

IS “INTELLIGENT DESIGN” UNAVOIDABLE— EVEN BY HOWARD VAN TILL? A RESPONSE

by Paul A. Nelson

Abstract. Howard Van Till has long been a critic of interventionist conceptions of God’s creative activity, and he places the “intelligent design” position in that category. Yet certain lines of reasoning in Van Till’s own work can best be understood as arguing for design. It is likely that this reasoning will eventually bring Van Till into conflict with an increasingly naturalistic scientific community.

Keywords: intelligent design; naturalism; purpose; Howard Van Till.

I have a simple if somewhat mischievous argument to advance. To wit: Howard Van Till is an intelligent design theorist.

The mischievous aspect of the argument is obvious. Van Till is arguably the most prominent Christian critic of the intelligent design (hereafter, ID) position. As his essay review “Does ‘Intelligent Design’ Have a Chance?” (1999) attests, Van Till sees ID as a failure characterized by a lack of theological candor and motivated by a mistaken conception of God’s creative activity. It might appear willfully obtuse, then, to attach the label of ID to Van Till’s own thinking.

Yet the label fits, if a bit awkwardly at first. Making my argument more than a playful tweak of Van Till’s nose are significant implications of his thinking that, in the ongoing debate, have thus far escaped comment. Those implications can be drawn together into the following syllogism:

1. Only a mind can design a purpose. (Indeed, to be or to have been “designed” is to be or to have been thoughtfully conceptualized for a purpose.)

Paul A. Nelson is a Senior Fellow of the Discovery Institute’s Center for the Renewal of Science and Culture, 1402 Third Avenue, Suite 400, Seattle, WA 98101, and editor of the journal *Origins & Design*.

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2. The universe has a purpose.
3. Therefore the universe was designed by a mind. (And the mind in question belongs to God, who not only thoughtfully conceptualized the universe but brought it into being by the uniquely divine act of creation.)

Propositions 1 through 3 can be found either explicitly stated or strongly implied in Van Till's recent writings. Now what gives this syllogism its real dialectical kick, so to speak, is Van Till's claim that the universe bears "the *marks* of having been thoughtfully conceptualized" (1998, 358; emphasis added). He opposes these mind-indicating marks or signs to "the marks of being the sort of unconceptualized entity that just happens to exist" (1998, 358)—that is, those indicators of primordial mindlessness that, in fact, the universe does not display. As he elaborates the point,

The optimally-equipped character of the universe's formational economy is, I believe, a vivid manifestation of the fact that it is the product, not of mere accident or happenstance, as the worldview of naturalism would have it, but of *intention*. In other words, the universe bears the marks of being the *product of thoughtful conceptualization for the accomplishment of some purpose*. (1998, 362; emphasis in original)

How is it, then, that such a remarkable universe has being? Not only must we account for the existence of something in place of nothing but also of a something possessing a host of truly astounding capabilities. Here is, I believe, where the "mind-first" thesis of theism is in a position to offer an answer vastly more reasonable and satisfying than the "no-mind" thesis of naturalism. How does something (a universe, say) come not only to exist but also to possess a formational economy as robust as the one exhibited by our universe, as the natural sciences are just beginning to realize? If not as an intentional and generous gift from a Creator, then how? . . . [A] creative Mind is absolutely essential. (1997, 128–29)

As yet it may seem that we have found nothing that would place Van Till in the ID camp. Where are the distinctive ID preoccupations with small probabilities, natural versus intelligent causes, explanatory filters, irreducible complexity, or the shortcomings of neo-Darwinism and methodological naturalism? Where, in particular, is what Van Till sees as the interventionism of ID—that is, the claims for a Designer's episodic and empirically detectable action in cosmic history?

Nowhere, of course, but none of that matters. This does, however: "A creative Mind is absolutely essential." Boiled down to its radical essence, ID holds that any explanation of the world that omits the causal primacy and necessity of a divine intelligence cannot be complete or satisfactory; and here we find Van Till sitting happily in the front pew, vigorously nodding his head in agreement. Sitting next to him, remarkably enough, is the Lehigh University biochemist Michael Behe, author of the ID classic *Darwin's Black Box* (Behe 1996), a book arguing for the intelligent design of cellular life. Indeed, the two could be singing from the same hymnal. It

is quite difficult to find any argument for *specific* historical (design-generating) interventions in Behe's work, or for what Van Till calls "the central role of 'hand action'" (1999, 675) in the scientific narrative of the origin and diversification of life. It is difficult to find such arguments, because Behe actually argues only for the necessity *somewhere* of a designing and creating intelligence, even if only at the beginning of the universe, precisely where Van Till himself proposes to locate the action of the Designer. In fact Behe often sounds every bit the orthodox Van Tillian, arguing that the information needed to build the irreducibly complex molecular machines of biology may well have been built into the universe from the start, to unfold naturally over time.

What Behe insists on is simply the causal necessity of an original intelligence: a Mind. "A creative Mind," to use Van Till's phrase, "is absolutely essential" (1997, 129). Amen; so be it. Van Till's proposition might have served with elegance as the epigraph to *Darwin's Black Box*. The distinguishing mark of ID, when compared to the prevailing naturalistic metaphysics of scientific explanation, is its claim for the legitimacy of intelligent causes and their detectability, however the intelligent cause chose to act. For Van Till, the action all occurred out of sight, but the outcome requires a Designer nonetheless. Any explanation of the universe which omits a Designer (and Creator) is incomplete. Behe, and most other ID advocates, would agree. The rest of the scientific community, however, would not.

Consider an analogy. We find a billiard table in the middle of a cornfield with its balls arranged neatly across the green felt in a diagonal line, in ascending order, with the cue ball first. Investigator A declares this pattern to be a designed (intelligently caused) arrangement. Investigator B agrees—yet A and B then set to bickering fiercely about when and by what mechanism the balls were laid in a line. Charges of "interventionist!" and "methodological naturalist!" are hurled. A and B declare each other to be fundamentally misguided. B writes scathing articles about A's scientific and theological naïveté, whereas A goes on the lecture circuit accusing B of being in the pocket of the naturalistic establishment.

But then A and B meet Investigator C, who tells them to forget about all that design nonsense. The petty disagreements of A and B about the etiological mechanism of an illusory design are overshadowed entirely by the severe and devastating truth on which C has seized. Billiard tables and billiard balls just happen to be. And the arrangement of the balls is nothing special. As far as that goes, says C, there is nothing special, anywhere, once one learns to think about the universe in a grown-up fashion. Whatever happens, happens. Get used to it.

Or try this thought experiment. Purge the globe of the young-earth creationists, the noisy evangelical dissenters from scientific orthodoxy, the stubborn ID promulgators, and all the other familiar troublemakers from

the creation/evolution controversy. Who then would be the bothersome design theorist still around to agitate the scientific community? Howard Van Till, of course. The syllogism given above *is* radical and nonconforming, and *does* make claims—even, I would suggest, empirical claims—about the universe. It is not a syllogism that the great majority of the members of the National Academy of Sciences would endorse. It would be rejected, with some vehemence, by Stephen Gould, Richard Dawkins, Jared Diamond, Stephen Hawking, Martin Rees, John Maddox, Francis Crick, James Watson, Steven Weinberg, John Searle, Elliott Sober, Murray Gell-Mann, Eric Davidson, and—well, pick nearly any prominent member of the scientific or philosophical communities. The syllogism places Van Till profoundly at odds with any intellectual who sees scientific explanation in the broadest sense as reduction to whatever-is-not-mind (or Mind): sentient, purpose-conceiving intelligence being the historically contingent offspring of a long evolutionary process whose causal roots lie in primal chaos.

It is not hard to see how Van Till might find himself uncomfortably in conflict with the scientific mainstream. Consider, for instance, the recent argument of the British Astronomer Royal Martin Rees that the life-sustaining universe we inhabit was drawn in a cosmic lottery by the blind hand of chance, from an infinite urn of other universes which would not sustain life (Rees 1997). We are here because we are here. No other universe in the urn would sustain us, but there is no one (meaning no One) to credit for that happenstance other than chance itself. There is no purpose to the universe, really, and no mind is required to design the universe or bring it into existence. A creative Mind is absolutely inessential.

Now Van Till has argued that the question of the origin of the universe's *being* is not properly scientific but belongs rather to metaphysics and theology. It requires no leap of the imagination, however, to see that if Rees's many-universes cosmogony catches on, as Rees hopes it will, Van Till's syllogism might become fully as offensive to scientific sensibilities as young-earth creationism or (to a lesser degree) intelligent design are now. Martin Rees sees his many-universes postulate as belonging to the science of physical cosmology. Van Till might disagree, but cosmologists have shown a strong propensity within the past couple of decades for laying hold of any interesting question within reach and pulling it into their scientific work. The physical cosmologist Lee Smolin, for instance, argues that our universe is, in effect, the product of natural selection among possible universes (Smolin 1997), and that just as the eye and the brain are the natural outcomes of a mindless algorithmic process, so too ultimately are life-bearing universes. A creative Mind is absolutely inessential.

Naturalistic metaphysics under the guise of science, Van Till might object, but the philosophical boundary lines that undergird his objection may well be shifting under his feet. And one can see that at the other end of the evolutionary narrative—say, at the historical origin of human

behavior—Van Till might find himself already at odds with evolutionary psychologists who want to explain morality and religious belief as the outcome of natural selection, with nothing theologically meaningful left when their work of scientific explanation is done. In any case, if the words *purpose*, *Mind*, and *create* have the content Van Till means for them to have, his thinking departs at its foundation from the prevailing naturalism of Western science. The propositions that the universe bears the marks of a designed purpose, and that the causal necessity of a creative Mind is absolutely essential to understanding the universe, make Van Till a design theorist in the broad sense.

How about in the strict sense? Design theorists such as William Dembski (see, for example, Dembski 1998) have stressed that ID is committed to the empirical detectability of design. Van Till disagrees, however, that *divine* design is detectable.

Do I expect to find particular instances in which God's action in the course of cosmic formative history is empirically discernible? Do I expect to catch God in the act of coercing atoms and molecules into doing things differently from what they might otherwise have done (as if I could even know that)? No, I do not. I can observe what creatures have done, but God's act of calling for that particular creaturely action is beyond my empirical grasp. (Van Till 1998, 363)

But what then are the *marks* of design that Van Till claims to see in the universe?—marks, one should recall, that Van Till distinguishes from those marks or indicators that characterize “mere accident” (1998, 362). For a *mark* or sign to exist at all, it must stand out against some background. Moreover, for a mark to indicate a particular *kind* of cause—this, rather than that cause—one must have some method of assigning marks to causes, and, plainly, the types of causes must vary. If every outcome were the same, it would be impossible to set up the necessary contrast classes.

Taking the language of “mark” seriously suggests that Van Till may be ambivalent about the issue of empirical detectability. His talk of the “astounding capabilities” of the universe invites the reply that one *needs a reason* to be astounded, because astonishment presupposes that the outcome one might otherwise have expected did not come to pass; in other words, astonishment as a reaction to evidence requires a *range* of possible outcomes. Here again we are speaking of contrast classes; and where contrasts can meaningfully be drawn, or where possibilities and outcomes vary, we are within hailing distance of empirical detectability. We are within hailing distance, that is, of a *science* of intelligent design.

Thus, my answer to the question posed in the title is “Yes, although he won't agree.” At bottom, Howard Van Till is a Christian, and the Christian worldview shines at every opening with a dazzling inner light of design. The marks of purpose and of an original creating Mind are hard to hide. Inevitably they are impossible to ignore.

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