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NATURE'S BOOK SHELVED

*Seeing Is Not Always Believing,
But There Are Things the
Unbeliever Should See*

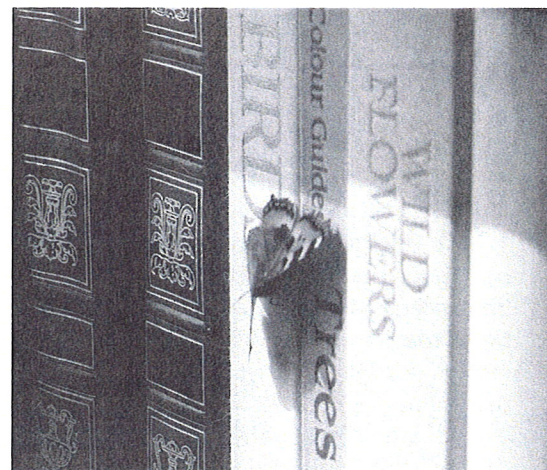


Photo: iStockPhoto

by JONATHAN WITT

DOES NATURE PROVIDE EVIDENCE of a cosmic maker? The answer of the religious skeptic is obvious: No. An essay in *Scientific American* communicates this view sarcastically, poking fun at a Georgia public-school textbook sticker warning students that evolution is just a theory. Confident that neo-Darwinism provides a thoroughly undirected and unimpeachable account of life from the first organism to the present teeming world, the essayist suggests several alternative stickers for a series of imaginary books. The one in *Creationism for Dummies* reads, "Religious belief rests on a foundation of faith. Seeking empirical evidence for support of one's faith-based beliefs therefore could be considered pointless. Or even blasphemous."

Some consider this argument merely a ploy to get Christianity off Darwinism's back, but what about Christians who make the same argument? Some prominent ones—like Fr. George Coyne, director of the Vatican Observatory, the astronomical research division of the Catholic Church, and John Haught, Professor of Theology at Georgetown University—insist not only that the natural world provides no such evidence, but that it would be a problem if it did.

KIERKEGAARD AGAINST DESIGN

Such a view can serve as a coping strategy for those who feel that Darwinism has effectively undermined natural theology—sour grapes writ large: "Evidence for design? Who needs it? Not anyone with real faith."

But this can't be the only motivation. Søren Kierkegaard opposed design arguments before Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* had ever appeared.

Kierkegaard insisted that one entered Christianity through a leap of faith, not by way of scientific arguments or logical proofs. According to one contemporary philosopher, he believed "that any such proof would undermine our freedom to choose Christianity. . . . If God could be demonstrated like a math problem, then wouldn't one have to believe in Him by force of logic? Rather than by love, by choice, by gambling one's very existence with fear and trembling on the Unknown, the very stuff of the human spirit as described throughout the Bible?"

Kierkegaard's view entered twentieth-century Christian theology through Karl Barth and his criticism of natural theology. Barth claimed the Apostle Paul for his inspiration, but Kierkegaard's influence is obvious, and through him, the impulse has passed into contemporary Christianity.

According to one *Touchstone* reader (responding to an earlier article of mine), the notion that nature points clearly to a designer "may actually violate an important notion of theology, which is that God hides." Paul Thomas continues:

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If information were conclusively discovered in the genetic code, for example, then God would have conclusively revealed himself in nature . . . belief in God would become deterministic, a no-brainer forced upon humankind, not an act of free will. God would no longer be a lover who approaches us with a still, small voice, but rather one who forces his love on human beings, turning them into automatons.

Before deciding if this view holds water, it's important to be clear about what it will contain if it does. Even Christians skeptical of intelligent design in biology—like John Polkinghorne, a Cambridge University physicist and Anglican priest, or Kenneth Miller, a Catholic biologist and leading defender of neo-Darwinism—have appealed to evidence of God's handiwork at the cosmic level.

And understandably. First, growing scientific evidence shows that the universe is not eternal but had a beginning. Who or what caused this remarkable event? And second, physicists and chemists have determined that the many physical constants of our universe—things like gravity and the electromagnetic force—are just right to allow for complex life. These findings provide strong evidence that a creative intelligence was responsible for the origin of our universe.

STRIPPED OF FREEDOM

Return now to those who insist that God would never strip us of free will by providing clear indicators of design in nature. To be consistent, they must dispense even with design arguments from physics and cosmology, must insist that such evidence does not point to a grand designer, must insist that brute atheism should explain every feature of the physical universe adequately, all the way back to and including the origin of the universe in the finite past; for even a single feature pointing clearly to design would—according to their position—strip us of the freedom to disbelieve in God.

The argument, then, is a very large bucket. Fortunately, it does not hold water. Kierkegaard came at the problem of faith from within an overwhelmingly Christian culture that moved effortlessly, even unconsciously, from evidence of design directly to the Triune God. Kierkegaard also was reacting to what he saw in Hegel as an overemphasis on detached, objective reflection. For Kierkegaard, Hegel took too little account of the central role of choice in human

existence, gave too little attention to the free individual.

I mention these influences because Kierkegaard is manifestly a profound thinker and, here, manifestly in error. The conjunction calls for explanation, and what I am suggesting is that the answer lies partly in what Kierkegaard was reacting against.

Now let's examine the error: the claim that evidence of design in nature would compel belief in the God of the Bible. Consider the bacterial flagellum, an extraordinarily intricate rotary engine inside living cells. Biologist and design theorist Michael Behe argues that the best explanation for this structure is intelligent design.

However, while the flagellum provides evidence of design and hence a designer, we find nowhere on the bushings of the little engine the words, "Made by Jehovah." This evidence from nature doesn't tell us who the designer is, much less compel us toward a living faith in the God of the Bible.

This is obvious from instances near and far. British philosopher Antony Flew has been called the world's most influential philosophical atheist. As far back as his debates at C. S. Lewis's Socratic Club at Oxford University more than half a century ago, he argued that there simply wasn't enough evidence for a creator. But recently he investigated the argument for design in the origin of life and, in the process, left atheism behind. "It now seems to me," he said, "that the findings of more than fifty years of DNA research have provided materials for a new and enormously powerful argument to design."

But that evidence has only drawn Flew from atheism to a non-specific theism. He still rejects the God of the Bible, rejects the idea of any Creator who would consign his creatures to eternal punishment. Flew only affirms what he calls the God of the philosophers, a non-specific designing intelligence.

BARE EVIDENCE

Or consider how the Israelites responded to those bracing design arguments, the miracles of the Exodus. Did the parting of the Red Sea transform them into automatons? If so, then automatons never behaved so badly. Ten plagues, a maritime miracle, and thunder from Mount Sinai, and they were still second-guessing Yahweh's competence as a military commander, rethinking their divorce with the land of Egypt, and falling down before the first pair of golden calves they could lay their hands on. With

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a cloudy pillar by day and a fire by night, they made a full-time job of rebellion.

The miracles that freed Israel from slavery confirmed God's existence and demonstrated his care for them, but the miracles didn't force the Israelites to trust in his goodness. Satan knows God exists, and comes before the throne of God to accuse. The demons believe, and shudder. The Apostle Paul says in the first chapter of Romans that even the lost know God, because God has made his eternal power and divine nature clear "from what has been made." He goes on to explain that, nevertheless, humanity "exchanged the glory of the immortal God" for idols.

If the angel of death and Lazarus risen from the dead are not enough to strip a man of his free will, one needn't tremble before the bare evidence of design in a living cell. Perhaps Kierkegaard had in mind those defenses of God that made facile leaps from glorious design to the *Gloria Dei*. Perhaps he found the reality of God so obvious that the bare evidence of design in nature was to him uninteresting.

Or perhaps he overreached in hopes of refocusing our attention upon and revitalizing the faith that grows from hazarding everything in search of the ragged figure of Jesus. Kierkegaard was an existentialist reacting to what he saw as intellectualized faith. But Christianity encompasses heart, mind, soul, and strength. And God is the God of sheep as well as lions; of those who cry, "Help my unbelief" as well as spiritual giants.

Kierkegaard offered a second reason for his distaste for design arguments. He said he would "surely not attempt to prove God's existence," for even if he began the process, he would never complete it, leaving him "constantly in suspense, lest something so terrible should suddenly happen that my bit of proof would be demolished."



I have a relative who is quick to write off his favorite football team during close games so they won't have a chance to disappoint him. This is the tack many take with contemporary design arguments, and it's the tack urged by the plaintiffs in a Pennsylvania trial over intelligent design. In the opening days of the *Kitzmiller v. Dover* trial, which I attended last fall, the ACLU argued that design arguments could prove dangerous to a student's religious faith: Since such design arguments might not pan out, or might raise insoluble questions about things like death and suffering in the world, *better not to expose students to them in the public classroom.*

THE HEAVENS DECLARE

Such thinking is misguided. Is the evidence for design real, and are arguments based on that evidence soundly constructed and well informed? If the signature of design in nature is authentic, who are we to insist it is a gift that God shouldn't have given?

We live in an age where the secular institutions of the West have closed the book of nature by insisting that science can only consider material causes, must obey a methodology that constructs only theories fully consistent with atheism. They rarely put the matter this baldly, of course. It usually goes by the benign, official-sounding term "methodological materialism." The term is sleep-inducing and appropriately so, for materialism is a spell cast upon the West, a spell potent enough that even some Christians frown disapprovingly at scientists who risk their careers to announce that they see, through today's powerful microscopes and telescopes, evidence of design.

And while some Christians fret over an imagined incompatibility between faith and indicators of design in nature, the Psalmist proclaims from under a starry sky without qualification or apology, "The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands. Day after day they pour forth speech."

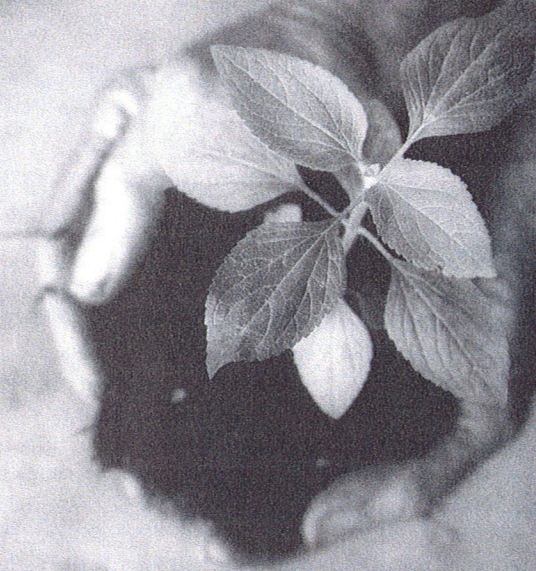
Deeper into his hymn of praise, David moves from the generic *El* to the Creator's personal name revealed in Scripture: Yahweh. He makes this switch just as the subject moves from the book of nature to the book of God's written law. Thus, in a single psalm, David has suggested for us a pattern of witness: The evidence for design can point a man toward a grand designer, thus laying the groundwork for a personal encounter with the Lord of Scripture.

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Make no mistake: The science of intelligent design is a form of human exploration valuable in its own right: the scientist open to the truth, searching out the best explanation for some corner of the natural world, fashioning a compelling argument for design based on empirical evidence and sound reasoning. But in entailing all of these things first and foremost, it can function secondarily as a powerful tool of pre-evangelism.

There are people, many of them young, standing on a far shore. They have heard of the man Jesus, but they've been told that he is just out of reach, a lovely myth, a figure from a time before reason when men believed in miracles, in a white-bearded God forever tinkering with the world, trying to set it aright.

I could tell many stories of people, already in love with the figure of Jesus, who walked into a building atheists and left believers in Christ after seeing accomplished scientists and philosophers explaining the growing evidence for design in biology and other disciplines. These converts were people in the strangely modern circumstance of already knowing Jesus, even loving him, but who had been told that nature—reality itself to modern minds—has moved beyond such childish tales.

A BROKEN SPELL

Such people do not need cautious explanations of why evidence of design would strip them of their freedom. They are in bondage already, are under the spell of materialism,

and they need someone to break the spell.

Unfortunately, design theorists are massively undermanned and underfunded, Davids against the Goliath of a luxuriously funded, highly placed, and intensely motivated group of people opposed to the tiniest hint of evidence for design slipping into the mainstream of science.

At the beginning of every episode of the old PBS series *Cosmos*, the late astronomer Carl Sagan told the audience that the universe is all there is, ever was, or ever will be. Design theorists need strong support from the larger Christian community to get the evidence out to the broader public that Carl Sagan was manifestly wrong, that the book of nature tells a very different story.

They need both encouragement and help spreading the truth about where the evidence in science points, because far too many people—inside and outside of Christianity—are busy explaining that evidence away. They, like Kierkegaard, forget that the evidence from God's book of nature need not be a dwelling place. It can also be a stepping-stone.

The article from Scientific American was Steve Mirsky's "Sticker Shock" (February 2005); the description of Kierkegaard is taken from The American Thinker (www.americanthinker.com/articles.php?article_id=4761); and the quote from Anthony Flew is taken from "Interview with Gary Habermas" in the Winter 2004 issue of Philosophia Christi (www.biola.edu/antonyflew).