

Lars Johan Erkell

Department of Zoology
University of Gothenburg
Box 463, SE-405 30 Göteborg, Sweden

Intelligent Design –

The theory that doesn't exist

For a long time, biologists have had the theory of evolution as their scientific tool. And this is no coincidence – it has proven remarkably useful in understanding everything from fossil series to nucleotide sequences. Today, this theory is considered one of the great, established scientific theories.

In later years, however, the theory of evolution has been challenged by the theory of Intelligent Design (ID), which is being held up as a more adequate alternative for explaining life's complex forms. Advocates of ID claim that the theory of evolution is insufficient, and that the variety and complexity of organisms only can be explained as caused by an intelligent "designer". Proponents of ID maintain that their theory is purely scientific and has no religious connections. This calls for a discussion about what science really is.



About scientific theories

Scientific theories are the researcher's tools. The purpose of these theories is to, from fundamental concepts, describe and explain nature's different phenomena. Newton's theory of gravitation is a good example of this. It describes falling apples, planetary orbits and numerous other phenomena as manifestations of one single force: gravitation. This theory also offers the possibility of calculating, with great accuracy, the orbits for planets as well as the trajectory for a falling apple. It also tells us that planets must move in elliptical orbits, and that hexagonal orbits are impossible. Scientific theories thus tell us why the world looks like it does, and what the underlying principles are. These theories describe and explain.

Modern science is based on something we normally call the hypothetical-deductive method.

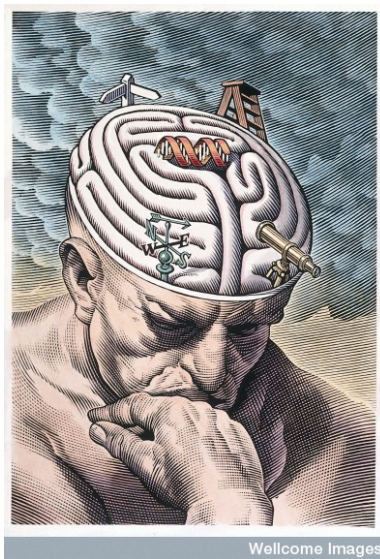
In accordance with this method, a theory with scientific claims must provide us with the possibility of constructing testable hypotheses. A hypothesis is an assumption or a prediction that we can derive from theory. Newton's theory of physics for instance predicts that two bodies with different weight will fall with the same speed, if air resistance is disregarded. And it is not until this hypothesis has been properly tested – and proven correct – that we can start taking the theory seriously.

CORRESPONDENCE TO
Lars Johan Erkell
Email: lj.erkell@zool.gu.se

A scientific theory must also be logically coherent and cannot allow contradictions.

The theory of evolution, however, differs from the theory of gravitation. It distinguishes itself from many theories of physics in the way that chance plays a big part, making exact predictions difficult. One is therefore often reduced to discussions of probability rather than to using analytical mathematics – as in the manner of physicists. Thus it is impossible to predict the exact events of the evolution; one can only provide the framework for what might happen (and what could never happen) in each specific case.

It is, on the other hand, possible to make predictions such as that fossils are to be stored in a specific sequence. So every time a new fossil is being characterized and dated, the theory of evolution is being tested anew. And so far, no correctly dated and identified fossils have been found that were obviously wrong. After the breakthrough for molecular biology a few decades ago, it became apparent that the principles of the theory of evolution could be recognized even in this previously unknown “organizational level”.



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The theories of Newton and Darwin are based on a materialistic and mechanical description of the world, something they share with other established scientific theories. In science, materialism means the study of phenomena that are only connected to matter in its different forms, i.e. matter and radiation. The reason for this is simply that matter and radiation are observable and measurable. Mechanism means regarding the world as controlled by cause-and-effect connections, completely without foresight and purpose. Yet again, the reason for this is practical – it is the only possible way to work. You cannot work with undefined forces or unknown purposes.

Thus the reasons for science to have this materialistic and mechanical view are purely practical. And based on this view, one can conduct clear and reproducible experiments – good enough to build testable hypotheses and theories upon.

The fact that scientific models based on supernatural forces are not being used in science is not a result of them being a priori forbidden – they are simply impossible to work with.

It is not possible to deny that there might be spiritual forces or intentions at work in nature, but the hypothetical-deductive method cannot handle those types of explanatory models.

Finding a non-material force that is both observable and measurable would probably result in that force not being called “supernatural” anymore – it would just become part of normal science.

Intelligent Design as science

As mentioned above, proponents of ID claim their theory to be strictly scientific (the ultimate ID goal is to redefine science to accept supernatural explanations). There is however no discussion about what sort of designer they have in mind, or about the intention or potential of this designer. This has several important consequences:

- It is impossible to construct any testable hypotheses. If we don't know how the designer works, there is nothing to base our predictions on. And if we can't make any predictions, then it is impossible to create hypotheses. A theory that cannot produce testable hypotheses can neither be confirmed nor refuted – and the refutability is considered a fundamental demand in a scientific theory.
- ID theory cannot tell us why the world looks like it does; it doesn't provide us with any tools with which to describe the world. Further, it cannot explain anything based on underlying laws or connections. As a scientific tool it is therefore useless.
- So far, not a single research result based on ID theory has been made. And looking at the two previous paragraphs, this is a logical consequence.
- Since it is impossible to verify ID theory empirically, the argument for the theory is that it *has* to be true since there is no other satisfactory explanation for how all forms of life have arisen. This is called arguing from ignorance (or appeal to ignorance) – *argumentum ad ignorantiam* – a logical false conclusion. Not understanding doesn't prove anything – other than the fact that we simply don't understand. Seeking to prove something based on ignorance is neglecting the possibility that someone else has, or might get, the knowledge you lack yourself. In fact it's more than that – you actually claim perfect knowledge. Even though arguments like these are logically unsustainable, rhetorically they can be very persuasive.
- ID arguments are always constructed in negative terms. Advocates of Intelligent Design argue that the theory of evolution has so many flaws that it cannot be correct – thus leaving ID theory as the only plausible explanation. But this is another false conclusion; there is nothing saying that these are the only possible theories, or that only one of them can be true. Criticizing the theory of evolution doesn't automatically prove another theory. Every theory with scientific claims must find its own empirical base.
- The fundamental argument for the design theory is based on how we intuitively assume that nature's forms – so miraculously suited to their purpose – must be the work of a designer. But since we don't know anything about this designer, it is impossible for us to know if something is designed or not. What would we go by? It

is not enough that something seems well adapted and designed. There is no way for us to know whether the designer has the same idea of purpose and function as we do. Also, things that to us don't seem to be very suited to its purpose might still be designed – and be part of a plan we don't understand.

When we conclude that something is designed, by necessity we automatically (intuitively) ascribe the designer our own concepts of design. This actually means that we are designing the designer.

Thus it is clear that ID theory is not a functioning scientific theory. And spokespersons for the ID movement occasionally admit to this. Michael Medved (senior fellow of the Discovery Institute, see below) made the following statement in *Jerusalem Post*, in the summer of 2008:

*The important thing about Intelligent Design is that it is not a theory - which is something I think they need to make more clear. Nor is Intelligent Design an explanation. Intelligent Design is a challenge. It's a challenge to evolution. It does not replace evolution with something else.*¹



Intelligent Design as a political campaign

An international movement with roots in the American creationist movement very ambitiously propels the theory of Intelligent Design. The centre for ID theory is the Discovery Institute (DI), a think tank with strong connections to the religious right. While reading "The Wedge Document"², the goals of the Discovery Institute become very clear. This document was leaked to the Internet in 1999. The authenticity was denied at first, but has later been confirmed. The document starts with a discussion about how materialism through science has been established in society, and how its influence has caused moral corruption in every part of our society. Then the overall goals are listed:

- *To defeat scientific materialism and its destructive moral, cultural and political legacies.*
- *To replace materialistic explanation with the theistic understanding that nature and human beings are created by God.*²

The document then continues with a plan for making ID theory part of the public debate. Next step is the inclusion of intelligent design in public school curricula, as an alternative to the theory of evolution. The overall purpose is to make ID theory the wedge that splits materialism and establishes a religious perspective on society and its values. The founder of the movement, law professor Phillip Johnson, has stated that:

*"Our strategy has been to change the subject a bit so that we can get the issue of intelligent design, which really means the reality of God, before the academic world and into the schools."*³

The movement has had a breakthrough in the American public debate, but the development has been slower than expected. The biggest setback was probably the "Dover trial" in Pennsylvania, in 2005, which basically stopped all plans of getting IG theory into American schools as an alternative to the theory of evolution.

But the ID campaign continues and is now spreading throughout Europe. And the main tactics is and will be the same: attacking the theory of evolution.

Footnotes

- (1) Ruthie Blum: One on one: Broadcast views *Jerusalem Post*, Online Edition Aug. 6, 2008
<http://www.jpost.com/servlet/Satellite?apage=1&cid=1215331212438&pagename=JPost%2FJPArticle%2FShowFull>
- (2) The Wedge Document. *Discovery Institute*, 1999
<http://www.antievolution.org/features/wedge.pdf>
- (3) *Let's Be Intelligent About Darwin* - National Post, 2/6/04

Literature

Some basic ID literature:

Behe, M. J. (1996): *Darwin's Black Box*. The Free Press

Dembski, W. A. (2002): *No Free Lunch*. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers

There are several books criticizing ID theory, for instance:

Perah, M. (2003): *Unintelligent Design*. Prometheus Books

Young, M., Edis, T. (2004): *Why Intelligent Design Fails*. Rutgers University Press

There are also a number of books critically reviewing the ID movement, for instance:

Kornhall, P. (2008) *Skapelsekonspirationen: fundamentalisternas angrepp på utvecklingsläran*. Leopard Förlag

Forrest, B., Gross, P.R. (2004): *Creationism's Trojan Horse: The Wedge of Intelligent Design*. OUP USA

Links

Lenny Flanks ID critical book *Deception by Design: The Intelligent Design Movement in America* is available at no cost:

<http://www.talkreason.org/articles/deception.cfm>

There are numerous articles criticizing ID. Relevant places to start are:

<http://www.evolutionsteori.se>

<http://www.talkorigins.org/>

<http://www.talkreason.org/index.cfm>

<http://www.talkdesign.org/cs/>

There are many web sites with information supporting the ID movement, for instance:

<http://www.genesis.nu/>

<http://www.discovery.org/csc/>

<http://www.creationdesign.org/>

<http://www.arn.org/index.html>

Exercise

Read about the evolution of the eye

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Evolution_of_the_eye and discuss the following:

- 1) Both the human and the octopus eye have lenses, but with different structure. What is the theory of evolution's stand on this? What hypotheses can be formulated concerning both the similarities and the differences? How can these hypotheses be tested?
- 2) How can ID theory explain this? Which hypotheses can be formulated based on ID theory, and how could these hypotheses then be tested?



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