

THE CHRISTIAN CORE OF INTELLIGENT DESIGN

by Sharon Woodill

Abstract. Intelligent design (ID) theorists assert that ID is a scientific theory that is merely consistent with some religious beliefs. Many critics point to the circumstantial evidence of the apparent development of ID from creation science and the affiliation of ID with mainstream evangelical organizations to assert its religious orientation. This article suggests that the position of ID proponents is a substantial understatement, and that beyond the circumstantial evidence of critics, fundamental Christian doctrine constitutes the essence of ID theory. The bulk of scholarship on ID is polarized into those for and against, as most focus on adjudicating ID truth claims, but this adversarial structure elides some important complexities. This article sets aside the truth claims of ID and focuses more broadly on the discourse in which it is situated to show the Christian core of ID and to examine several hallmarks of religion apparent from this perspective.

Keywords: Christianity; intelligent design; religion; religious studies

Intelligent design (ID), the proposed scientific theory that the origins of the natural world is best explained as the product of an intentional intelligent agent, has sparked controversy both inside and outside the academic community. ID theorists assert that ID is a scientific theory that must be examined on its own merit and apart from the situatedness of its proponents, but many critics point to the circumstantial evidence of the apparent development of ID from creation science, funding sources from and partnerships with large evangelical organizations, and the religious orientations of its key advocates to connect ID to evangelical Christianity (Forrest 2001). ID proponents such as Stephen Meyer (2009, 347) argue that ID is merely consistent with some religious beliefs, but this, I would argue, is an understatement. While circumstantial evidence may indeed be informative, in this article I suggest that ID purports a decidedly Christian framework.

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Thus far ID has garnered little scientific traction, and for the most part this topic is polarized into those for and against. Most scholars focus on adjudicating ID truth claims, but this focus has somewhat elided the complexities of ID discourse and has blurred its requisite connection to the theory of evolution. Mainstream scientists and philosophers of science have concluded that ID is merely creationism in a tux, and this may indeed be the case, but such findings license a disregard of the topic altogether, or, as Michael Ruse says, “been there already, done that already” (Ruse 2007, 39). This approach halts inquiry into a topic and idea to which millions of people subscribe, and the assumption that there is nothing of interest that warrants in-depth scholarly analysis gives ground for this perspective to flourish relatively unchecked.

This article sets aside the truth claims of ID and focuses more broadly on the discourse in which it is situated. In this discourse several hallmarks of religion are apparent that suggest that beyond the circumstantial evidence offered by critics, the key tenets of ID constitute a powerful set of religious beliefs. In this article, I take a close look at the two basic tenets of ID, irreducible complexity (IC) and specified complexity (SC), and I suggest that these entail scientized creation narratives that reflect the doctrinal crux of Christianity. I examine ID discourse more broadly to suggest that ID is best understood as a “thing” deemed special, and I compile a sketch of the epistemological capital of ID. ID involves a set of epistemological politics with the potential to motivate a potentially politically powerful collective. Perhaps we have been there and done that already, but I think that we need to go back and do it again.

ID AS SCIENTIZED BIBLICAL NARRATIVE

Whether or not ID constitutes a scientific theory and/or religious belief has been a point of great debate. ID proponents argue that ID is not creation science, a decidedly Christian movement based on the biblical account of creation (Numbers 2006). ID critics, however, have convincingly demonstrated a continuance between the two. A continuance does not necessarily mean that they are one and the same, however, and I lean toward the argument of ID proponents on this issue, though they may not favor my motives for doing so. I want to suggest that ID theory involves a Christian framework in a much stronger but more subtle way than its creation science forerunners. More specifically, I suggest that ID tenets largely amount to two scientized creation stories: the Genesis account and the Logos account found in the prologue of John’s Gospel. These stories form the pillars of the Christian faith as one refers to the creation of the material world and the other refers to the creation of the spiritual world on Earth and the Christian believer by extension.

Mainstream scientific communities have overwhelmingly rejected IC and SC, the two basic tenets of ID. The National Academy of Sciences (2008) states on their website that scientific evidence does not support ID claims and that ID is indeed “disproven by modern biology” (NAS website, third paragraph).¹ ID tenets lead to a clear demarcation from mainstream science, but they do quite the opposite in relation to biblical narrative.

IC is a key tenet of ID that is largely attributed to Michael Behe. A precise definition of IC is a bit difficult as it seems to take on variations in different ID texts and thus seems to be a concept that is somewhat in flux (Boudry, Blancke, and Braeckman 2010). Nonetheless, Behe’s (2006) basic explanation of IC is that organic development cannot be accounted for by small gradual improvements over time because before a living system is functioning properly it would not be fit and thus would not be favored by natural selection. He writes, “Natural selection can only choose systems that are already working. If a biological system cannot be produced gradually it would have to arise as an integrated unit, in one fell swoop, for natural selection to have anything to act on” (Behe 2006, 39). Behe’s argument posits that the entire system must have come into being simultaneously as a complete and discrete unit, and that the causal mechanism of the coming to pass of such a system is traceable to the intentional foresight of an intelligent agent. As such, a very narrow view of biological origins is espoused. Behe’s flagship example of IC is the bacterium flagellum that he describes as being metaphorically compatible with an outboard motor (Behe 2006, 256). Behe’s argument requires the action of an intelligent agent to achieve the seemingly optimal “design” of this structure prior to the possibility of being molded by evolutionary pressures. Behe argues that IC is a better explanation of the evidence and is thus a viable alternative to evolution.

Evolutionists challenge the conceptual framework of Behe’s claim, among other things. IC, in posing an alternative to evolutionary theory, implies a mistaken characterization of evolutionary processes by asserting an understanding of evolutionary processes as progressively moving toward optimality. In other words, the colloquial survival-of-the-fittest characterization of evolution undergirds IC, but to the average nonevolutionary biologist, evolutionary “progress” is often best described not as survival of the fittest but as the survival of the fit enough (Sarkar 2007, 90). Phillip Kitcher (2007), goes even further by suggesting that optimality is often the exception rather than the rule, and he argues that a designer free from the constraints of the natural laws of evolution to produce new organisms, as implied by ID theory, “would be expected to do much better” (49).

Behe does leave room for evolution after the initial formulation of a fully functional organism, but it is very difficult to imagine any significant role for natural selection in his theory. There is a highly symbiotic relationship among living systems, among each other and between systems and their

environments (i.e., nonliving systems, to the extent that a distinction between living and nonliving systems is even possible). Though we may perceive living systems as independent discrete units, this perception is challenged when we note that living systems are heavily reliant on each other within the web of life. If IC is true, then biological origins must have indeed been very rapid: how long would humans survive without intestinal bacteria, or plants without pollinators, or any of the other highly interpenetrated beings and living things without each other? If individual organisms are irreducibly complex, then so too is the whole living world. Given that complex organisms cannot exist without other complex organisms and systems, then if one was intelligently designed at one time then all must have been designed at the same time. Utilizing IC to explain biological origins differs little from explaining biological origins as a construction project that transpires in six days, give or take, and it leaves virtually no room for evolution at all, of any sort.

The theory of IC is highly reductionist because it is an all or nothing theory. In this account nothing happens on its own without all the pieces already strategically assembled, and functionality is imposed externally, or from the outside. IC is not just incompatible with evolution: it is virtually the exact opposite. The significance of this opposition cannot be understated, as we will see.

On its own, the apparent Genesis story of creation is only one element of Christian doctrine inherent in ID tenets, but taken together with William Dembski's theory of SC, ID can be seen as being decidedly Christian. Dembski, the key formulator of this tenet, writes,

Specified Complexity is a reliable empirical marker of intelligent design. A long sequence of random letters is complex without being specified. A short sequence of letters like "the," "so," or "a" is specified without being complex. A Shakespearean sonnet is both complex and specified. Thus in general, given an event, object, or structure, to convince ourselves that it is designed we need to show that it is improbable (i.e., complex) and suitably patterned (i.e., specified). (Dembski 1999, first paragraph)

Dembski explains SC in terms of information theory by correlating the concept of "specificity" to "information" and the matrix of the parts, functions, and purposes to "complexity." The mark of intelligent agency, in this account, entails the selection of one set of possibilities among a host of alternatives. That a Shakespearean sonnet speaks about love rather than hate, for example, or employs iambic pentameter as opposed to some other meter, is the intentional choice of the intelligent agent, or the composer, in the act of creation. Dembski's work relies heavily on probability theorems that have not stood up against the examination of the discipline (see Olofsson 2008 and Sober 2002 for example).

Dembski's information theory uses language as a conceptual framework, which equates to a translation of Logos theology into a mathematical form (Dembski 1998; Forrest and Gross 2004, 289). SC is the tangible marker of the instantiation of information from the realm of intelligence into the material realm. This information, however, like language, is construed as the conduit of transcendent meaning formulated in a mind and intentionally put forth into the world. Dembski (1998 "Creation of the World," subheading) writes that "any act of creation is the concretization of an intention by an intelligent agent." He goes on to explain that concretization can transpire in a variety of ways: sculptors etch stone, musicians compose music, and so forth, but what is common to all creators is language as it conveys the instructions for design and allows for the materialization of ideas. Dembski concludes that "in this way, language becomes the universal medium for concretizing intentions," though he warns the reader that "language" must be broadly conceived.

Generally speaking, Dembski intentionally separates the theory of SC from Christian theology in order to assert what he claims to be the scientific merit of his theory, but this distinction is untenable within the (conventional) scientific context. The comparison of the act of creation by an intelligent designer to the act of creation by human artists is telling, as human creators require a mechanism by which they can concretize ideas: sculptors need tools (perhaps their hands are tools), musicians need instruments, and so forth. (That the creative process for humans transpires in the way Dembski describes is itself questionable, as the creative process is often constrained and enabled by the material world—the tools available, environmental resources, and so forth. It is arguably not the case that a creator comes up with an idea and in a linear direction translates that idea into some tangible form. But for the sake of argument, let's say that one does.) ID advocates in general, and Dembski specifically, reject Darwinian evolution, thus they rule out a mechanism or tool for creation. This omission truncates the design theory in that it asserts that the imparting of information, or the act of speaking, *is* the mechanism that imparts order and causally directs the world in real physical/material ways. Without a discrete creation mechanism, we are entreated to accept a direct causal arrow from the words of the intelligent agent to the transformation of nothing into something. Such action constitutes a divine methodology.

In some of his less technical writing, Dembski explicitly refers to SC as the Logos theory of creation. Dembski (1998, "The Creation of the World" subheading) states that "the language that proceeds from God's mouth in the act of creation is not some linguistic convention. Rather, as John's Gospel informs us, it is the divine Logos, the Word that in Christ was made flesh, and through whom all things were created." In the Genesis creation story, everything God "said" came to be; it was his words that brought forth the power that constructed and animated the divine

creation. It was instant and ahistorical. For Dembski, the act of speaking invokes a first cause, an intentional preconception of meaning that once imparted directs the material world in real physical ways.

Logos theology has a long and winding history in Christian doctrine, inherited from the Platonist philosophy of forms in which the archetypes of all things exist in an abstract realm of perfection prior to their realization in material and variable form. The Christian version of this thesis, sometimes referred to as “Divine Ideas,” suggests that “all things have a primordial existence as God knows and desires their eventual coming to be in time and space” (McIntosh 2012, 367). This thesis is particularly important to the Christian doctrine of creation because the coming to pass of the living world is understood as an expression of love from the mind of God (McIntosh 2012, 367). Furthermore, the incarnation of Christ is an expression of this Divine love in that God delivers a form of himself that is both spiritual and material, and is understood as the bridge, both literally and figuratively, between God and humanity (Bostock 2007). It is this bridge, according to Christian doctrine, that brought the person of Christ into the world and provided salvation to a death-destined humanity.

The scientizing of Logos theology does some important epistemological work: it normalizes and idealizes the subjugation of the empirical to the spiritual, or the outer world to the inner world, in other words. The Logos creation story of John’s Gospel is not merely an expression of God’s love, as the New Creation is said to enable direct access to the Divine. Prior to the incarnation of the Divine, access to the Mind of God was understood as coming from examination of his creation, or the material world, and while this access is still part of Christian doctrinal basics, it is supplemented by a belief in direct access to God through the New Creation—the Holy Spirit in the believer made possible through the sacrificial deeds of Christ (Bostock 2007). The Logos—God’s word—is thus understood as the transmission of information from the spiritual to the material realm and the spiritual conduit between God and human beings. In other words, through the scientizing of the Logos theology, ID compels valuation of the inner world, understood to be the direct communion with God (in believers), over the material world with which one physically interacts.

IC and SC constitute scientized Christian creation narratives. IC entails the Old Testament version of creation, and SC entails the creation story in the prologue of John’s Gospel, which tells the story of the New Creation. The Old Testament tells of the creation of the physical world, and the New Testament tells of the creation of the spiritual world of the believer. There are strong parallels between the two stories: conceptual, structural, and textual (Cole 2006). These parallels function to harness power and authority of the creation of the world to the creation of the Christian believer and establish the creation narratives as the doctrinal crux of Christianity. It is through this New Creation that the divine (God) is believed to traverse

the natural/supernatural realms to enter the material world via the person of Jesus. “The Word became flesh” (John 1:14). ID does not simply fit with Christianity as some advocates suggest; rather, ID entails a decidedly Christian framework.

ID AS A “THING” DEEMED SPECIAL

That ID constitutes a biblical idea is foundational to an understanding of ID as a “sacred” idea as well. According to Emile Durkheim (1915), religion is best defined by the “characteristics which are found wherever religion itself is found” (24). Though defining “religion” involves an entire body of literature in its own right, the element of importance here is the idea of “sacredness”—apart from whether or not it can aptly be considered as “religious.” Durkheim’s concept of the “sacred” has been taken up, reworked, and expanded by scholars, but a general understanding of “sacred” as extraordinary, other than the profane, and safeguarded by taboos, is a generally acceptable foundation of more nuanced and delineated understandings (Knott 2010). This understanding is sufficient for the present discussion.

Ann Taves (2009, Kindle location 602 KL) suggests the term “specialness” as a generic reference for things like “sacred,” “magical,” “spiritual,” and so forth, and she suggests that it is possible to consider such things in a broader context—particularly as such things develop in social contexts. I defer to Taves (2009) in defining “things,” as this understanding seems most applicable in the case of ID. She writes, “We can consider ‘the sacred’ as an emic term and refer simply to ‘things set apart and forbidden,’ where ‘thing’ can literally mean anything, whether event, person, behavior, object, experience, or emotion” (Taves 2009, 614 KL). Drawing on an interdisciplinary roster of religious studies scholars, Taves (2009) discusses some of the processes by which people “deem something special,” as she puts it (600 KL). For example, sometimes people transform things that seem to stand out or “approach an ultimate horizon or limit” into an absolute ideal thus demarcating it from common experience—human perception and imagination. Deeming something special may result from an attempt to account for and accommodate anomalous experiences and appease cognitive dissonance (812 KL). Often prohibitions or taboos are created to demarcate something from the ordinary.

The process of deeming something special, in other words, seems to be deeply entrenched in collective action, and numerous scholars make connections to its evolutionary history. Perhaps the processes of deeming them so are a product of the human necessity to make sense of the world, and/or to facilitate the basis for moral communities that in turn facilitate evolutionarily necessary intuitions in regards to such things as harm and fairness, group dynamics, or social hierarchy. Significantly, for the case of

ID, the processes of deeming something special can correlate to awe-related emotion evoked by experiences that cannot be readily accommodated to common experience (842 KL). In a similar way, characteristics associated with anomalies can be solidified into reality and deemed as special or sacred based on their association with the mystery.

Based on these ideas, I suggest that the concept of ID be considered as a “thing” deemed special. This suggestion builds on the assertion in the previous section that ID codifies the special creation narrative in technical talk. In this narrative, a conceptual distortion that promotes mystery and cordons off ID as something special is produced in several ways: by a problematic metaphoric transfer of concepts, by asserting an anomalous experience, and by establishing evolution as taboo. Taking these together, ID can be seen as a sacred idea with familiar religious mechanisms in play.

The Paleyian design argument is a basic element of ID, and posits a metaphoric comparability between living organisms (and/or their parts) and machines of human design. This argument, though having roots in ancient times, remains compelling to many despite having been refuted both rationally and scientifically. Longstanding acceptance of this metaphor, as Doren Recker (2010) reports, reflects the tendency of human beings to map from the familiar to the unfamiliar in order to construct conceptual frameworks that render meaning and comprehension of unknown domains (653). Recker cites Niall Shanks (2004), who draws connections between understanding the body as a machine in medicine and the development of technology during the Renaissance as the major contributors of the proliferation of the machine metaphor in design arguments (28). Shanks writes that “somewhere in this process our intellectual ancestors made a transition from seeing nature as if it was a machine, with many and complex components, to seeing it literally as a machine” (28). The uptake of the machine metaphor lead to the inference of a machine-maker, or designer of living machines (Recker 2010, 653). Furthermore, Recker (2010) argues that given the embodied nature of cognition, “metaphorical and other intuitive, associative reasoning is not bad reasoning. It is how we usually think, and it is generally reliable” (657). The problem, however, is that such reasoning can be deceptive, and human beings seem to be prone to seeking agency and purpose in encountered phenomena whether or not there is justification for such a search let alone any apparent finding. This tendency may compel the attribution of constructed meaning(s) and block the acceptance of counterintuitive explanations, even when such explanations are backed by strong rational and empirical evidence.

Recker (2010) recommends the implementation of robust educational practices in regard to both science and philosophy as a means of addressing this problem, and while this advice is surely wise in the larger scheme of things, for now, taking a closer look at the machine metaphor is instructive. There is perhaps a more basic approach to engaging metaphoric reasoning

so as to produce a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomena with which one is concerned. To understand more fully in such situations, one can look at not only how concepts are successfully mapped from one domain to another, but also at how these same concepts are mismatched.

The concept of ID employs a problematic metaphor with religious implications. In the surrounding world, there is everywhere apparent the processes of becoming. Generally speaking, we do not experience things in the world without a causal history. Most can experience the growth and development of things in the natural world without directly observing a builder or creator. We see the living world appear quite on its own. This is not the case, of course, with constructed objects, as we can directly (or relatively directly) observe the constructor(s) or gather empirical knowledge of how something was constructed. To my knowledge, we have never witnessed a constructed object construct itself. To compare the two objects, a living entity and the artifact of a living entity, is like, as they say, comparing apples to oranges. Though they may have something in common, they are two different things.

Furthermore, in characterizing living organisms as machines, ID also asserts an anomalous experience. Regardless of whether or not something was built or grew of its own accord, typical experience does not attest to the instantaneous appearance of things. Built or grown, experience generally attests to a developmental process—things do not just appear from nowhere. The special creation story draws believers away from typical experiences of the world and into the imagination of otherwise impossible events, and, commensurate with Logos theology, demands a valuation of the imaginary over the material, or the inner world over the outer world.

The imagination is not free here, however. The special creation narrative embraces a lack of a causal history of the becoming of the cosmos and human beings, ultimately. Special creation is not a description of anything, self-organizing or constructed. It is a conceptual prescription for something inaccessible to modes of intellectual processes, thus it evokes mystery and awe. ID is proposed as a story about the way things are, it is a creation story of an un-story—a denial of development and change in favor of a ready-made fixed reality. The organism-as-machine metaphor works poorly for producing scientific explanation, but it works rather well for producing a religious experience (of a sort).

The religious experience that ID compels is constituted by the substitution of mystery-as-knowledge for knowledge, and this substitution is facilitated by the dualistic structuring of ID. The dualistic structuring of the epistemic space of ID is created by erecting and highlighting a sharp distinction between natural causes and intelligence. In the ID documentary *Unlocking the Mystery of Life* (Allen and Eaton 2003), ID proponent Stephen Meyer positions ID in opposition to evolution through the definition of “methodological naturalism.” He says: “it [methodological

naturalism] just means that if you're going to be scientific, you must limit yourself to explanations that invoke only natural causes. You can't invoke intelligence as a cause" (52:00). Meyer reinforces and elaborates this distinction: "We know, at present, there is no materialistic explanation, no natural cause that produces information. Not natural selection, not self-organizational processes, not pure chance. But we do know of a cause that is capable of producing information and that is intelligence" (1:00:29). In this statement, Meyer rules out the possibility of intelligence being a natural cause by insisting that natural causes are not known to produce information and intelligent causes are known to produce information. If intelligence is not natural, then one can presume that it is derived from some alternative realm or supernatural. "Intelligence" in this context, is defined by *not* being natural thus it cannot be a "natural" cause. In other words, "natural" is precisely what "intelligence" it is not. This oppositional structure recapitulates the IC/evolution dichotomy.

"Intelligent design" thus functions logically as a type of placeholder. Wayne Proudfoot (1985) explains that placeholders—logical operators in which explanation of a phenomenon is excluded by its very own definition—creates a type of mystery, a cognitive gap, an anomaly that does not fit with usual experiences of the world (127). As a result, the mystery fosters a sense of awe and reverence because it refers to something outside of common rational experience and is thus often set aside as a reference to something sacred (151). In the ID argument, one can only know that intelligence was responsible for creation; the mechanism by which this happened is not even part of the question. The designer simply spoke, or so the story goes. The origin of the living world is thus set apart as something mysterious, miraculous, and outside the empirical realm. In this way, mystery-as-knowledge is substituted for knowledge itself.

The deeming of something as special often involves prohibitions against comparing or combining that "thing" with similar but conventional things and/or it marks comparable "things" as taboo (Taves 2009). If we think of ID as something deemed special, it makes sense that ID advocates would invest a great deal of effort in persuading its audience that evolution is untrue, evil, and dangerous. Such effort reinforces the specialness of ID and protects against the demystification of biological history.

Indeed ID advocates appear to be heavily invested in asserting the invalidity of evolution, an important step in the specializing of ID. Many ID titles refer explicitly to Darwin and/or evolution with only a secondary reference to ID, if any at all: *Darwin's Black Box: The Biochemical Challenge to Evolution* (Behe 2006), *Uncommon Dissent: Intellectuals Who Find Darwinism Unconvincing* (Dembski 2004), *Darwin on Trial* (Johnson 2010), and *Darwin's Doubt: The Explosive Origin of Animal Life and the Case for Intelligent Design* (Meyer 2013a), just to name a few. With titles like these, one might argue that disproving evolution is more important than proving

ID, and such a tactic makes good sense if the objective is to create and protect a mystery.

ID discourse routinely associates evolution with all manner of social pathology and historical atrocities. Arguably, the most notorious example is in the movie *Expelled: No Intelligence Allowed* (Frankowski 2008) a pseudo-documentary that purports to reveal the mistreatment of academics who support ID. The filmmakers enlist a plethora of ID advocates to advance the argument that the proliferation of evolutionary thought paved the way to the Holocaust, among other incidents of human depravity. This message is reinforced by the strategic placement of gruesome images and film clips of Nazi Germany directly after segments of interviews with prominent evolutionists. Through the relentless visual coupling of evolutionary thought with social degradation, evolution is anthropomorphically demonized and portrayed as ruthless, unruly, and depraved. *Expelled* is by no means an isolated example, as evolution is routinely identified as the destroyer of traditional morality, “even providing the backdrop for eugenics, abortion, and racism” (Dembski and McDowell 2008, 97).

The evolution taboo does a great deal of epistemic work. One of its key functions is to divide the conceptual landscape into two opposing views thus creating a dualistic framework. The constructed dualism forces the audience to “choose” between opposing perspectives, and it enacts a cohesive collective to the extent that all those who accept ID tenets are conceptually located in one epistemic space. In this way, ID advocates force the epistemic hand by eliminating the logical possibility of holding both perspectives and by precluding alternative options such as intelligence being an emergent property of matter or theistic evolutionary perspectives that purport an understanding of evolution as the mechanism of divine creation.

Theistic evolution perspectives, generally speaking, are problematic on the face of it for ID as a “thing” deemed special, in that they dilute the evolutionary taboo and diminish the potency of ID. If faith and evolution are compatible, than evolution cannot really be a problem and ID would not be necessary or relevant (Ravitch 2010, 115). Theistic evolution compromises epistemic boundaries by challenging the dualist framework that ID requires and providing an escape hatch for members of its epistemic collective.

It is therefore unsurprising to find strong sentiments against theistic evolution in ID discourse. Meyer (2013b) makes this point rather explicitly by explaining the dilemma that people (even theistic people) find themselves in if they accept evolution theory:

If there was a purely undirected unguided process that produced everything, such that even people who are theistic affirm that, and these are some of the folks called theistic evolutionists, would affirm the Darwinian creation story,

but then recognizing that the Darwinian mechanism is unguided and undirected, would then conclude “well therefore God doesn’t know the future” because the mechanism is unguided undirected therefore unpredictable. (5:00)

Meyer reinforces the evolution taboo with the cultivation of fear by equating theistic evolution with the cognitive discomfort of uncertainty and the threat of facing an unknown future. Moreover, the implicit rational option for ID subscribers is that mystery-as-knowledge is the safest option as it promises an antidote to the insecurity and dangers of evolution. Dembski (1996, paragraph 15) disparagingly equates theistic evolution to atheism because, in his assessment, acceptance of evolutionary ideas means that: “No, the heavens do not declare the glory of God, and no, God’s invisible attributes are not clearly seen from God’s creation.” The assertion is that without God, people are left vulnerable to the wiles and perils of nature.

ID aims to alleviate this problem by positing an intentional intelligent designer. The notion of an intentional intelligent designer suggests that knowledge and foresight are intrinsic traits that endow such an entity with the ability to know the future, offer guidance, and ultimately alleviate fear and uncertainty. For these reasons ID is a tenable thesis to many. ID as a Christian “thing” deemed special is an indispensable epistemic tool that likely cannot be defused in the less invested realms of empirical evidence and naturalistic explanation.

THE EPISTEMOLOGICAL CAPITAL OF ID

At the heart of ID, as a “thing” deemed special, is the protection of the creation myth and its religious entailments. But why is ID so important? Why must evolution be off limits? Frank Ravitch (2010) makes a compelling case for ID as an apologetics marketing strategy that serves the proselytizing convictions of evangelical Christians. This may very well be the case, but I do not think that this answer goes far enough. Proselytizing is focused toward those outside the religious collective, and while undoubtedly ID is an important implement in that endeavor, it also, perhaps more significantly even, does a substantial amount of work within its sphere of influence. Though surely not a comprehensive answer, identifying some of the epistemic capital of ID will provide some helpful insight.

ID texts provide valuable epistemic tools for religious (Christian) leaders to make claims about how the world is, which often grants license to make claims about how it ought to be. ID material seems to be primarily directed at a Christian audience in that much of this material is created by evangelical Christian publishers and distributed and sold within evangelical Christian markets (Radosh 2008). ID material, however, is often presented in technical and sophisticated mathematical and scientific language that only a segment of the intended audience, or even the more general

public for that matter, could effectively access. Indeed, Dembski (2006, xvii) specifically identifies an “educated lay audience” as the target for the technical portions of his book *No Free Lunch*, and he provides a roadmap for nontechnical readers suggesting which sections of his text can be skipped or lightly perused “without loss” (2006, xx). Dembski explains that his strategy is “to include just enough technical discussion so that experts can fill in the details as well as sufficient elaboration of the technical discussion so that nonexperts feel the force of the design inference” (2006, xvii). When these texts are considered by experts, or those with the technical background in the areas upon which the texts draw, however, they are repeatedly evaluated as logically and/or scientifically unsound, yet this does not dam the steady stream of new texts that appear on the market.² The audience for these texts then cannot be the scientific community because they do not meet the standards that the community demands and they are typically not accepted, thus there is no real market for such texts in that sphere.³ The audience for these texts must be, it seems to me, some subsection of a community that is already sympathetic to this view and who would benefit from drawing on ID’s authoritative umph as a seemingly rigorous scientific claim, strategically parsed from a religious context in order to procure maximal epistemic authority. For people such as pastors, ministers, and other congregational leaders, who would generally have the educational background to be able to interpret these texts within a Christian, if not scientific, framework, ID symbolizes scientific credibility that can be deployed to bolster epistemic authority. Such authority is often the grounds for legitimation of normative claims about the material and social world.

The value of ID can, to some extent, also be seen in how it is utilized by its intended—Christian—audience. Many evangelical Christian groups explicitly list ID as central to their worldview. Sean McDowell is the owner of Worldview Ministries and co-author with William Dembski of *Understanding Intelligent Design: Everything You Need to Know in Plain Language* (2008). In this book, the authors write:

According to the Christian worldview, God freely created the world. The Bible opens with Genesis 1:1: “In the beginning God created . . .” It is no accident that the first thing the Bible teaches is creation. Creation implies purpose. Because we are created, there is a purpose for our existence, for the family, for work, for sex, and for how we ought to live. Creation by a loving God is our *origin*. (18, emphasis in original)

McDowell has published widely on ID and other issues related to Christian apologetics, and his CV boasts a wide array of speaking engagements and public appearances.⁴ McDowell’s work is focused on “imparting hard evidence and logical support for viewing all areas of life through a Biblical worldview.”⁵ In a similar manner, Focus on the Family (FOF), a large evangelical organization with branches throughout the world, including

Canada, offers a training series entitled *The Truth Project*. This series is a set of self/group studies designed to address basic elements of the Christian worldview. The objective of this project is to counter a perceived decline of the understanding of key biblical concepts among professing Christians.⁶ After a series of lessons designed to establish the truth and authority of God and the Bible, Lesson Five seeks to establish that science points to the reality of a universe intelligently designed by God. ID legitimates a biblical worldview, and it harnesses a popular understanding of science as a reliable arbiter of truth to ground biblical authenticity and assert a set of normative claims about personal actions, behaviors, and social policy and structures derived therefrom. While this utility of ID certainly brandishes a great deal of epistemic weight, the full force of its power is still understated in these examples.

Arguably, the greatest value of ID as a pillar of a Christian worldview is tightly connected to its dualistic structure as opposite to evolution. Christianity boasts great diversity of biblical interpretations and doctrinal bents that are likely beyond reconciliation to any significant degree. Rather than providing a common ground for diverse biblical interpretations and doctrinal proclivities, however, ID, as Dembski (1998) suggests, provides a common adversary—evolution. This move makes it a powerful tool for uniting a broad spectrum of believers into a potentially powerful political entity. Whether or not this potential has been realized to any extent and to what ends are questions for a more empirical study.

I am not suggesting that ID is in any way a religious anomaly. Taves (2009), drawing on a plethora of evolutionary scholarship, suggests that setting things aside as special is likely a tendency favored throughout our evolutionary history for the purpose, among other things, of creating group stability—a necessary practice for survival in many cases. Whether or not this is actually true matters less than the fact that human societies seem to accomplish a great deal when working as a group, and the development of management techniques is quite reasonable and no doubt necessary. Being normal, sensible, or necessary, however, is no reason to bracket such groups and their management techniques from scrutiny.

CONCLUSION

By proffering mystery and then claiming to “know” or have insight into said mystery (even though it is by definition unknowable), ID advocates establish themselves as an epistemological authority in a category outside of denominational divides and above the common Christian. Whether there is a god or not, there most certainly is a social structure where [God’s] representatives inhabit and proctor spiritual, epistemic, political, and economic activities. ID advocates benefit from its use and uptake in designer-friendly domains, and ID users benefit from its authoritative status to procure a sense of security in the face of vulnerability.

One might argue that there is no harm in ID, and as a scientific theory, I would agree. Arguments from design, though present throughout the ages, have not prevented the proliferation of science and technology. With the current strength and growth of knowledge and technology, it would seem that such ideas would now be bankrupt and powerless. What is important to remember, however, is the extent to which ID is present in popular and religious culture, and their impact on rational discourse. Furthermore, ID, along with a number of creation-based stories, constitutes a fundamental belief of a great many people, and if it does indeed strengthen epistemological claims that license normative ideals, then it behooves us as scholars and citizens to move beyond adjudicating the truth claims of ID and to examine the sociological dimensions of this movement from a diversity of perspectives and contexts.

NOTES

1. The National Academy of Sciences statement on intelligent design can be found here: <http://www.nas.edu/evolution/IntelligentDesign.html>.
2. A list of ID new releases can be found here: <http://astore.amazon.com/discoveryinsti06?node=37&page=2>. Last accessed November 10, 2014.
3. I want to be clear here that some ID advocates do scientific work that is accepted and validated by the scientific community, but this work is not ID work itself. I am specifically referring to ID texts in this case.
4. These articles can be found on the Worldview Ministries website: <http://www.seanmcdowell.org/index.php>. Last accessed June 29, 2014.
5. This quote is taken from the "About" page of the Worldview Ministries website: <http://www.seanmcdowell.org/index.php/about-us/bio>. Last accessed June 29, 2014.
6. See website: <http://www.thetruthproject.org/whatistruthproject/>. Last accessed June 29, 2014.

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