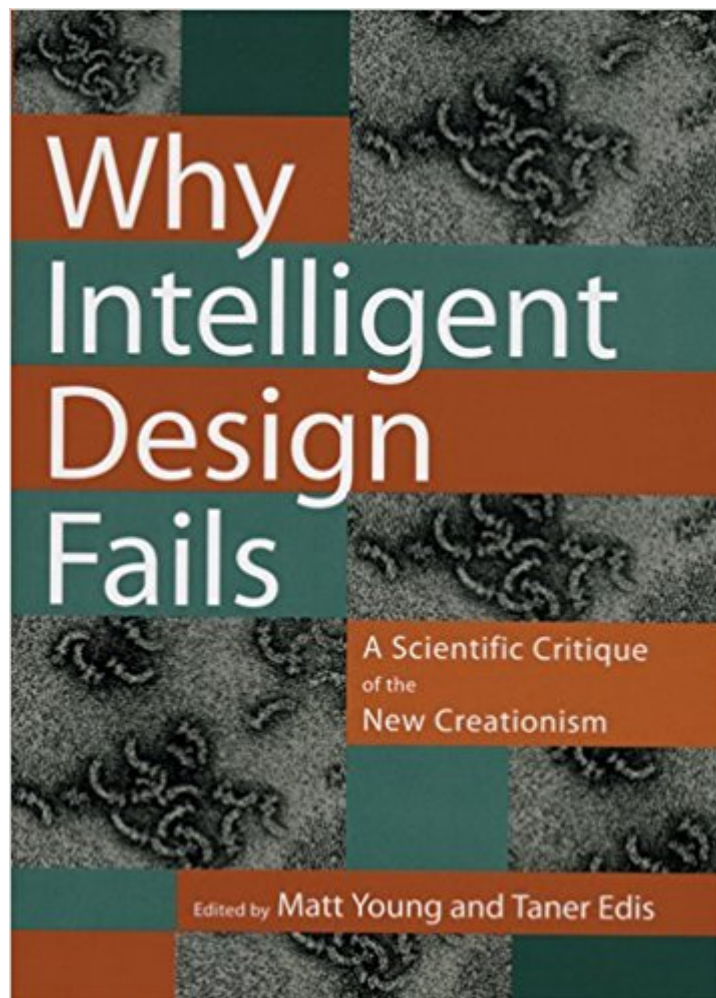




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Why Intelligent Design Fails: A Scientific Critique Of The New Creationism



Synopsis

Is Darwinian evolution established fact, or a dogma ready to be overtaken by "intelligent design"? This is the debate raging in courtrooms and classrooms across the country. *Why Intelligent Design Fails* assembles a team of physicists, biologists, computer scientists, mathematicians, and archaeologists to examine intelligent design from a scientific perspective. They consistently find grandiose claims without merit. Contributors take intelligent design's two most famous claims--irreducible complexity and information-based arguments--and show that neither challenges Darwinian evolution. They also discuss thermodynamics and self-organization; the ways human design is actually identified in fields such as forensic archaeology; how research in machine intelligence indicates that intelligence itself is the product of chance and necessity; and cosmological fine-tuning arguments. Intelligent design turns out to be a scientific mistake, but a mistake whose details highlight the amazing power of Darwinian thinking and the wonders of a complex world without design.

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Customer Reviews

A terrific book that explores, fairly and openly, whether proponents of ID have any scientifically valid gadgets in their toolbox at all...accessibly written throughout and an invaluable aid to teachers and scientists. (Kevin Padian Professor and Curator, University of California, Berkeley, and President, Nation)

Matt Young is the author of *No Sense of Obligation: Science and Religion in an Impersonal Universe*. He was a physicist with the National Institute of Standards and Technology and is now Senior Lecturer in Physics at the Colorado School of Mines. Taner Edis is an associate professor of physics at Truman State University in Kirksville, Missouri, and the author of *The Ghost in the Universe: God in Light of Modern Science*.

This is a good compendium of responses to the usual arguments advanced to promote ID. Because it is by several authors, the writing clarity is not uniform but generally the writing is good and the reasoning is excellent.

The problem with this book is really a simple one: the authors of way too many of the invited chapters assume too much knowledge on the part of the reader. Sometimes the knowledge assumed is familiarity with the writings of Intelligent Design proponents (e.g., Dembski or Behe). At other times, it is that the reader will be familiar with certain concepts, diagrammatic conventions, or nomenclature of a specific scientific field. Either way, more discussion and review would have been worthwhile. As it is, many thinking people will be lost as they read this book. I know I was -- despite the fact that my Ph.D. diploma hanging in my university office where I am employed as a basic scientist suggests I should not have been! Oh well, the introductory and final chapters were worth reading.

The Preface to the first edition of this 2004 book states, "This book concerns... a new and comparatively sophisticated form of creationism. Concerned scientists and educators will find answers to questions such as the following: What is intelligent design (ID) creationism? ... Why is it universally rejected by mainstream science?... What are the specific scientific errors in intelligent design arguments?" (Pg. xi) The book contains a number of essays, including ones by Niall Shanks [A Critique of Intelligent Design Theory], Mark Perakh [Unintelligent Design], Victor Stenger [Not by Design], etc. One essayist notes, "Those jaw bones did not just suddenly one day re-form themselves and decide to become ear bones; because mammals did not need unhinging jaws, the jaw bones gradually changed their shape and their function until they became the bones of the inner ear. The ear today may be irreducibly complex, but once it was not. You might, however, be fooled into thinking that the ear could not have evolved if you did not know exactly how it originated." (Pg. 22) Another observes, "How many basic types are there? Creationists don't tell us. Until we know, the dynamic-creation model is only a fragment of a theory. If basic types are to capture the million or

so species on earth, the model must include thousands of basic types." (Pg. 35) He adds, "I cannot stress enough how amazing it is that the model cannot answer straightforward questions such as why cats and dogs share characteristics and are placed in the same group, Carnivores..." (Pg. 38) Another essayist says, "Michael Behe claims to accept the common descent of all life... Behe's position is puzzling. He does not say why he accepts common descent... Perhaps he does not realize the consequences of his statement. Common descent of life means ... that life is one unbroken chain of ancestors and descendants. It means that every organism inherited all its genes from the previous generation... And that includes irreducibly complex systems." (Pg. 43) A later essay adds, "[Kenneth R.] Miller, like Behe, is a Catholic. But contrary to Behe, Miller rejects intelligent design as a scientific theory because there is scientific evidence against it and also because of flawed logic." (Pg. 49) This book will be of keen interest to critics of Intelligent Design, as well as to anyone interested in the Creation/Evolution controversy.

First, I will observe that many of the critical (i.e., negative) reviews of this book are surprisingly similar in style, diction, format, and content. While this is not sufficient to justify the conclusion that they are all the product of one author under various pseudonyms, it is sufficient to raise the suspicion. Now, if I were a proponent of ID, I would say that this situation could not have arisen by chance, and would suspect that an intelligent -- if unscrupulous, and not particularly articulate -- designer was behind this apparent coincidence. Now to the point, which the critics seem to miss. The burden of proof is not on Darwinian evolution, but on alternative theories: Darwinian evolution has been, and continues to be, predominant, and if ID wants to be considered as a serious contender it needs to show that (a) it has at least equivalent explanatory power and (b) satisfies all of the usual criteria for scientific theories. Foremost among the latter is *disprovability* -- it must be possible to disprove the theory, or at least to challenge it such that its proponents must provide a (disprovable) alternative theory that has the same explanatory power. ID is not disprovable, by definition: no "theory" that has a magic escape clause ("and then a miracle happens") is disprovable, because a miracle (extra-scientific event) can always be (and always is) invoked. If (for example) human remains were found in strata corresponding to the Cretaceous -- not just once, but in many locations -- this would be a blow to the prevailing theory. This has not, to my knowledge, happened -- nor has any other piece of concrete evidence arisen to challenge evolution. All of the arguments advanced by ID proponents are "gap" arguments, or -- in the case of Behe and Dembski -- arguments based on misapplications or misrepresentations of scientific principles (such as the second law of thermodynamics). The second half of my title -- "critique by duckbite" -- refers to the tendency for

the (negative) critics to fixate on one small aspect of one of the 13 chapters in WIDF. Another way to put this is that they are missing the forest by focusing on one twig on one particular branch of one particular tree. For example, to claim that an author is a sloppy scholar on the basis of one slightly incorrect citation (of a web site, no less) is simply fatuous, and smacks of ad hominem argument. If you critics are so desperate to find flaws in this book that you are fixated on trivia like this, your very desperation speaks volumes about the actual (high) quality of the book. You can't dissect this book: you have to take all of the arguments collectively, as a whole. And as a whole, it's hard for me to understand how anyone can fail to find it convincing. BTW, unlike many -- I said "many", not "most" or "all", so don't get your knickers in a twist if you happen to have read it -- of the negative critics, I actually read and understood the entire book, and am also sufficiently conversant with all of the disciplines involved that I understand all of the issues and arguments. I know the molecular biology, I know the physics, I know the biochemistry, and I am a professional AI researcher with over 20 years of practice, so I understand the philosophical and computational issues as well. The bottom line is that the only thing that distinguishes ID from creationism of any other stripe are the fact that its proponents are disingenuous about their religious bias, and its claim to scientific legitimacy: absent the legitimate scientific underpinnings, it's just another attempt to push religion into the science curriculum. And WIDF demolishes all of the supposed scientific underpinnings of ID. Demolishes. The burden of proof is on you, (negative) critics, and on Behe and Dembski and their ilk: you have not demonstrated that ID is science in even the remotest sense of the term, and until that day you have no business claiming that it's a plausible alternative to Darwinian evolution.

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