

A controversy in a nutshell

A review of
*The Politically Incorrect
Guide to Darwinism
and Intelligent Design*
by Jonathan Wells
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Summarizing Intelligent Design (ID) is a fairly daunting task. ID was launched as a movement in large part by Phillip Johnson's landmark bestseller *Darwin on Trial*. Since its publication in 1991, ID literature has been proliferating exponentially. The literature critical of ID was slow to get going, but it is now extensive as well. Jonathan Wells' ambitious goal in *The Politically Incorrect Guide to Darwinism and Intelligent Design* is to summarize the entire controversy in one reader-friendly, popular level guide (the *Politically Incorrect Guides* series is modelled after the hugely popular *Dummy's Guide* series). Wells' large-scale organization isn't as tight as *Darwin on Trial*, where the arguments were so structured that you knew when you finished one chapter what the next chapter was going to talk about. But what Wells lacks in structure is made up for by the up-to-date and readable coverage he gives to the subject.

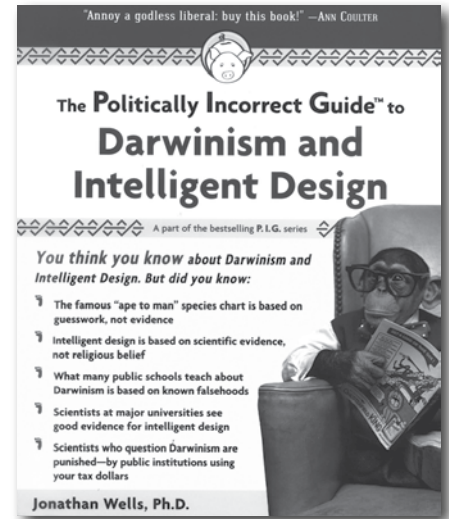
ID has always proceeded against evolution in a two-step process. First, design advocates attack the sufficiency and accuracy of the reigning paradigm, Darwinism. But the fact that Darwinism is insufficient and inaccurate does not, by itself, establish the conclusion of design. So, as a second prong to the argument for ID, design advocates argue that a scientifically more satisfactory explanation is design by an intelligent designer. Even within a single argument, the two-pronged approach is often distinguishable. For example, in Michael Behe's

formulation of irreducible complexity, the negative argument states that the Darwinian process is incapable of forming an irreducibly complex biological structure. The positive argument states that an irreducibly complex biological structure is characteristic of design. (The two-pronged nature of the argument is often lost on the evolutionists, but it is important because it means that ID's argument is not an argument from ignorance, as evolutionists often suggest.) In this *Politically Incorrect Guide*, there is a pretty neat dividing line between the anti-Darwinist and pro-ID sections.

Anti-evolution

Wells' first several chapters are devoted to demolishing the credibility of Darwinism, examining the fossil record, embryological recapitulation and genetic phylogenies, among other things. Most of the themes will be familiar to anyone with even a passing familiarity with ID and creationism. Yet unless you've been reading the literature regularly and assiduously, Wells will probably have several new tidbits on any given issue even for those who are quite familiar with the debates. Particularly good is his chapter, 'You'd Think Darwin Created the Internet', exploding the Darwinist claim that evolution is essential to science.

Wells' discussion of speciation was one chapter that was not quite up to the high standards of the rest of his discussions. Wells started strong, noting that speciation is not a problem to Intelligent Design or young earth creation, but got sidetracked into hairsplitting over whether any speciation had actually been *observed*. This is certainly an interesting question worthy of inquiry, but not helpful insofar as it reinforces the (false) public impression that creationists and Intelligent Design advocates believe in fixity of species. Wells did make



the effort to qualify his discussion properly, but once you have stated that speciation is not a problem, why go through a long (and on the whole, unconvincing) argument to show that we haven't seen speciation actually *happen*?

Pro-ID

Wells moves from the negative case against evolution to the positive case for Intelligent Design, starting with the hardest of all ID arguments to explain at a popular level: Dembski's explanatory filter. He does a fine job of explaining this mathematically involved concept to laymen, before moving on to discuss the design arguments from biological information (focusing on Stephen Meyer), from irreducible complexity (focusing on Michael Behe), and from cosmic fine-tuning (focusing on Guillermo Gonzalez). This is a lot to cover, but Wells is a good teacher. He avoids getting bogged down into minutiae, yet manages to give enough detail to make the discussion feel substantial.

Wells manages to cover the bacterial flagellum in three pages, including interactions with the critics.

'By knocking out genes and screening for cells that can no longer move, researchers have identified all the gene products (proteins) required for assembly and operation of the flagellum. Remove any of them, and it stops working. Thus the motor of

the bacterial flagellum meets Behe's criterion for irreducible complexity' (p. 113–114).

Ever since Behe first offered this argument, the critics have claimed that the flagellum co-opted the apparatus from another biological feature, called the type-III secretory apparatus (TTSS). Wells manages to present the critique and distil ID's responses from Behe, Minnich and Meyer in a page and a half:

'[A] mechanic could remove the gasoline engine from an outboard motor and run it by itself, but the outboard motor can't function without it. Removing the engine doesn't refute the irreducible complexity of the outboard motor; in fact, it confirms it' (p. 114–115).

Also, evolutionary experts in the TTSS say that it came from a flagellum, so the anti-ID critics are out of step even with their fellow evolutionists.

After devoting a separate chapter to each of these separate arguments for design, Wells turns to the subject of naturalism and the definition of science:

'Darwinists have been unable to refute intelligent design with evidence, so they rely on a self-serving definition of science that excludes it from serious consideration' (p. 131).

Wells points out that the more fundamental question is not what meets a particular definition of science, but what the true explanation for the phenomena we are studying is.

Conservative values

The 'truth' of Darwinism or design has important implications in many fields, but Wells focuses on two: conservatism and Christianity. This is not surprising: first, Wells' publisher (Regnery) is best known for its conservative connections on the American political scene. And second, despite ID's disavowal of religious commitments in its science, ID's main support base is evangelical Christians (who also are the most important

religious bloc in American political conservatism).

Conservatism is hard to define (as one conservative writer put it, it's a question of what needs conserving¹). For purposes of this book, Wells is talking about both social conservatism in the sense of traditional morality, and economic conservatism in the sense of small government, less regulation or fewer regulations and a freer market. Wells gives a short but incisive review of Darwinism's dismal track record when it comes to social values: racism, abortion and eugenics.

On the economy, he is less convincing. The average educated reader probably will come to the issue already seeing a strong link between *laissez-faire* economics and the social Darwinist 'survival of the fittest' mentality,² and Wells has to overcome this if he wants to make the case that Darwinism is not supportive of free enterprise. Wells offers some historical commentary to the effect that American nineteenth-century capitalists actually drew their theories from classical economists like Adam Smith rather than social Darwinists, which is all fine as far as it goes.³ Wells then notes that Darwinism is based on a struggle to survive in a world of limited resources, and argues that this approach invites increased government regulation.

In contrast, ID sees the world as having potential for increased productivity based on intelligent action. This is an interesting argument, which Wells is drawing from articles by Discovery Institute Fellow George Gilder, but Wells does not develop it sufficiently to prove the strong point he seems to want to make: that evolution supports interventionism *better* than the free market. By closing the chapter with this argument, readers will probably miss the main points, which are easily explained and documented. First, evolution has not exclusively been used to justify *laissez-faire* economics; statists and interventionists have also freely appropriated it.⁴ Second, evolution is an ethically bankrupt political philosophy; it has historically failed to provide limits to

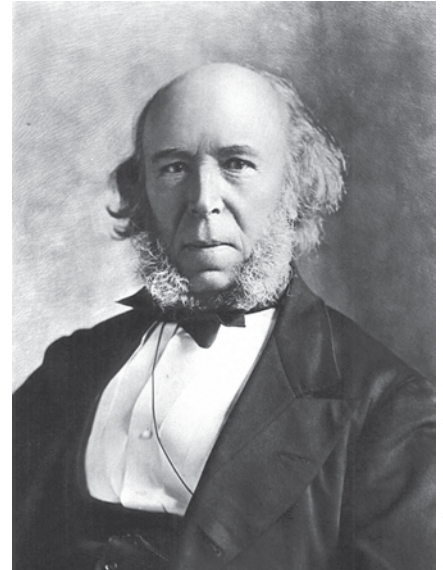


Image from <www.wikipedia.org>

Herbert Spencer has linked the free market to Darwinism in the minds of many people. However, Jonathan Wells argues that there are reasons to view Darwinism as a better fit with government interventionism than with the free market.

either individualistic rapaciousness or collectivistic tyranny.⁵

Christianity

In moving from economics and political theory to Christianity, Wells is back on turf he's familiar with—but he's still in an awkward position. ID has always struggled to avoid being labelled religious, and it claims to make no theological claims (which is itself a theological claim, though a minimal one). Wells has a fine line to walk to maintain this stance while explaining why Christians should prefer ID to Darwinism. He does this by focusing on why Darwinism is *anti-Christian*, without an explicit discussion of the relationship of Christianity and ID.

He starts by pointing to three basics upon which 'traditional Christians' are united:

'(1) God created everything from nothing, (2) God planned the incarnation—and thus human beings—from the beginning, and (3) God continues to interact with the creation' (pp. 170–171).

Then he turns to the evolutionist literature for numerous statements on

the opposite theme: ‘Man is the result of a purposeless and natural process’ (p. 172, quoting George Gaylord Simpson). Wells concludes, ‘it is clear ... that there is a fundamental conflict here’. The conflict is ‘between traditional Christianity and Darwinism’ (p. 173). Darwinism *could* allow for the existence of God, but not the God of ‘traditional Christianity’.

All this is true enough; the disappointment is that Wells does not go further. There are important biblical and theological reasons for rejecting not just Darwinism, but also old-earth theories generally (even when those theories are generally compatible with design). And they would also help answering typical objections: ‘Why did a designer make things to go extinct or attack each other?’ These objections are easy to answer with the biblical teachings of the Fall and Flood, but these answers are unavailable in an old-earth paradigm.

ID advocates have usually avoided such discussions, and have satisfied themselves with showing that ID is more compatible with Christianity than Darwinism is. For these purposes, ID advocates try to stay in the realms of ‘consensus Christianity’, as Wells does, without dealing with the heart of the theological questions. Christians should recognize ID as a step in the right direction (away from Darwinism), and nothing more.⁶ ID can be an ally, but should not be adopted as the Christian position. So long as it clings to the myth of religious neutrality, it will also retain some kinship to the Athenians in the book of Acts, in paying its homage to an unknown god (cf. Acts 17:23).

War stories

Even if ID is not all that we would like it to be theologically, it is still a powerful cultural symbol of resistance to the reign of naturalism as scientific and philosophical orthodoxy. This is a theme that runs throughout *The Politically Incorrect Guide*, as Wells recounts story after story of Darwinists attempting to silence an opposition it cannot defeat in argument.⁷

In one chapter, Wells calls it ‘American Lysenkoism’, referring to Trofim Lysenko, a leading figure in the Soviet scientific establishment in the 1930s and 1940s who espoused Lamarckian evolution. Lysenko opposed Mendelian genetics and used his power ruthlessly against his opponents in scientific debate. Wells points out that Lysenko opposed Mendelian genetics precisely because he believed it to be un-Darwinian (p. 185).⁸ The bottom line is that science in the Soviet Union was a matter of politics, not free inquiry.

Today, Wells says, Darwinism would crumble quickly in the face of free inquiry, so it, like Lysenko, is propped up by power plays, politics and money. And Wells delights to regale us with story after story to that effect. Some of the stories made national news, such as the nearly ruinous attack on Smithsonian scientist Richard Sternberg, whose only offence was allowing an ID article to be published in a science journal he edited. Others were played out on a smaller stage. For instance, high school science teacher Bryan Leonard had his doctoral dissertation rejected for simply studying belief patterns of students who are taught scientific data both for and against Darwinism. The faculty’s reasoning was that Leonard must have assumed that there is ‘valid scientific data challenging macroevolution’, which was ‘a fundamental flaw’ (p. 189).

There are many of these stories, and they play an important role in this book, not primarily because they are part of the argument, but because they give the book some human interest. Wells uses the persecution stories to keep up a theme of ‘culture war’ controversy, befitting a ‘politically incorrect’ book.

A ‘politically incorrect’ theme also creates an expectation of an accessible and exciting political editorial style, and so we are treated to some occasionally raucous and humorous pull-out quotes accompanying the text to spice things up. I would be interested to know whether these were chosen by Wells or his publisher. The Darwinism-design

controversy really doesn’t need help being sensationalized, so it would not have been my approach.

Still, whoever chose the quotes generally did a good job, with one exception. In the text, Wells mentioned the rabidly anti-Christian attitudes of Professor Paul Mirecki, an outspoken critic of ID (but who has no qualifications in science; his department is Religious Studies, Academe-speak for ‘anti-Christian religious relativism’). This was relevant to the discussion in the text, which was on the connection between Darwinism and atheism, so there was nothing wrong here. The problem was the pullout quote, with a large heading: ‘A Darwinist’s opinion of Pope John Paul II’, followed by the description endorsed by Mirecki: ‘A corpse in a funny hat wearing a dress’ (p. 174; see also p. 169). The pullout was accurate—Mirecki *is* a Darwinist, and that *was* his view of Pope John Paul II. But the effect is to link Darwinism in general with a particularly extreme and rude statement by one Darwinist on a tangential matter, and it looks like a cheap propaganda technique. The attention-grabbing shock effect is not worth flirting with misrepresentation, not even in the interests of giving a ‘politically incorrect’ aura to sell books.

The future of ID

The ‘war stories’ of persecuted ID advocates, though, were included with a much better reason than merely giving an exciting ‘politically incorrect’ context. To Wells, they are hopeful signs—that Darwinism is unstable and can only keep its position in society by force, not argument. In his concluding chapter, Wells turns to the future of ID, with the theme of scientific revolution. This has been a favourite metaphor of ID, with all its implications of a Kuhnian ‘paradigm shift’ in the works. This is precisely how Wells describes the situation, setting the context with a description of Kuhn’s thesis itself.⁹ He identifies four key points from Kuhn that are relevant to ID and uses them

to lay out his optimistic predictions for the future of ID.

First, scientific revolutions usually involve a debate over the definition of science. That is certainly the case in the Darwinism versus design debate. Ever since Phillip Johnson launched the design movement with his book *Darwin on Trial*, ID has relentlessly critiqued the naturalistic definition of science, and the Darwinist opposition has fought back with equal persistency.

Second, scientific revolutions usually divide the scientific community into parties, ‘old paradigm’ versus ‘new paradigm’. The Darwinism versus design debate has divided the scientific community, indeed. And Darwinists, the ‘old paradigm’, are throwing everything they have into the fight against the upstarts, ranging from conventional scholarly critiques to the harassment that Wells emphasizes. This harassment, Wells suggests, is a sign that the design advocates have made substantial progress, and the Darwinists are desperately grasping at every weapon at their disposal.

Third, scientific revolutions usually turn on the question of which paradigm should control future inquiry. According to Kuhn, the more important question is not what research has already been done, but what paradigm ought to set research programs for the future. So the mere fact that ID has promise in this area is enough to make it a player. Wells spends some time here describing potential ID research projects. He points to several lines of research that are either already completed or underway, including experiments with proteins and new hypotheses about pathogenic viruses, indicating that ID already has proven to be a worthy research program.

Fourth, scientific revolutions are usually precipitated by the young researchers in a field, who are not personally involved in the already existing paradigm community. On this point, Wells is convinced that ID’s appeal among young people is ‘skyrocketing’. As concrete evidence, he points to the proliferation of Intelligent Design and Evolution Awareness (IDEA) clubs on university

campuses since the first group was founded in 1999 at the University of California–San Diego.¹⁰ Wells concludes,

‘A growing number of bright young men and women have the courage to question Darwinism, study intelligent design, and follow the evidence wherever it leads. ... And the future belongs to them’ (p. 207).

Conclusion

ID has indeed made major progress toward dethroning the hegemony of naturalism in science and opening many eyes to the problems with Darwinism and the superiority of design. For this, creationists are grateful. We stop short of identifying ourselves with the ID movement not because we are unappreciative of their work, but because we recognize that ID has a major theological blind spot. ID insists on clinging to the myth of neutrality, as if science can be done without religious interpretation. Everything anyone does is grounded in religious presuppositions, and the problem with ID is that it does not go all the way to recognize the true Designer, the Triune God of Scripture. Still, in many of the Darwinism-design arguments, creationists are in the same boat as ID, and we can only profit from more familiarity and interaction with the ID community and its writings. And hopefully, the ID movement will reciprocate with a greater openness to discuss the theological issues that we cannot compromise. Despite its somewhat sensational ‘politically incorrect’ marketing, *The Politically Incorrect Guide* is a good resource to have on hand for ready reference on the status of ID. And this is something we can all appreciate.

References

1. Evans, M.S., *The Theme is Freedom*, Regnery, Washington D.C., 1994.
2. Actually, though, rather than cruel competition, the free market’s theory is that ‘the success of the more able raises the productivity and improves the standard of living of the less able.’ Reisman, G., *Capitalism: A Treatise on Economics*, Jameson Books, Ottawa, IL, p. 344, 1998 (emphasis in original).

3. Although it does not go back far enough; for the historical Christian foundation of capitalism, see Stark, R., *The Victory of Reason*, Random House, New York, pp. 55–68, 2005.
4. This was well described by, of all people, Michael Ruse in his chapter on social Darwinism in *The Evolution-Creation Controversy*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, pp. 103–112, 2005. Specific historical connections between government economic interventionism and evolution are also well illustrated by Lester Frank Ward, the American opponent of Herbert Spencer. See Bogardus, E.S., *A History of Social Thought*, University of Southern California Press, Los Angeles, CA, pp. 277–287, 299, 1922. And of course, Marxists, the most hard-core opponents of the free market, rely heavily on Darwinism. See Noebel, D.A., *Understanding the Times*, Harvest House, Eugene, OR, pp. 134–153, 1991.
5. For a general discussion of two different political philosophies based on evolution, see Noebel, ref. 4, pp. 576–613, as well as Bergman, J., Darwin’s critical influence on the ruthless extremes of capitalism, *J. Creation* 16(2):105–109, 2002; The Darwinian foundation of Communism, *J. Creation* 15(1):89–95, 2001.
6. See Wieland, C., CMI’s views on the Intelligent Design movement, <www.creationontheweb.com/IDM>.
7. One of the most recent being Guillermo Gonzalez’s denial of tenure. Wells covered the beginnings of the persecution, pp. 127–129; for the continuation, see Grigg, R., Darwinian thought police strike again <www.creationontheweb.com/gonzalez>, 12 June 2007.
8. Interestingly, modern Darwinians primarily remember the fact that Lysenko rejected the modern version of Darwinism (known as the ‘neo-Darwinian synthesis’) that attempts to put natural selection in terms of Mendelian heredity. They then lump Lysenko in with anti-Darwinists, forgetting that it was precisely because Lysenko was a Darwinian that he rejected Mendel.
9. In his book, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (University of Chicago Press, Chicago, IL, 1962), Thomas Kuhn proposed that science proceeds by revolutions. A ruling paradigm remains in place even as discrepancies and contradictions accumulate between the paradigm and the empirical data, and the decision to discard the old paradigm in favour of a new one is accomplished by a revolutionary ‘paradigm shift’. For a discussion of ID’s use of Kuhn, see Woodward, T., *Doubts About Darwin*, Baker books, Grand Rapids, MI, pp. 40, 66, 129–130, 2003.
10. ‘There are now clubs in Canada, Kenya, Ukraine, and the Philippines, not to mention several dozen in the U.S.’ (p. 206).