Seeking God in Science: An Atheist Defends Intelligent Design

by Bradley Monton

reviewed by Matthew H Haber

On December 20, 2005, Judge John E Jones III ruled against the Dover Area School District in the lawsuit brought against it by Tammy Kitzmiller and ten other local parents regarding the incorporation of intelligent design (ID) into the school curriculum (Kitzmiller v Dover Area School District, 400 F Supp 2nd 707 [2005]). Philosopher of science Bradley Monton soon posted an essay on-line critical of Jones's ruling. Just as the philosopher Larry Laudan had voiced concern over the reasoning in Judge Overton's 1982 ruling in McLean v Arkansas, Monton raised doubts over the demarcation criteria embedded in Judge Jones's ruling. Monton's essay generated a bit of a stir, coming under fire from philosophers of science and biologists while receiving praise from ID advocates. Seeking God in Science: An Atheist Defends Intelligent Design is an expansion of Monton's essay, a reply to his critics, and an attempt to locate himself in this rather messy debate.

My focus here is on Monton's treatment of ID in biology. Admittedly, this covers only a portion of Monton's book, and, to be fair, the weakest part of it. Monton is a philosopher of physics and religion, and the strength of the book is clearly the extraordinarily clear and entertaining sections reflecting his expertise. Furthermore, despite the provocative title, Monton accepts contemporary evolutionary theory as the best available explanation for biological phenomena and diversity, asserting that “intelligent design should be dismissed on the grounds that the empirical evidence for the claims just isn’t there” (p 58). Though this endorsement carries reservations about the conceptual underpinnings of evolutionary theory, it also serves to set Monton apart from other ID proponents.

Seeking God in Science, and my reaction to it, is conflicted. At times it productively challenged me; on other occasions it left me confused. Many difficult arguments are cleanly dissected, with premises on full display for examination; others rest on unspoken or unexamined (and often tenuous) assumptions. Monton explicitly states and applies the criteria of evaluation in any given section of Seeking God in Science, yet these criteria shift from one section of the book to another.

Monton's main thesis is that “intelligent design needs to be taken more seriously than a lot of its opponents are willing to” (p 7). This suggests that ID critics have not taken it seriously enough. To the contrary, a strong case can be made that ID gets much more attention and its ideas are considered far more seriously than similarly empirically-lacking challenges to contemporary evolutionary theory (such as Rupert Sheldrake’s morphic resonance theory). H Allen Orr (2005) and Sahotra Sarkar (2007), among many others, have done admirable
jobs addressing the biological claims of ID in both accessible and technical outlets. The most prominent ID book, Michael Behe’s *Darwin’s Black Box*, received reviews in leading scientific journals, including *Nature, American Scientist*, and *The Quarterly Review of Biology* (Coyne 1996, Dorit 1997, Blackstone 1997). ID proponents, for the most part, have greeted these responses with deflection, continuing to push the same tired old examples without effectively confronting any of the contrary evidence or explanations. It is no wonder that the critics have often not continued to pursue the matter. But this disengagement should not be mistaken for a failure of ID critics to take it seriously—for Monton's assertion to be credible there must be serious material that has not received its due. Instead, like ID advocates, Monton here seems to conflate “take seriously” with “accepting” or “adopting”.

To be fair, Monton generally acknowledges the weakness of ID's biological arguments, preferring instead to focus on what he describes as physics-based ID arguments. This is not surprising. Monton is a philosopher of physics and religion, and his extremely clear presentation of these arguments is where the book shines. Perhaps these are the arguments that Monton suggests ID critics have failed to take seriously. Yet by Monton's own admission, these arguments constitute only a small part of the ID corpus. If ID advocates do not seriously pursue these arguments, it is a bit unclear why their critics ought to—especially when those critics are biologists and philosophers of biology. Furthermore, the physics-based arguments are taken seriously. They are very much in line with familiar design arguments in the philosophy of religion. Of course, these arguments also typically have very little to do with evolutionary biology, and so aren’t likely to be regarded as relevant by those concerned with the study of evolution.

There is a good reason why a broader audience ought to pay attention to ID arguments: they may well be right! Monton is on surer footing when he stops worrying about who should pay attention to what, and simply tackles the ID arguments he finds most compelling. As would be expected of a good philosopher of science, Monton frames his treatment of these arguments in the context of a discussion of how scientific theories are assessed. What is it that makes a theory a good theory? Here, though, the treatment is a bit uneven, with Monton at times considering whether ID *may be true* and at other times considering whether it is *plausible*. Subtle though this distinction may be, it is a vitally important one that dictates how we assess theories (and for what purposes). Plausibility, after all, is a higher bar than merely not having been shown to be false. For Monton, roughly, plausibility is expressed in terms of the probability assigned to a belief (or theory). How high that probability must be in order for the belief or theory to be considered plausible, at times, gets run together with whether it is possible, that is, has a non-zero probability. The upshot is that sometimes arguments are assessed by whether they raise the probability of their conclusion at all, as opposed to raising it to some threshold or against competing views.

Monton also does an excellent job of offering extremely clear explications of ID arguments, especially in chapter 3: “Some somewhat plausible intelligent design arguments”. Monton clearly and forcefully considers the premises here and identifies where finer distinctions are in order—just what philosophers do well. This is typical of Monton’s style, and is also on display in his consideration of ID critics’ arguments. Lazy dismissals of ID are, rightly, simply not tolerated. Unfortunately this same standard of analysis is more unevenly applied to biological-based ID arguments—just those of concern to readers here. The most glaring example, to my mind, was the quick acceptance of the presumption that if there
were a God, that God would intervene with evolutionary processes, thus undermining naturalistic biological accounts of evolution (p 110–111). This presumption would benefit from the same standard of analysis that Monton brings to the arguments of ID critics. There are many theist positions that do not posit such an interventionist divine being. Why does it matter that Monton fails to adequately consider theist positions compatible with evolutionary theory? It goes to the mode of assessment of theories used by Monton. Ignoring these positions distorts how we adjust our degrees of belief in and assignments of probability to ID and non-ID views. Effectively, this takes all the probability we might assign to theist positions and attributes it to ID. But that biases the outcome in favor of ID. If only some theistic positions are compatible with (let alone entail) ID, then Monton is overestimating the probability of ID and it is less plausible than he presents—and he presents ID as barely plausible to begin with.

Monton reports that a motivation for writing this book and his advocacy for including ID in public school curricula is his own experience teaching the debate in his philosophy courses. I can empathize with Monton here, as I have also been struck by the depth of understanding my philosophy students come away with about evolution after reading Darwin's *Origin of Species*, along with Paley's *Natural Theology* and contemporary ID literature. So I take his recommendations seriously, though ultimately I was unpersuaded. I think, for example, that we'd be better off simply advocating that students read Darwin and his peers directly, rather than bother with contemporary ID. The latter, I've found, simply adds very little to the discussion.

In the end, Monton has produced a novel book among ID advocates. Of the books advocating for ID, this is among the best. It has the advantage of being less obviously entangled in the cultural and political battles that typically pervade such texts (though some of the score-settling grows tiresome). The exposition is clear, the arguments penetrating, and it is a crisp, good read.

References

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