothesis of an intentional cause. Meyer is a Christian, but atheists, and theists who believe God never intervenes in the natural world, will be instructed by his careful presentation of this fiendishly difficult problem.

Here are selections from various parts of Meyer's book which summarize his case.

The theory of intelligent design holds that there are tell-tale features of living systems and the universe that are best explained by an intelligent cause – that is, by the conscious choice of a rational agent – rather than by an undirected process. Either life arose as the result of purely undirected processes, or a guiding intelligence played a role. Advocates of intelligent design argue for the latter option based on the evidence from the natural world. The theory does not challenge the idea of evolution defined as change over time or even common ancestry, but it does dispute the Darwinian idea that the cause of all biological change is wholly blind and undirected. Even so, the theory is not based on biblical doctrine. Intelligent design is an inference from scientific evidence, not deduction from religious authority.

The design inference defined here does not constitute an argument from ignorance. Instead, it constitutes an "inference to the best explanation" based upon our best available knowledge. ... an inference to the best explanation does not assert the adequacy of one causal explanation. Instead, it asserts the superior explanatory power of a proposed cause based upon its proven – it's *known* – causal adequacy *and* based upon a lack of demonstrated efficacy among the competing proposed causes. ... The inference to design, therefore, depends on present *knowledge* of the demonstrated causal powers of material entities and processes (inadequate) and intelligence (adequate). It no more constitutes an argument from ignorance than any other well-grounded inference in geology, archaeology or paleontology – where present knowledge of cause-and-effect relationships guides the inferences that scientists make about the causes of events in the past.

Premise One: Despite a thorough search, no material causes have been discovered that demonstrate the power to produce large amounts of specified information.

Premise Two: Intelligent causes have demonstrated the power to produce large amounts of specified information.

Conclusion: Intelligent design constitutes the best, most causally adequate, explanation for the information in the cell.

Intelligent design constitutes the *best* explanation of a particular feature of life because of *what we know about the cause-and-effect structure of the world* – specifically, because of what we know about what it takes to produce large amounts of specified information.

I've provided these quotes to give a flavor of Meyer's argument. It's impossible here to do justice to his 624 page book. Based on my reading of Meyer, Behe, Dembski and Flew I have concluded they are not whim worshippers or raging subjectivists. Yes, they are making an argument for a belief in God or at least some kind of unknown intelligence that is responsible for the design of life, a conclusion with which we might ultimately disagree. However, to be fair, these authors craft arguments, marshal facts to support them, anticipate objections, and try to address them. I'm not saying the ID argument is irrefutable. Unfortunately the "refutations" I've seen in books or on the 'net are heavy on sarcasm and ad hominem but are light on true objective analysis.

My point is that Objectivists and others who summarily reject ID arguments do not do justice to them but, more importantly, lose an opportunity to truly check and test their own premises.

<a href="http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/0743290313?ie=UTF8&tag=wyattorc00-20&linkCode=as2&camp=1789&creative=9325&creativeASIN=0743290313">Darwin's Black Box: The Biochemical Challenge to Evolution</a><img alt="Small image placeholder" data-bbox="720 895 740 905"/>

src="http://www.assoc-amazon.com/e/ir?t=wyattorc00-20&l=as2&o=1&a=0743290313" width="1" height="1" border="0" alt="" style="border:none !important; margin:0px !important;" />

<a href="http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/0521678676?ie=UTF8&tag=wyattorc00-20&linkCode=as2&camp=1789&creative=9325&creativeASIN=0521678676">The Design Inference: Eliminating Chance through Small Probabilities (Cambridge Studies in Probability, Induction and Decision Theory)</a>

<a href="http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/0061335304?ie=UTF8&tag=wyattorc00-20&linkCode=as2&camp=1789&creative=9325&creativeASIN=0061335304">There Is a God: How the World's Most Notorious Atheist Changed His Mind</a>

<a href="http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/0061472786?ie=UTF8&tag=wyattorc00-20&linkCode=as2&camp=1789&creative=9325&creativeASIN=0061472786">Signature in the Cell: DNA and the Evidence for Intelligent Design</a>