**Stephen Barr's Unreasonable Reasonableness**
William Dembski | 10 February 2010

http://www.uncommondescent.com/intelligent-design/stephen-barrs-unreasonable-reasonableness/

Steve Barr and I used to be friends. I'm not sure he would consider me one any longer. According to his latest posting at *First Things* (go here), "Religion has a significant number of friends (and potential friends) in the scientific world. The ID movement is not creating new ones." And since creating new friends for religion among his scientific colleagues seems to have become Barr's overriding concern, that presumably makes me and the ID movement the enemy.

I first learned of Barr back in 1992 through a friend of mine from the University of Chicago doing a postdoc at Caltech. Knowing my interest in the science-religion discussion, he told me about a talk he had heard at Caltech from a U. of Del. physicist named Stephen Barr. My friend sent me a typescript of the talk and I was intrigued. Barr quoted the Church Father Minucius Felix: "If upon entering some home you saw that everything there was well-tended, neat and decorative, you would believe that some master was in charge of it, and that he was himself much superior to those good things. So too in the home of this world, when you see providence, order and law in the heavens and on earth, believe that there is a Lord and Author of the universe, more beatiful than the stars and the various parts of the whole world."

I called Barr and we had a nice chat. He indicated an openness to design in biology but felt that the better design arguments were to be made at the level physical law (God having designed the laws of the universe). Fair enough. In that first conversation back in 1992, I urged Barr to write a book on his law-based approach to design and thoughts about science and religion — he seemed to have an enthusiasm for the subject and the smarts to pull it off. As a research scientist, he stressed how busy he was and at the time dismissed my proposal out of hand. In following years Barr and I kept in touch. I had him invited to the MERE CREATION conference held at Biola in 1996, which he attended and at which he was a valuable participant.

Then, in 2003, ten years after our first conversation, he published a fine book titled *Modern Physics and Ancient Faith* (I like to think, and believe evidence supports it, that I was part of the causal chain in its production). In an email with subject header "Can you help me out," he asked me to help promote the book, asked me to write a blurb for it, and even asked me to direct him to others who might write blurbs for it (the blurb on the back cover by Peter van Inwagen was probably at my instance). In any case, I was happy to give him the following blurb: "Stephen Barr has an exceptionally clear style and a gift for illustrating complex ideas and making them understandable. More significantly, here is a free mind joyfully relating the physics he loves to the faith that sustains him, unconcerned about the reaction of the 'professionals'." I meant the blurb at the time and still think it's a fine book (indeed, I've used it in some of my seminary classes).

But I'm not sure I can honestly say that Barr is unconcerned about the reaction of his colleagues any longer. Indeed, given his *First Things* piece, he seems overly concerned to distance himself from his past ID connections and to score points with a more socially acceptable community of scholars. He protests too much. A colleague of mine, reading his *First Things* post, reacted this way:

> Barr is a good example of the Thomistic critique of ID. He'll get attaboys from his department colleagues and some of his religious friends. The Church Fathers and the Apostles, however, cannot be reached for comment.
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> If the argument from designed laws keeps getting stronger with the progress of science, why do so many people well acquainted with the progress of science fail to accept the conclusion of the argument? Perhaps Barr should notice that IC phenomena promise to offer an argument that could rationally persuade some people to whom "designed laws" talk looks like window dressing or seeing by the eye of faith.
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> Too bad he doesn't realize that his anti-gaps project is basically a commitment to a naturalistic research program. How does he think that saints are canonized? Why does he abandon scientific explanation for Jesus's ministry? "Science must fail for ID to succeed." Scientific New Testament criticism must fail for Jesus's supernatural character to be manifest (partly) in miracles….

Barr quotes from the Apocrypha and the Church Father Clement to suggest that ancient design arguments focused on beauty and order and law to the exclusion of contrivance and complexity, but in so doing he misrepresents that literature. I co-edited a 600-page anthology on the writings of the Church Fathers about creation and design titled *The Patristic Understanding of Creation*. It's available here from Amazon.com. Many of the design arguments there are in the spirit of Paley's watchmaker, though instead of going with the best technology of Paley's day (watchmaking), they went with the best technology of their day (musical instruments).

Fast forward to the middle ages, and one finds Thomas Aquinas distinguishing primary from secondary causes and stating explicitly in the *Summa Theologiae* that humanity was created not by secondary but by primary causation — in other words, not by God acting strictly through the physical creation but by God's direct activity making the physical creation do things that were otherwise not in its power (thereby excluding any form of evolutionism in accounting for the emergence of humanity): "The first formation of the human body could not be by the instrumentality of any created power, but was immediately from God." (*Summa Theologiae* I:91:2)

Barr's aversion to ID-style natural theology, which admits limitations in nature that only divine power can overcome, thus thus flies in the face of a long and illustrious history of design-theoretic arguments. To call design in this sense a "debacle," as Barr puts it, is thus historically misguided and suggests that Barr's aversion to ID is motivated by other concerns. Actually, it's not hard to see what that motivation is. As Barr states in his *First*

*Things* piece: "There are plenty of ways to make a case for the reasonableness of religious belief that can be persuasive to many in the scientific world." Barr puts a premium on appearing reasonable to his scientific colleagues. And even though he chides the ID community for appearing unreasonable and thus failing to win the scientific community, a bit of self-reflection should reveal that his own approach has hardly won the day. He writes, "I have addressed many audiences myself using arguments similar to theirs [i.e., those of Ken Miller, Francis Collins, etc.] and have had scientists whom I know to be of firm atheist convictions tell me that they came away with more respect for the religious position."

More respect? How much more exactly? Respect is fine and well, but I take it from this quote that these atheists are still atheists. In my own experience, I find that I've lost the respect of many in the scientific community, but I also receive emails now and again from persons who once were atheists but then found God because ID shook them out of their dogmatic slumber. The case of Antony Flew, the best known atheist in the English-speaking world until Richard Dawkins supplanted him in this unenviable position, is a case in point (see his book THERE IS A GOD). Flew attributes his conversion to theism not to a law-based teleology and not to the insight that neo-atheists such as Dawkins illictly extract faulty metaphysical implications from their science. None of the above. Flew attributes his conversion to ID, and specifically to the coding of information inside the cell. By contrast, the Templeton-sponsored theistic evolutionary community, which Barr has now fully embraced, is welcome to the respect that have so richly earned and which buys them nothing in the eternal scheme of things.

Although Barr's reasons for rejecting design are mainly theological and philosophical, Barr opens his *First Things* piece by attacking ID's supposedly poor scientific track record: "It is time to take stock: What has the intelligent design movement achieved? As science, nothing." This statement is false and Barr, if it were not for wanting to appear reasonable to his scientific colleagues, would admit it to be false. ID, at the very least, has pointed out certain weaknesses in conventional evolutionary theory, weaknesses that evolutionists routinely ignore and which point up the need for a more complete theory of biological origins. As NAS member from my alma mater (U. of Chicago) Dave Raup put it to me in an email: "The search for the missing mechanisms can only be helped by people like you asking tough questions. Keep at it!"

Back in 2004, Barr actually agreed with David Raup that ID performs useful service for science. Endorsing my book *The Design Revolution* (IVP, 2004), Barr wrote a blurb that appears in the book's front matter: "*The Design Revolution* is about questions of fundamental importance: Can one formulate objective criteria for recognizing design? What do such criteria tell us about design in the biological realm? Sad to say, even to raise such questions is dangerous; but fortunately Dembski is not deterred. In this courageous book he takes aim at the intellectual complacency that too often smothers serious and unprejudiced discussion of these questions. –Stephen Barr, Professor of Physics, University of Delaware, author of Modern Physics and Ancient Faith."

But ID does far more than merely point up problems with existing theory. It suggests a way forward through the impasse that the study of biological origins now faces as a result of its commitment to naturalism, a commitment Barr shares. The website for the Evolutionary Informatics Lab (www.evoinfo.org) is being revamped and a new statement characterizing the lab's purpose is being added. It reads:

> Intelligent design is the study of patterns in nature best explained as the product of intelligence. So defined, intelligent design seems unproblematic. Archeology, forensics, and the search for extraterrestrial intelligence (SETI) all fall under this definition. In each of these cases, however, the intelligences in question could be the result of an evolutionary process. But what if patterns best explained as the product of intelligence exist in biological systems? In that case, the intelligence in question would be an unevolved intelligence. For most persons, such an intelligence has religious connotations, suggesting that it as well as its activities cannot properly belong to science. Simply put, intelligent design, when applied to biology, seems to invoke spooky forms of causation that have no place in science. Evolutionary informatics eliminates this difficulty with intelligent design. By looking to information theory, a well-established branch of the engineering and mathematical sciences, evolutionary informatics shows that patterns we ordinarily ascribe to intelligence, when arising from an evolutionary process, must be referred to sources of information external to that process. Such sources of information may then themselves be the result of other, deeper evolutionary processes. But what enables these evolutionary processes in turn to produce such sources of information? Evolutionary informatics demonstrates a regress of information sources. At no place along the way need there be a violation of ordinary physical causality. And yet, the regress implies a fundamental incompleteness in physical causality's ability to produce the required information. Evolutionary informatics, while falling squarely within the information sciences, thus points to the need for an ultimate information source qua intelligent designer. Such an information source, however, does not properly belong to the theory of evolutionary informatics, which can be conducted entirely in ordinary information-theoretic terms.

I contend that such an approach to intelligent design is fully scientific. Barr, though showing no awareness of the work of the Evolutionary Informatics Lab (which is presenting papers on ID at IEEE conferences and publishing papers in IEEE journals), would reject such a claim. Yet at the same time that he rejects it, MIT's Technology Review (2.3.10) suggests that we may be on to something: "There is a growing sense that the properties of the universe are best described not by the laws that govern matter but by the laws that govern information." Conservation of Information, as described in various papers on the Evolutionary Informatics Lab's publication page, constitutes such a law governing information and is directly pertinent to establishing the insufficiency of conventional material mechanisms for generating biological information AND the need for information sources not reducible to such mechanisms (which includes characterizing the flow of information among them).

Barr and his colleagues (he puts himself in the number of "John Polkinghorne, Owen Gingerich, Francis Collins, Peter E. Hodgson, Michal Heller, Kenneth R. Miller, and Marco Bersanelli") have in the last several years been proclaiming ID's imminent demise. Let me suggest that the ID community, given its limited resources and given the increasing attacks by once-sympathizers like Barr (attacks which limit ID's talent pool by suggesting to budding scientists intent on a successful career that they need to look elsewhere than ID — thank you very much, Stephen Barr!), is nonetheless doing quite well. With the Biologic Institute and the Evolutionary Informatics Lab, ID's scientific program has advanced considerably in just the last three years. As the information-theoretic basis of ID is developed and becomes more widely known, wet-blanket statments such as Barr's dismissing ID's scientific accomplishments outright will no longer be sustainable.

To sum up, Barr's overriding concern is to appear reasonable to his scientific colleagues. The ID community's overriding concern is to know the truth about design in nature. If that means appearing unreasonable, so be it. The funny thing about truth is that eventually it wins out, even if at first it appears unreasonable.