

# Briefing Sheet Session 2: Intelligent Design

## What is Intelligent Design?

Most scientists accept that the diversity of organisms on our planet has come about through the process of evolution. How life began is another question which has proven to be as difficult as it is significant. A number of hypotheses have been proposed regarding the origin of life, but they are all provisional at best.

In the 1990s a group of scientists, philosophers, and mathematicians were drawn together by a common interest in the possibility of scientific evidence for a designer. Some of them were working on the origins of life, some on biochemistry, and others on the idea that design could be detected mathematically. They formed the 'Intelligent Design' (ID) movement, and many of them became affiliated with the Discovery Institute in Seattle, USA.

Intelligent Design theorists follow the principle that if a 'natural' object is designed, then that design will be detectable. They often compare their approach to archaeology or to the search for extra-terrestrial intelligence, both of which are based on the premise that intelligent agents produce detectable 'signatures' – such as writing or mathematical patterns. So the aim of ID is to discover and identify structures that carry a signature of design.<sup>1</sup> There are two key concepts in Intelligent Design.

1. The main way of detecting design is to look for 'specified complexity', or whether a system can carry information. Mathematician William Dembski's example is this: a single letter is specified, while a collection of different letters is complex. A sonnet, however, is both specified *and* complex. It carries information in a way that 14 lines of jumbled letters do not.
2. Some biological structures are 'irreducibly complex'. If any part of the structure is taken away or any stage in its development is removed, then what remains doesn't serve any useful function and is harmful to the life of the organism.

If a structure is irreducibly complex, this is evidence that it could not have evolved from simpler structures by an undirected process, because any intermediate stages would be harmful to the life of the organism.

Dembski developed statistical criteria to detect things that are:

- A. The result of chance (random events), or
- B. The result of necessity (physical laws), or
- C. Designed.

The Intelligent Design movement makes no theological claims, and it never attempts to explain who or what the 'designer' might be. It simply questions the current status quo in science. Its members include people of different faiths as well as agnostics and atheists. They have put forward what they think is good evidence for design in nature, and they have challenged the current philosophy of science by asking for 'supernatural' causes to be considered when thinking about the origins of complex systems in biology.

## Why is ID so controversial?

Some academics received Dembski's first book (CUP, 1998), on statistical detection of design, positively. The growing ID movement then came into the public eye in 1999 after the publication of an internal document which proposed a 'wedge strategy' to confront the naturalistic philosophy that, it was suggested, dominates science. The debate began to heat up, particularly when the argument was taken into the realm of evolutionary biology, and ID has now gained notoriety in the media because of involvement in high-profile court battles over public education in the USA.

The idea of a designer will inevitably be controversial in some secular circles, so the most useful place to look for a reaction to ID is among Christians working in science. Every Christian believes that God created the universe, so in some sense they already believe in an intelligent designer – but they don't necessarily hold to the specific ideas put forward by the ID movement. The vast majority of Christian biologists are not at all convinced by the evidence for design in biology in the sense suggested by ID proponents. These biologists believe that there is good evidence that complex biological systems, including the 'irreducibly complex' structures identified by ID methods, are assembled incrementally by a gradual evolutionary process.

ID is sometimes adopted as an alternative to 'Young Earth Creationism' or 'Theistic Evolution'. But ID is not a solution to the issues that evolutionary biology throws up, such as the problem of suffering and the interpretation of Genesis. It is also dangerous to adopt ID as 'proof for God' – scientific evidence alone is not a strong foundation for faith.

## Further Reading

Phillip E. Johnson, *Testing Darwinism* (IVP, 1997; published in the US as *Defeating Darwinism*).  
Darrel Falk, *Coming to Peace with Science* (IVP, 2004).  
The Discovery Institute's ID resource site: [www.intelligentdesign.org](http://www.intelligentdesign.org).  
Deborah B. Haarsma and Loren D. Haarsma, 'Origins', <http://67.199.69.61/origins>.

1. [www.intelligentdesign.org/whatisid.php](http://www.intelligentdesign.org/whatisid.php) [23/1/2009].