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Bill Dembski's blog on Uncommon Descent

### **Pinker weighs in against ID**

In the current *Time* magazine ID cover story, Steven Pinker criticizes ID as follows:

**STEVEN PINKER**

*Psychology professor, Harvard University*

*It's natural to think that living things must be the handiwork of a designer. But it was also natural to think that the sun went around the earth. Overcoming naive impressions to figure out how things really work is one of humanity's highest callings.*

*Our own bodies are riddled with quirks that no competent engineer would have planned but that disclose a history of trial-and-error tinkering: a retina installed backward, a seminal duct that hooks over the ureter like a garden hose snagged on a tree, goose bumps that uselessly try to warm us by fluffing up long-gone fur.*

*The moral design of nature is as bungled as its engineering design. What twisted sadist would have invented a parasite that blinds millions of people or a gene that covers babies with excruciating blisters? To adapt a Yiddish expression about God: If an intelligent designer lived on Earth, people would break his windows.*

*The theory of natural selection explains life as we find it, with all its quirks and tragedies. We can prove mathematically that it is capable of producing adaptive life forms and track it in computer simulations, lab experiments and real ecosystems. It doesn't pretend to solve one mystery (the origin of complex life) by slipping in another (the origin of a complex designer).*

*Many people who accept evolution still feel that a belief in God is necessary to give life meaning and to justify morality. But that is exactly backward. In practice, religion has given us stonings, inquisitions and 9/11. Morality comes from a commitment to treat others as we wish to be treated, which follows from the realization that none of us is the sole occupant of the universe. Like physical evolution, it does not require a white-coated technician in the sky.*

<http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1090921,00.html>

Some comments (paragraph by paragraph):

(1) Pretheoretic intuitions can be right as well as wrong — the moon appears to go around the Earth and it does in fact go around the Earth. The job of science is to get at the underlying truth, regardless of whether it coincides with or contradicts our intuitions.

(2) As for the human body being riddled by quirks, such quirks disconfirm design only if we make unwarranted assumptions about the nature of the designer and how the designer must act. If, for instance, the designer acts by gradually guiding an evolutionary process (say, by increasing the probability of genetic variations that have adaptive value — Ken Miller and Bob Russell seem to take such an approach), then such quirks may be unavoidable.

Also worth considering is whether the quirks are indeed quirks. For an argument why the inverted retina constitutes good design, go [here](#). As for our convoluted seminal duct, it would be interesting to see Pinker propose its proper form and suggest a surgical procedure that would correct the problem he finds — would “Pinker’s solution” constitute a real improvement leading to no deficits elsewhere? Such criticisms by Pinker of ID have no force so long as no answers to such questions are forthcoming — and invariably they remain unanswered in these discussions (see Paul Nelson’s “The Role of Theology in Current Evolutionary Reasoning,” *Biology and Philosophy* 11, 1996: 493-517).

The final quirk that Pinker considers is goose bumps. Do goose bumps confirm conventional evolutionary theory? If we didn’t have goose bumps, Pinker would explain them as the result of natural selection selecting them away because they were no longer necessary. Since we have them, they are the result of phylogenetic inertia not getting rid of them. Given that his theory of evolution could equally explain both possibilities, goose bumps provide no evidence for evolution one way or the other.

What about the intelligent design of goose bumps? I’m perfectly happy to consider them a quirk that results from evolution working in tandem with design. But let’s say we had to come up with a design explanation of them. Here goes: goose bumps kick in when we’re frightened or cold or otherwise experience strong emotions. But is it that we are consciously having such experiences or is it the goose bumps that assist in bringing to consciousness such experiences. Goose bumps are, after all, not under conscious control — they are governed by the sympathetic nervous system. Perhaps goose bumps are designed as a way of bringing to consciousness various stresses that need attention. Of course, Pinker could now tell an evolutionary story here as well — that evolution has selected for goose bumps. But that would defeat his purpose in challenging ID.

(3) From bungled design Pinker now turns to sadistic design. But sadistic design implies design that is really clever at bringing about pain and destruction. So sadistic design seems in fact to confirm rather than disconfirm design. That raises a theodicy problem for Christians, but it does nothing to make the design problem go away (cf. [http://www.designinference.com/documents/2000.02.ayala\\_response.htm](http://www.designinference.com/documents/2000.02.ayala_response.htm))

(4) As a devoted disciple of Richard Dawkins, Pinker next invokes the wonder-working power of natural selection. That finally gets to the real substance of the debate between intelligent design and standard evolutionary theory. Contrary to Pinker’s exaggerated claims, natural selection (even when supplemented with all the blind sources of variation

you could like) has yet to prove itself a competent fashioner of biological complexity (cf. [http://www.designinference.com/documents/2004.01.Irred\\_Compl\\_Revisited.pdf](http://www.designinference.com/documents/2004.01.Irred_Compl_Revisited.pdf)).

(5) The evils of religion pale by comparison with the evils associated last century with materialistic ideologies underwritten by evolutionary theory (Marxism and National Socialism being cases in point). Indeed, “the science of eugenics” took its cues from straight Darwinism (see Richard Weikart’s book on the topic: <http://www.csustan.edu/History/Faculty/Weikart/FromDarwintoHitler.htm>).

Curiously, Pinker invokes as the basis for morality a form of the Golden Rule. I say “curiously” because that rule cannot be grounded in evolutionary theory. Thus, Pinker himself has justified infanticide in the name of evolutionary theory (it was, according to him, at times “adaptive” for our hunter-gatherer mother ancestors to do so — go here for his [evolutionary defense of infanticide](#)). Indeed, evolutionary ethicists have justified just about every human evil in terms of evolution (after all, how could those evils persist unless they had an evolutionary justification).

Perhaps we don’t need a white-coated technician in the sky to be good. But Pinker’s brand of evolution gives us plenty of reason to be bad.