

Origins and
the Scientific
Community

How can the intelligent design movement gain academic credibility?

FIND A FERTILE IDEA

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Leaders of the intelligent design (ID) movement—William Dembski, Stephen C. Meyer, Michael Behe, Paul Nelson, Jonathan Wells—write mainly for popular audiences and have a negligible presence—as ID theorists—in scientific literature.

To get credibility in the academy, these theorists need to engage the academy by publishing in its journals and attending its meetings. But first they need a fertile idea—one that generates new scientific knowledge.

ID's central thesis—that biological systems show scientific evidence of intelligent design—has not developed to the point where it can make specific predictions that lead to new knowledge. At the end of the 18th century, William Paley wrote about how the intricate mechanics of a watch provide evidence of a designer. Two centuries later, Behe is making the same argument about the flagellum of the bacterium.

If ID proponents want to update Paley's arguments for the 21st century, they need to show how their version is more fertile.

Paley-era biologists—many of them Christians—did not abandon Paley because his design arguments were refuted; they weren't. They moved on because his ideas were *sterile*. Good scientific ideas, like atomic theory, gravity, quarks, and genetics, are rich. Such ideas are like bags of popcorn in the microwave, exploding with new insights into nature.

Two decades ago, Phillip Johnson launched the ID movement with *Darwin on Trial*. He galvanized the search for a study of biology without evolution. Ambitious agendas were developed.

Promises were made in those early days that ID would produce new scientific knowledge.

It hasn't. ID's ideas are no better developed now than they were in the 1990s. And many of the ideas—like the irreducible complexity of the blood-clotting cascade and the bacterial flagellum—have grown measurably weaker as research has successfully “reduced” the complexity. Little progress has been made on even articulating a definition of design, and different ID theorists look for the definition of design in different places.

ID's own thinkers disagree about such basic questions as common ancestry and the age of the earth. A paradigm so vaguely articulated and inconsistently embraced by its own adherents will not win over a skeptical scientific community.

I would love to see ID redirect its energies to developing a genuinely fertile idea. Stop trying to prove that Darwin caused the Holocaust or that evolution is ruining Western civilization. Agree among yourselves that the earth is old, since science has proven that. Do not call world-class scientists “cranks,” as Meyer implies in *Signature in the Cell*. Do not claim that evolution is collapsing, when everyone in the field knows it isn't. Stop claiming that you cannot get your work published in conventional journals when you aren't submitting papers to these journals.

Instead, roll up your sleeves and get to work on the big idea. Develop it to the point where it starts spinning off new insights into nature so that we know *more* because of your work. Then the academy will welcome you with open arms. Science loves rebels.

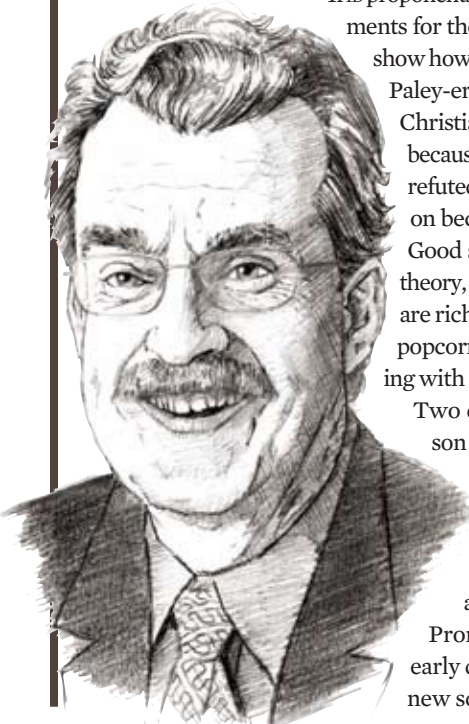
REDEFINE THE QUESTION

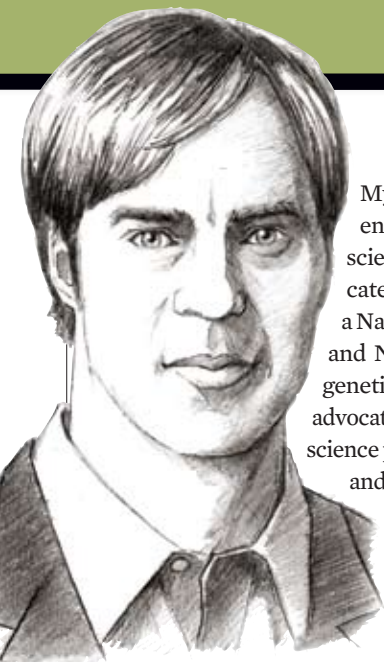
Stephen C. Meyer, director of the Discovery Institute's Center for Science and Culture, is the author of *Signature in the Cell*.

Asking what advocates of intelligent design must do to gain credibility in the academy is a bit like asking a man when he stopped beating his wife. Such a question makes a prejudicial assumption.

When queried about his history of spousal abuse, an innocent man should say, “I don't concede the premise of your question.” Similarly, I would suggest that behind the Village Green question lurk some false assumptions. Indeed, the question seems to presuppose three things: the scientific community is uniformly opposed to the theory of intelligent design; the theory *needs* majority support in the academy to be credible; and there is a good reason—such as lack of supporting evidence—for hostility toward the theory within academia.

First, the scientific community is not uniformly opposed to ID.





My recent book on the subject received enthusiastic endorsements from many scientists not previously known as advocates of ID, such as chemist Philip Skell, a National Academy of Sciences member, and Norman Nevin, one of Britain's top geneticists. Further, many longstanding advocates of intelligent design are themselves science professors at mainstream universities and, therefore, already part of the academy. Second, as the recent scandal surrounding global warming suggests, the "consensus" of scientists can often be wrong. What matters is not consensus but evidence. And the evidence for ID is strong. In *Signature*

in the Cell, for example, I show how the information that runs the show in cells points decisively to intelligent design.

DNA stores instructions for life functions as a four-character digital code. Based on our experience, we know that systems possessing such information invariably arise from minds, not material processes. We know that software comes from programmers. We know that information—whether inscribed in hieroglyphics, written in a book, or encoded in a radio signal—always comes from an intelligent source. So the discovery of a digital code in DNA provides compelling evidence of a prior designing intelligence.

Third, those who reject ID within the scientific community do so not because they have a better explanation of the relevant evidence, but because they affirm a definition of science that requires them to reject explanations involving intelligence—whatever the evidence shows. Imagine an archaeologist confronted with the inscriptions on the Rosetta stone, yet forced by some arbitrary convention to ignore the evidence for intelligent activity in the information those inscriptions contain. That is similar to the response of evolutionary biologists. Many scientists reflexively reject the theory of intelligent design as unscientific *by definition*, despite the evidence of intelligent activity in the information encoded in DNA.

Thus, to keep building a scientific research community, we ID advocates must expose the prejudicial rules of reasoning that preclude consideration of our theory, and keep explaining ID's strong foundation in evidence. We must also address our arguments to open-minded younger scientists and show how ID opens up many important research questions that Darwinian thought has long suppressed.

BECOME COMPREHENSIVE

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One of ID's strengths is its philosophical minimalism: the search for patterns in nature that are best explained by intelligent agency rather than by undirected forces.

This big-tent approach allows a broad range of perspectives—young-

earth creationists, old-earth creationists, some theistic evolutionists, as well as design-friendly non-Christian scientists—to work together under the ID banner. That diversity allows ID folks to test ideas among supporters and friendly critics before bringing them to more hostile academic audiences.

But the minimalistic stance of ID is also a weakness that, I believe, renders it unable to fully compete in the academy. While ID proponents have made progress in advancing design-detection methods, and have been modestly successful in applying them to real biological systems, the problem is that ID offers no historical narrative.

It is one thing to argue that an object or organism is designed. But then comes the question of how and when the design was implemented (and also by whom). Because ID is minimalistic, a number of options are available. Was the design implemented over a multibillion-year history of Earth, or in six rotational days several thousand years ago? Was it worked out through a genetic unfolding of a single information-rich cell, or through designed interventions within evolutionary lineages, or by separate, *ex nihilo* creations? Various ID proponents offer different answers, but none speaks for ID itself, because if one perspective were widely accepted, the other members would be forced to leave the tent.

Consider a brief sketch of naturalistic evolution, the dominant perspective in the academy and one that includes a set of postulates about historical events. These postulates say life originated from nonliving chemical interactions, life forms developed and evolved in unbroken ancestor-descendant lineages, and only unguided processes, such as mutation, natural selection, and others, are responsible.

ID, as defined, is a statement about *mechanism*. It addresses only the last of naturalistic evolution's postulates; the first two are untouched. So ID is not a full-fledged contender here. In contrast, each of the various perspectives included under ID's big tent makes historical claims. Young-earth creationists believe that creation happened in six rotational days, and that the geological record is largely a product of Noah's Flood; old-earth creationists posit *ex nihilo* creative events during a multibillion-year history; and so on.

Each of these perspectives is a comprehensive program that offers a full history of Earth and its inhabitants. Only such a comprehensive program, which synthesizes both the present and historical worlds, may compete with naturalistic evolution. So while ID research will continue and, I hope, succeed in developing workable design-detection methods, its academic credibility will be limited by its very nature: ID is not a comprehensive theory of Earth and the history of life. ☩

