

ESSSAT Conference Iasi, Rumenia, April 5-10, 2006
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[draft version / paper presentation]

The theological failure of ‘Intelligent Design’

INTRODUCTION

Against the claim that ID allows for faith in the context of science, I will argue that ID seriously injures religious belief and theology.

However, even though my position with regard to ID is explicitly negative, I want to say the following:

Many religious people in my secularized country feel that ID liberates them from the taboo that intelligent people should not be religious. We theologians have to credit ID for this, and to reproach ourselves for failing to establish the respectability of religious belief in the context of science in a theologically better but equally appealing way.

But, this having said, I think that the ID approach is a backward step. And this is what I hope to make clear.

Part of the problem of ID is that it induces the notion of ‘intelligent design’ and thereby appears to also induce an ‘intelligent designer’ or ‘God’ into scientific discourse.

Furthermore, ID-proponents not only induce ‘intelligent design’, but they claim that the need for the notion of ‘intelligent design’ can be demonstrated from within science.

This is an idea very alien and hostile to science’s self-understanding.

Here the suggestion may arise that this alleged shortcoming *on the side of science* may very well be profitable *on the side of theology*. Contrary to what appears on first sight, I want to defend the position that ID is at least as harmful on the belief- or theology-side as it is on the side of science, and maybe even more so. To name only one drawback: It reinforces the common prejudice that an attitude of faith is inherently anti-scientific, and that real scientists need to be atheists.

1. ANTROPOLOGICAL TURN IN THEOLOGY & MECHANISTIC TURN OF THE WORLD VIEW

The main argument for the theological failure of ID is, that, by reintroducing the concept of God as designer and producer of the world who intervenes in the world immediately, ID harks back to a mechanistic world view which – contrary to its promise of rehabilitating purposiveness – reinforces the concept of the world as intrinsically purposeless, and resurrects huge problems of God and evil.

In the 17th century, the Aristotelian matter-form conception was transformed into the dualistic matter-mind scheme, thereby dividing reality into two mutually independent domains. Accordingly, theology restricted its domain to the spiritual and mental (feelings, intentions, affections, purposes), leaving out most of the material. This amounted to an ‘anthropological turn’ in theology, in which the relationship between God and nature was all but ignored.

Nature became the exclusive domain of science where ever since Galileo and Newton it was understood primarily in terms of matter and external forces, and therefore intrinsically as purposeless and valueless. Nature was reduced to a machine. Hence the term ‘mechanicism.’

Given the predominance of science in our contemporary experience of the world, the view that everything is meaningless and purposeless has come to be seen as the only scientifically defensible view of the world.

2. THE ID-BATTLE AND THE ID-‘SOLUTION’

It is against this view that the world is meaningless and purposeless – proclaimed as a ‘scientific view’ and with atheistic overtones – that ID wages war.

Though I share its concern, I do not share its analysis and even less its solution. In fact, I think that, instead of providing a solution, ID is reproducing the problem. Why?

Well, the ID-theory wants to reintroduce the ideas of purpose and of intention into the narrative of the cosmos, earthly life, and human beings. However, in its attempt to allow room again for purposes, the ID-movement returns to an explicitly mechanistic model. It speaks of design which, since it is intelligent, needs a Designer according to most. And a designer is someone having a conscious purpose, and is acting or making or manipulating according to that purpose. And so, in correlation to this, it is linked to something that is in itself purposeless, a product, a stupid machine working according to purposes that its designer built into it, so that it cannot be understood from within itself. Hopefully, you can hear in all of this – designing / making / manipulating / machine ... – that the prevailing tone is that of a *mechanistic model*.

By returning to the mechanistic model, ID is precisely confirming the intrinsic purposelessness of the world! Hence my conviction that, instead of solving the problem, ID is reinstating it.¹

3. GETTING AWAY FROM THE MECHANISTIC WORLD VIEW / EXPLORATION OF AN ALTERNATIVE

Alternative conceptual possibilities regarding purposiveness...

The solution, so it seems to me, will have to come from a scrutiny of the critique of the mechanistic world view. In other words: maybe we can re-animate a thinking about God and nature, by liberating our thinking about nature from the grip of the mechanistic framework that has prevailed for so long; in short, by no longer seeing nature as a machine, but as consisting of striving and living organisms. This may also offer new possibilities when it comes to the relation between God and nature.

The mechanistic model is beset by a great number of difficulties, not only for theology, but also when it comes to the philosophy of nature or metaphysics. A plant or a population is neither constructed piece by piece, nor is it governed from without, but it

¹ Besides, the ID-argument would seem to entail an entity that not only designs intelligently but also *produces* a product (‘It/He’ would actually be putting together a bacterial flagellum outside of the evolutionary process). It is well known that such interventionist and im-mediate conception of the action of God raises insuperable theological problems, especially when it comes to the relation between God and evil.

develops, it grows, it forms itself in interaction with its environment. This is a *form of 'purposiveness'* that is not imposed from without, is not going on straightforward, but involves an internal *seeking process* by trial and error. Such process can be seen not only in living nature, but also in some physical processes, or, for instance, in a democracy...

My suggestion is to explore these other examples of purposiveness. Indeed, instead of capitulating to mechanistically tinted concepts according to which somebody is turning or has been turning the dials so as to make us go through life like machines without any deviation from our built-in purpose, why don't we try other concepts of purposiveness that fit this seeking process.

Think for instance of an *artist*. An artist has an internal desire for what is not yet, for what he or she wants to represent, seeks to compose, or something like it.

Or take a *biological population* which is not arbitrarily doing anything whatever with regard to its genetic composition, but (by recombination) moves to that genetic composition of the population which is preferable in its context (already in the 1940's, Sewall Wright did pioneering mathematical work in this area). Such population does not follow a purpose that is imposed from without, but it moves towards its 'best option,' where 'best option' itself changes according to the changes in the situation (moving target).²

And there are many other examples, e.g., in education.

... and the significance of this for a theology of nature

For theology, these seeking forms of directionality suggest a God-world relationship, in which the divine constantly arouses our desire in a constantly different way according to the changes in our situation, and where God is not an external designer, but acts as an 'object of desire,' as the 'motive and motor of our utmost individual striving.' In nature too. Such picturing of God as object of desire goes back to thinkers like Aristotle, Aquinas, Whitehead and others.

This picture of divine efficacy is somewhat similar to that of a 'fitness function' (as used in adaptive dynamics): a rule that assigns direction/attractiveness/preference to a set of eligible possibilities, thereby enabling a process to organize itself in an adaptive way.³

If seen in this way, God is not the giver and 'fixator' of purpose (with an outcome determined from the start), but God is the condition for the possibility of our own purposiveness (where 'our' is conceived as widely as all reality). And obviously the

² Sewall Wright, 'Adaptation and Selection,' in: *Genetics, Paleontology, and Evolution*, ed. by G.L. Jepsen, E. Mayr & G.G. Simpson, Princeton University Press, 1949, 365-389; C. Rueffler, T.J.M. Van Dooren & J.A.J. Metz, 'Adaptive walks on changing landscapes: Levins' approach extended,' in: *Theoretical Population Biology* 65 (2004), 165-178.

³ See the scientific literature mentioned in note 3. For a first theological elaboration: P. Oomen, 'Divine "Second Order" Design and Natural Self-Organization,' in: *Studies in Science and Theology: Yearbook of the European Society for the Study of Science and Theology* 8 (2002), 3-16.

effect of this is not simply a straightforward success-story, but a way in which also our vulnerability is increasing (Whitehead, Munnik).⁴

4. TO CONCLUDE

I deem this picture of God guiding like a fitness function does, or an ‘object of desire,’ much more promising than ID, and this for the following reasons

Purposiveness is brought back in the very heart of being and living, enabled and aroused by God.

This picture of God as ‘fitness function’ or as ‘object of desire’ *has no need* for gaps in the theory of evolution, but rather considers the evolution process, with all its sideways and contradictions, as an example par excellence: A process that is unceasing and open-ended because it is always subject to the continuous pull of ‘desire,’ the attraction of what is preferable within a given situation.

If science needs a materialistic theory, let it be one in which matter is not the dead stuff of Descartes, but that matter of which we see the example in the living process of evolution.

Thus this view *does demand* a renewed and better look at nature, the ‘physis’ (to which ‘physics’ owes its name). The proper feature of this ‘physis’ is that it seeks, desires, pursues a way.

If so, people will no longer need to consider their striving as an anomaly: *Every* creature groans and suffers the throes of giving birth!

Finally, the ID-theory links God in a one-sided way to order. It is the picture of God as ruler. But the difficult word ‘God’ represents so much more: love, desire, attention, the cry for help, judgment, resistance.

⁴ Alfred N. Whitehead, *The Function of Reason*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1929. René Munnik, ‘Wat weerloos wordt: Over scheppingsgeloof en evolutieleer’, in: *Schrift* (1997) 171, 89-94.