Reilly Center Reports

Introduction to Evolution and Intelligent Design

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Few issues concerning science in the public arena are capable of arousing the passions that characterize recent debates about intelligent design and evolution in the United States. In Kansas, California, and Pennsylvania, in laboratories, churches, statehouses, classrooms, and courthouses, the argument rages over whether intelligent design is a legitimate scientific alternative to evolution and whether intelligent design should be taught in the science classroom. At stake are important questions about the nature of science, its relationship to religion, the place of religion in American public life, and the control of public education. With so much at stake, it is hardly surprising that passion more often than not triumphs over reason.

The suite of articles presented in this inaugural issue of Reilly Center Reports has been assembled for the purpose of providing a more dispassionate, informed, and reasonable overview of the central issues in the debate over intelligent design and evolution than one is likely to find in many media outlets and in the often partisan, polemical literatures that pour forth from both sides. The emphasis here is on context. We hope to provide the reader with an introduction to various of the scientific, theological, and historical contexts in which the debate must be assessed. No one of the following essays poses as the definitive word on a given topic. They should be read, instead, as introductions to the issues, references to more expansive relevant literatures being provided throughout. As with all issues of Reilly Center Reports, we present here not new scholarship, but mainly a distillation of extant scholarship cast in a vocabulary and at a level of technical detail accessible to a broad public audience. Links and references will take the interested reader to more specialized literatures.

While we strive for fairness and accuracy, the essays collected here reflect a definite point of view. It is a plain, historical fact that the terms “science” and “religion” do not name timeless categories. It is, likewise, a plain, historical fact that, as cultural institutions and ways of belief, the two are connected and have influenced one another in manifold ways. But we assume that, in a contemporary setting, science can be distinguished from religious dogma and religious conviction, partly on the basis of the kinds of evidence and arguments that ground belief in each domain, well enough, at least, so as to make clear what belongs in a course on science and what belongs in a course on theology or comparative religion. We also assume that science and religion are not inherently antagonistic to one another. It is no accident that such assumptions are shared by many faculty and students working and studying at one of the world’s leading Catholic research universities.

Intelligent design arguments predate Darwin and the modern, synthetic theory of evolution. Generally speaking, the term “intelligent design” designates any argument that infers the existence of a designing intelligence—God to the theist—from evidence provided by scientific descriptions of nature, as when the clock-like regularities of Newton’s cosmos impressed thinkers in the seventeenth century as compelling reason to infer the existence of a cosmic clock-maker. The late-twentieth century revival of intelligent design finds such evidence in two places, at least: (1) in the very evolutionary story of the origins of life, held be advocates of design to be inexplicable absent the assumption of guidance by a designing intelligence, and (2) in the apparent cosmological fine-tuning of a universe in which, were the values of a few constants to have differed by just a percent or two, life and human intelligence could not have emerged. Some variants of contemporary design arguments differ from older such arguments by the addition of an elaborate apparatus drawn from theories of statistical inference. Criticisms of intelligent design range from doubts about the functioning of the just-mentioned statistical apparatus and complaints about an alleged lack of independent evidence for design to theological worries about the mode of divine action assumed by design arguments and frankly political worries that demands for teaching intelligent design in the science classroom are just the opening wedge for a larger strategy of de-secularizing American public education.
A series of recent public events have brought the debate over intelligent design and evolution into the foreground. Among them are: (1) the Kansas State Board of Education’s hearings in the spring of 2005 that eventuated in new state curriculum guidelines requiring the inclusion of intelligent design in biology classes; (2) the summer 2005 letter from Christopher Cardinal Schönborn, Archbishop of Vienna, published in the New York Times and read by many as an endorsement of intelligent design by a senior member of the Catholic clergy and old friend of Pope Benedict the 16th; and (3) the trial in Tammy Kitzmiller, et al. v. Dover Area School District, et al., which led to a decision by the U.S. District Court for the Middle District of Pennsylvania declaring unconstitutional the Dover, PA school board’s mandating that intelligent design be presented as an alternative to evolutionary accounts of the origins of life.

The setting of the debate shifts from one such arena to another. It will be aired before more state and local boards of education, more litigation is inevitable, and legislative initiatives are said to be in the offing in more than one state. Passions will continue to run high. All the more reason for those who care deeply about both science and religion to inform themselves well and to think their way clearly through the many hard and interesting questions that are implicated in the debate. Reilly Center Reports hopes only to help.