

Trinity Magazine
Spring 2009

Intelligent DESIGN

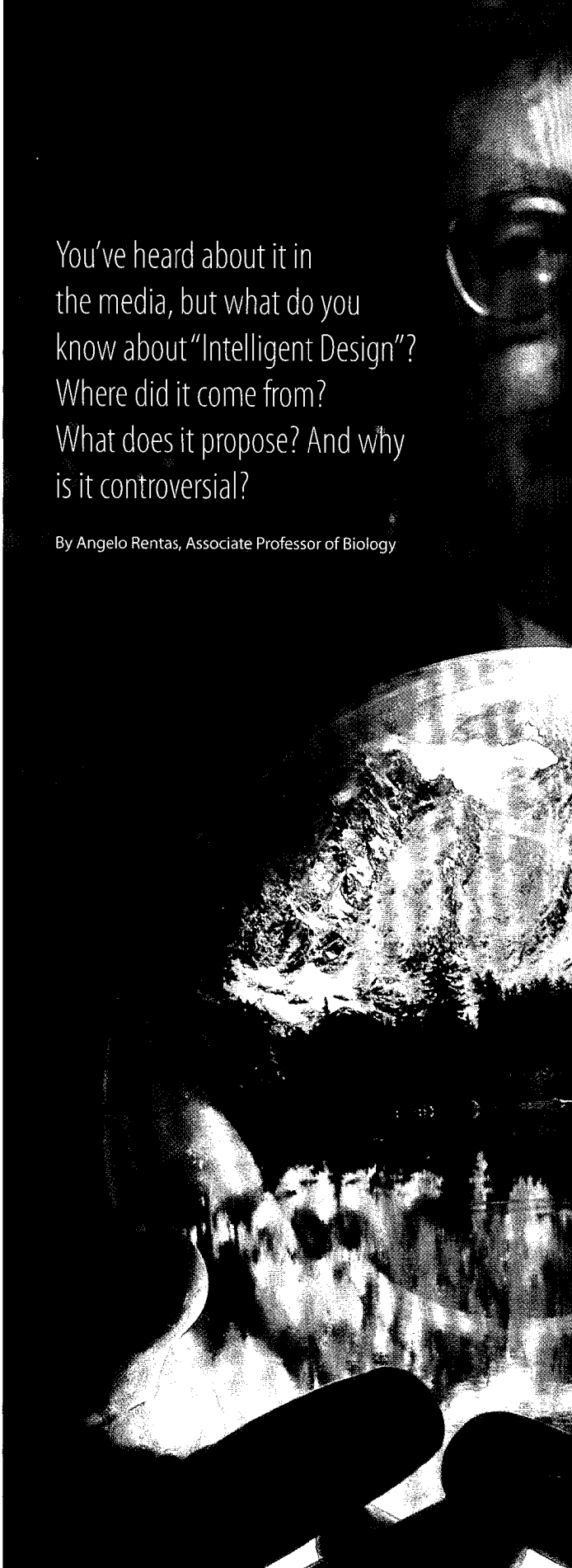
The Intelligent Design movement is a live issue in our culture today, but the conversation addressing the issue seems to be growing more contentious. If we are to understand the controversy better, we need first to understand the Intelligent Design movement itself. What is Intelligent Design? Proponents maintain that there exists within nature evidence of purposeful design by an intelligent designer. Most important is their conviction that design is empirically detectable, and therefore the search for design is scientific.

The History of Intelligent Design

The idea of "intelligent design" has been around for centuries, tracing back even to Socrates and Plato. The current Intelligent Design movement, however, had its inception in the 1980s. In 1984, Charles Thaxton, Walter Bradley, and Roger Olson wrote *The Mystery of Life's Origin*. The authors, who all have earned doctorates in a physical science discipline, argue that there are limits to what matter and energy apart from intelligence can accomplish. The book was well received by other scholars in the field, and a small group of both scientists and nonscientists formed in response to the book.


Around the same time, University of California law professor Phillip Johnson read Richard Dawkins's book *The Blind Watchmaker: Why the Evidence of Evolution Reveals a Universe Without Design*. According to Karl Giberson and Donald Yerxa's book, *Species of Origin*, Johnson became convinced that Dawkins's argument was not founded on the kind of evidence that ought to support a legitimate scientific theory but rather seemed to rely on rhetorical devices. Shortly afterward, Johnson met Stephen Meyer, a young geophysicist completing his doctor of philosophy at Cambridge University. Meyer introduced Johnson to the newly formed group.

In 1991, Johnson wrote *Darwin on Trial*, in which he criticizes the logic often used by scientists to defend evolutionary theory. It is important to note that while Johnson consistently emphasizes the rationality of inferring design, he has been



You've heard about it in the media, but what do you know about "Intelligent Design"? Where did it come from? What does it propose? And why is it controversial?

By Angelo Rentas, Associate Professor of Biology



careful to sidestep the issue of the identity of the designer. This is characteristic of the Intelligent Design movement, which (unlike Creationism) does not claim that the intelligent designer is the God of the Bible. Arguments for Intelligent Design usually do not reference God or a particular religious viewpoint, which means adherents may hold differing religious points of view, including agnosticism.

As the group expanded in the early nineties, its members formed the Discovery Institute (www.discovery.org). From 1991 to 1996, Institute members focused on exposing unspoken philosophical assumptions that underlie Darwinism and explaining the rhetorical devices used by Darwinists.

In 1996, the Discovery Institute established the Center for Science and Culture (currently headed by Dr. Stephen Meyer). That same year, Dr. Michael Behe, a biochemist from Lehigh and a senior fellow of the Center, wrote *Darwin's Black Box*. In it, he explains that many examples of irreducible complexity are found at the molecular level in living cells. The term "irreducible complexity" refers to a system made up of several interacting parts that together cause the system to function. If any of the parts were removed from the system, the system would be unable to function. For Behe, irreducibly complex systems are evidence of an intelligent designer.

Within three or four years of Behe's book, Dr. William Dembski established himself as a significant design theorist in Intelligent Design. Dembski has doctorates in both philosophy and mathematics. In *Design Inference* and *Intelligent Design*, Dembski presents a coherent approach to the problem of reliably and empirically detecting design in nature. His approach uses

information theory to identify when chance and natural laws are likely explanations of various phenomena and when they are not. If his system of analysis gains acceptance within the scientific community, then Intelligent Design proponents hope that design theory will become more than just an argument against Darwinism.

It is interesting to note that, according to their website, the members of the Discovery Institute officially oppose efforts to require the teaching of Intelligent Design by school districts or state boards because they believe this could hinder discussion of Intelligent Design in the scientific community and because teachers have not been trained to teach Intelligent Design accurately. Instead, currently, the group hopes to see schools teach evolution more "completely," including the theory's strengths, weaknesses, and related scientific controversies.

Is Intelligent Design Scientific?

Intelligent Design proponents agree with members of the scientific community that only empirically detected events (events that are observable and measurable) are suitable for inclusion in the discipline of science. They disagree, however, that only undirected (natural) causes are empirically detectable. Instead they claim that all aspects of nature can be explained as the result of undirected or directed causes. Undirected causes would include "laws of nature" (such as gravity) and chance, while directed causes require the involvement of "intelligence," human or otherwise.

Proponents argue that if there is empirical proof of directed, nonnatural causes for events, those causes ought to be further scrutinized alongside other evidence as part of the scientific

process. In *Intelligent Design*, William Dembski contends that scientists routinely detect design through scientific inquiry. Think, for example, of a forensic scientific investigation into a suspicious death. Forensic science attempts to determine whether the death was accidental (i.e., an undirected cause) or deliberate (i.e., an intelligent cause). Other areas where design may be recognized through scientific inquiry are archaeology, cryptography (code-breaking), and the SETI project (search for extraterrestrial intelligence). Although not obvious to the casual observer, these varieties of scientific inquiry identify intelligent causation by detecting and measuring the complexity and information content of the systems under study.

Intelligent Design proponents believe that designed systems are frequently quite complex and information-rich, while systems resulting from natural causes are less complex and information-poor. The science of information theory has developed methods that allow for the discrimination of complex information-rich systems from less complex information-poor systems. These methods enable investigators to detect intelligent causation (or design) empirically. Intelligent Design theorists argue that these methods work with the observable features of systems. Thus, these methods used for detection of design are scientific and can be expected to yield valid scientific conclusions.

Why the Controversy?

There is an additional component to this discussion that we must keep in mind. Science has become a universally valid source of knowledge for our culture. The truth claims of science are often taken more seriously than the truth claims of religion or the arts. In practice, scientific truth has become recognized as the only *objective* truth. Science speaks, and most people listen and believe.

People understand that knowledge is power and that those who possess that knowledge have a great deal of influence. In our culture, scientific pronouncements are the ultimate trump card. For those who view Intelligent Design as non-scientific, the efforts to show that it is scientific are viewed as an illegitimate attempt to codify an opinion as scientific truth. This alone can raise the temperature of Intelligent Design discussions.

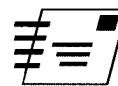
Also, with its acceptance of nonnatural causes, Intelligent Design counters philosophical naturalism, the philosophy of a number of well-known and influential professors of science. Philosophical naturalists believe that reality is completely

self-sufficient, self-contained, and self-ordering. Reality is simply and exclusively matter and energy. Nothing supernatural truly exists. The appearance of design in nature is just that—mere appearance. Purposeful nonnatural forces do not exist, and the appearance of design is the result of mindless chance and the outworking of natural law. A philosophical naturalist would neither see nor expect to see purpose in the reality outside of self or in his or her own life.

Is a proper understanding and practice of science consistent with philosophical naturalism? The practice of science does require empirical observation of the workings of the world. Observation, whether direct or indirect, is an essential feature of science. The views expressed by the philosophical naturalist, however, cannot be supported by observation. The philosophical naturalist must *assume* a purposeless and exclusively natural reality. Therefore, philosophical naturalism is not science and is not necessarily true.

While some may feel concerned by a possible religious agenda behind the Intelligent Design movement, we should not forget that all scientists have a view of science that is informed to some extent by a philosophical or theological system of thought. Thus, the issue is not whether individuals operate against a background of philosophical or theological thought but instead is about how philosophy or theology influences their view of science.

Ultimately, whether or not Intelligent Design will stand as scientifically true is dependant on whether nonnatural causes can be demonstrated with some confidence to be empirically detectable. The unscientific claims of naturalism must not be allowed to interfere with the scientist's pursuit of truth. The scientist must be allowed to follow the data wherever it might lead. If Intelligent Design proves itself a possibility, all those who use science to seek truth must be willing to consider the implications of that possibility.



What do you think?

Email your response to trinmag@tiu.edu.

Angelo G. Rentas is chair of the Biology Department and director of the School of Science and Technology at Trinity. Before coming to Trinity, he was supervisor of Gonozyme Manufacturing Support at Abbott Laboratories, research associate supervisor/lab manager at Hyland Diagnostics Laboratory, and clinical microbiology lab supervisor at Medical Center Labs. Currently he directs undergraduate research to identify and clone the isocitrate lyase gene in selected genera of green algae. Professor Rentas earned the Master of Science in biology from Northern Illinois University.