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INTELLIGENT DESIGN,
IRREDUCIBLE COMPLEXITY, AND MINDS—
A REPLY TO JOHN BEAUDOIN

Elliott Sober

In my paper "Intelligent Design Theory and the Supernatural—the 'God or Extra-Terrestrial' Reply," I argued that Intelligent Design (ID) Theory, when coupled with independently plausible further assumptions, leads to the conclusion that a supernatural intelligent designer exists. ID theory is therefore not neutral on the question of whether there are supernatural agents. In this respect, it differs from the Darwinian theory of evolution. John Beaudoin replies to my paper in his "Sober on Intelligent Design Theory and the Intelligent Designer," arguing that my paper faces two challenges. In the present paper, I try to address Beaudoin's challenges.

John Beaudoin[1] offers two objections to my argument[2] that Intelligent Design (ID) theory is not neutral on the question of whether there are supernatural designers. The first concerns my claim that the central thesis of ID theory is that

(1) If a system found in nature is irreducibly complex, then it was caused to exist by an intelligent designer.

The second concerns my assertion that

(2) Some of the minds found in nature are irreducibly complex.

Beaudoin doubts that (1) is ID theory's central thesis; with respect to (2), he points out that Michael Behe[3] "seems not to grant, at least not explicitly" that the concept of irreducible complexity applies to minds. Beaudoin's point, I take it, is that only physical systems can be irreducibly complex.
  Beaudoin offers three reasons for thinking that "Behe does not mean to include minds" when he discusses irreducible complexity:

(i) Behe doesn't cite minds as examples of irreducibly complex systems.

(ii) Behe requires that the parts of an irreducibly complex system must be "well matched," and Beaudoin contends that the relation of well-matching is spatial.

(iii) Behe says that irreducible complexity is a sign of ID when it is found in physical systems that have physically interacting parts.

Points (i) and (iii) do not touch my claim that (2) is true and that ID theorists are obliged to grant this. Whether Behe intended for his definition of

irreducible complexity to have the consequence that minds can be irreducibly complex is not germane. With respect to (iii), Behe's claiming that irreducible complexity in a physical system *suffices* to establish the existence of an intelligent designer does not show that he thinks that the system's being physical is *necessary* for the concept of irreducible complexity to apply. As for (ii), I don't agree that "being well matched" is a spatial relation. Two thoughts in a theory can be well-matched in the sense of being well-suited to each other. The same goes for two people in love.

Beaudoin offers one more piece of evidence concerning what Behe intended. After making point (iii), he says that "where the parts of the system do not physically interact, Behe states [that] the intervention of intelligence must be detected 'in other ways,'" and here Beaudoin refers to a footnote in *Darwin's Black Box* in which Behe discusses "patterns of coin flips or other systems that do not physically interact."[4] This is the strongest textual evidence that Beaudoin presents, but the fact remains that Behe defined irreducible complexity without requiring that the system be physical. He says that an irreducibly complex system is "a single system composed of several well-matched interacting parts that contribute to the basic function, wherein the removal of any one of the parts causes the system to effectively cease functioning."[5]

Beaudoin considers whether it would arbitrary for the ID theorist to restrict proposition (1) to physical systems. He says that it might not be if we know less about the mind than we do about biochemistry. There are two questions here. Do we know enough about a mind to tell whether it is irreducibly complex? On the assumption that something is irreducibly complex, are we entitled to conclude from this that it was produced by an intelligent designer? I think it is clear enough that a mind found in nature that is capable of planning and fashioning an irreducibly complex system must itself be irreducibly complex. If ID theorists grant this, but then doubt whether we can conclude that this irreducibly complex mind was intelligently designed, then I am puzzled why they would be entitled to take the supposition that the bacterial flagellum is irreducibly complex to show that it was intelligently designed.

In none of his three replies does Beaudoin address the positive argument I gave for thinking that (2) is true. A mind that designs and builds an irreducibly complex system (that's the relevant way in which a designer would bring an irreducibly complex structure into existence) has a function and the designer's mind couldn't perform that function if any of its interacting parts were excised. Consider, for example, the mind of a watchmaker as he designs and builds a watch. He has a set of beliefs and desires from which he formulates a plan; then he executes the plan by initiating actions, using his perceptual faculties to monitor how the project is going and perhaps modifying his plan along the way. The function (or, at least, *a* function) of the watchmaker's mind is to allow him to deal effectively with his environment; if you remove the watchmaker's beliefs, or desires, or intentions, or perceptual states, or memories, his mind will be unable to do this. Beaudoin raises the interesting question of how (2) is related to various positions on the mind/body problem. I am inclined to think that dualists and physicalists should both grant that (2) is true.

There is room to wonder whether other function claims about the watchmaker's mind might also be true. In addition, one might wonder exactly how the watchmaker's process of planning and building should be segmented into parts. However, if either of these questions is thought to undermine my assessment of the watchmaker's mind, why don't the same questions undermine Behe's assessment of the bacterial flagellum? This is the point I tried to make in my discussion of the wine bottle problem.[6]

Given his assessment of proposition (2), Beaudoin proposes that proposition (1) be restricted, the result being the thesis that

(1*) If a physical system found in nature is irreducibly complex, then it was caused to exist by an intelligent designer.

Beaudoin's other challenge to my argument is his claim that even (1*) isn't the central thesis of ID theory. Rather, he thinks that (1*) "plays a central role in a justification for intelligent design theory that most design theorists use." In his view, "design theorists advance multiple arguments for their view, some of which don't use (1*), or they do not make an argument with (1*) carrying all or most of the evidential burden." For Beaudoin, the trouble with (1*) is that irreducible complexity plays a merely epistemological role in the ID framework[7] and constitutes just one line of evidence among several for intelligent design.

If (1*) isn't the central ID thesis, what is? Beaudoin thinks the central thesis is that some structures in nature (e.g., the bacterial flagellum) are products of ID. Let us divide this proposition in two—there is the claim that some structures in nature are produced by ID *and* the claim that the bacterial flagellum is an example. The first of these is uncontroversial. No one doubts that watches and cars exist because of intelligent design. And even if we beef up this first conjunct and consider the claim that some *biological* structures are products of ID (I think this was Beaudoin's intent), the claim is still uncontroversial. It is not in dispute that plant and animal breeders have fashioned a variety of biological systems via artificial selection. Does this mean that the only thing that is nontrivial in ID theory is the second conjunct—the claim about the bacterial flagellum (and presumably other examples)? I don't read Paley[8] or Behe in this way. True, each discusses a number of examples. But in each case, the examples are supposed to illustrate a general principle; this is what (1*) helps codify. Paley and Behe would be within their rights to say that their main argument goes through even if the details of a few of their examples turn out to be off the mark.

I agree that there might be ID arguments that are not based on the concept of irreducible complexity; Beaudoin says that some ID theorists have developed arguments of this sort. However, this is not enough to undermine the argument I made in my paper. As long as (1) is *part* of the theory, the theory leads (once independently plausible assumptions are taken into account) to the conclusion that a supernatural intelligent designer exists. ID theorists who wish to avoid this consequence need to expunge (1) from their theory; *supplementing* it with *other* arguments for ID does no good. It doesn't matter whether (1) is central or peripheral or whether it is epistemological or substantive.

Beaudoin mentions that ID theory might be fragmented into a number of separate theories, each composed of a different argument but always

for the same conclusion. The result that Beaudoin has in mind is that only some of the resulting theories will have supernatural consequences. It is noteworthy that Beaudoin does not himself view ID theory in this way; for him, the theory is a single proposition that might be supported by multiple arguments. Surely nothing much should depend on whether we say that there is one ID theory that has different arguments attached to it or that there are many ID theories. I therefore accept Beaudoin's suggestion that my argument applies, in the first instance, to versions of ID theory that use the concept of irreducible complexity. The question then needs to be considered of whether an Aquinas-style argument similar to the one I constructed applies to other versions as well.[9]

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NOTES

1.   In John Beaudoin, "Sober on Intelligent Design and the Intelligent Designer," *Faith and Philosophy* 25.4 (2008), pp. 432–42.

2.   In Elliott Sober, "Intelligent Design Theory and the Supernatural—the 'God or Extra-Terrestrial' Reply," *Faith and Philosophy* 24 (2007), pp. 72–82.

3.   For example, in *Darwin's Black Box* (New York: Free Press, 1996).

4.   Ibid, p. 285, note 3.

5.   Ibid, p. 39.

6.   Sober, p. 75.

7.   But later in the paper, Beaudoin says that "it is reasonable to say that the theory . . . encompasses the methodological principles that are used . . . to identify structures as intelligently designed."

8.   William Paley, *Natural Theology, or, Evidences of the Existence and Attributes of the Deity, Collected from the Appearances of Nature* (London: Rivington, 1802).

9.   My thanks to John Beaudoin and Joel Velasco for useful discussion.