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Design, Evolution and Extension: Facing the Challenge of COVID-19 Together

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While the terms “evolution” and “design” are both now well-established in several branches of science, business, and folk knowledge, the concept “extension” has yet to be generally adopted in a coherent way as helpful to distinguish from the others. The arrival of COVID-19, however, may assist people to better identify and distinguish what each of these terms means in the context of how we make sense of the social impact of this global pandemic. This paper provides commentary on what these three terms signify and outlines how we can turn to “extension” and its cognates as a way of interpreting current events and meeting the challenges of the day.

In its broad use of the term “design,” the Intelligent Design (ID) movement is caught on the horns of its own dilemma. Based in the Discovery Institute in Seattle (U.S.), the ID movement has been promoting ID theory for almost 25 years out of its Center for (formerly, the Renewal of) Science and Culture.¹ This has led them to embrace an ideology of “design universalism” (more below), in which people who promote ID theory have taken upon themselves the mantle of “expelled” prophets and academic martyrs, speaking as if they have the intellectual power to offer a comprehensive “bridge between science and theology” (Dembski 1999) in the notion of “Intelligent Design.” What they have created is a political-educational movement that is weaponizing largely evangelical religious apologetics using the philosophy of “occasionalism” for God’s divine action in the world.²

The meaning of ID theory, however, is now quite clearly being pushed too far in the Discovery Institute’s response to the COVID-19 (aka SARS-CoV-2) pandemic. The Discovery Institute (DI), through its leading proponent Michael Behe, have taken a theologically contrarian position that deserves a warning for Abrahamic monotheists, non-theists and agnostics. As a result, I believe the DI may emerge from the global fight against the current pandemic looking much the worse as a “movement,” something that might impact their future viability. If this should occur, it would be relevant for Steve Fuller. He has allied himself loosely with the ID movement, having authored a book about ID theory and written multiple Forewords for DI-promoted and published books.

Two simple questions set the stage for this paper:

1. What would it look like if the DI went too far with their “design” metaphor?
2. Has ID theory gone too far promoting “design,” especially when there are other, more appropriate and accurate terms that should be used?

Based on 15+ years studying the DI and IDists (people who subscribe to and promote ID theory) from a sociological perspective, it sadly does not appear that it’s even “possible” for them or their theory ever to “go too far.” It is precisely this attitude that makes their view

¹ <https://www.discovery.org/id/>.

² <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/occasionalism/>.

<https://www.johnderbyshire.com/Opinions/Religion/occasionalism.html>.

<https://www.firstthings.com/article/2014/02/looking-for-god-in-all-the-wrong-places>.

appear fanatical. As a result, Abrahamic monotheists who have seriously considered ID theory on its own terms must now reluctantly realise they cannot accept it or support the DI in good faith. IDists inextricably intertwine their so-called “strictly scientific theory” with their religious worldview. As a result, they are unable to see alternatives to what comes across to everyone else as “theistic science.” Ironically, those alternatives may actually hold more insight, coherence, and practical usefulness than ID theory.

In short, while IDists preach an “edge of evolution” (Behe 2007) and push an anti-Darwinian (and sometimes anti-science) agenda in their attempt to reveal that “edge,” to this point they have not likewise addressed whether an “edge of ID theory” exists. What then is the edge of ID theory?

This paper aims to do three things:

1. Identify an “edge of ID theory,” which IDists do not yet acknowledge;
2. Address the “origin story” of COVID-19 as either a “design” or “evolutionary” phenomenon, and;
3. Propose an alternative vocabulary for the current pandemic that makes much more sense to people than “design” or “evolution.”

The notion of “extension” holds the key; “design” and “evolution” don’t apply to the currently developing tragedy of COVID-19. It has already resulted in more than 93,000 deaths globally (according to official statistics as of 09-04-2020) and has led to more hospitalizations than many nations’ medical systems can handle. The current pandemic makes understanding the origins and spread of the virus existentially important for everyone who reads this.

Did (Intelligent) Design via “the Designer” Create this Pandemic?

When Lehigh biochemist Michael Behe, the so-called “father of the ID movement,” was recently asked by the DI to write about COVID-19, I was curious what he would say.³ He, along with Biola University molecular biologist Douglas Axe, are probably the most vocal practising natural scientists who promote ID theory, particularly in the biological sciences.⁴ Would he actually suggest that a deadly pathogen is also “designed” by an “Intelligent Designer,” or not?

I was more curious than usual to hear from him, as I had just met Behe a few months ago in Ottawa, Canada, and it was evident from our two brief discussions that he doesn’t just promote ID theory, but “design universalism”—the ideology that everything is “designed” and nothing is “not designed,” or that nothing that is “not designed” can be openly and directly spoken about by an IDist. He explicitly denied he held such an ideological position by reverting to what has apparently become his common escape route refrain, “I’m a simple

³ <https://www.lehigh.edu/~inbios/Faculty/Behe.html>.

<https://www.lehigh.edu/~inbios/News/evolution.html>.

⁴ <https://www.biola.edu/directory/people/douglas-axe>, <https://www.discovery.org/p/axe/>.

biochemist,” when issues beyond biochemistry are indeed involved. Thus, I wasn’t surprised by what he wrote on the DI’s closed-comments *EvolutionNews* site, which *Media Bias/Fact Check* rates as “strong” for “pseudo-science” and “moderate” for “conspiracy level.” Nonetheless, his take on COVID-19 was highly problematic.



Figure 1. The author asks Michael Behe about “design theory” as distinct from “ID theory” and receives perplexity along with evasion in response (11-01-2019).

Behe wrote on “viral design” (March 10):

Do I think viruses were designed? Yes, I most certainly do! The viruses of which we are aware—including the coronaviruses, Ebola, and HIV—are exquisitely, purposively arranged, which is the clear signature of intelligent design [sic]. Well, then does that mean the designer [sic] is evil and wants people to suffer? No, not necessarily. **I’m a biochemist, not a philosopher.** Nonetheless, I see no reason why a designer [sic] even of such things as viruses should be classified as bad on that basis alone.⁵

Behe concluded the article stating that he has “no reason to think either that viruses weren’t designed or that the designer [sic] of viruses isn’t good.”

Here, “the (good) designer” is codename for God. Although DI policy is not to capitalize “Designer” or “Intelligent Design,” both should properly be capitalized—the former as a substitute for the Divine Name, and the latter since this signature is not “strictly natural,” as Phillip Johnson clarified with his ideological supernaturalism. Behe was not in any way suggesting that COVID-19 is “human-made,” which is important to note because the DI’s language policy requires them not to identify “the designer” in ID theory. He did not raise

⁵ <https://evolutionnews.org/2020/03/evolution-design-and-covid-19/>.

the issue of COVID-19 possibly being a bioweapon, i.e. whether or not COVID-19 arose or was manipulated by people in a laboratory (more below). For Behe, God [the Designer] designed and created COVID-19, just like everything else in God's creation, i.e. design universalism and occasionalism. In short, as both an apologetic and "theistic sciency" claim, there is a Divine Mind behind the universe that the DI believe can be studied and inferred (cf. "the Design inference") in a "strictly scientific" way. For that reason, ID theory is often referred to either as a "neo-creationist" theory—disguised apologetics—or as "theistic science," both of which have led most people to take a position against the theory and the DI that relentlessly promote it.

Enter Stony Brook University's Michael Egnor, a neurosurgeon and proselytizing IDist.⁶ Like Behe, Egnor is neither philosophically astute, nor linguistically sensitive enough not to muddy the communicative waters. He similarly defends the notion that ID theory is a "strictly scientific" theory, rather than a philosophy or quasi-theological pseudo-science. Yet at the DI's main "news" site, he asks: "Where is God in this pandemic?"⁷ According to Behe, God "designed" the pandemic! Or to state it another way, Egnor believes that COVID-19 was not the result of a standard "Darwinian" process of mutation and natural selection, and its origin and spread cannot be explained with the help of the modern evolutionary synthesis. Again, this is the claim of a neuroscientist, not a trained biologist. Dismissive of evolutionary science, Dr. Egnor, believes that COVID-19 should best be explained by appealing to "Intelligent Design," even while most trained natural scientists, philosophers and theologians resolutely disagree.

For many people, views such as Egnor's pose serious theological issues regarding ID theory and COVID-19. It makes no difference that Behe can retreat into his claim of being a "simple biochemist." For a self-labelled "revolutionary" who purports to correct the thinking of every other natural scientist, the explanation of a God-designed pandemic makes his promotion of ID theory look heterodox, if not callous, cruel and aloof.⁸ Yet, regrettably, this is precisely what the DI must commit itself to in the current situation to maintain its pretense of being "strictly scientific" while at the same time promoting a theological (or "theology friendly") agenda by means of "inference." In other words, the DI shows itself a "science and faith" organization at its roots, even sending its leaders to speak at apologetics conferences that don't appear on the website. The DI intentionally hides that fact while trying to make a "great scientific breakthrough" using "Intelligent Design" as the basis of its "strictly scientific" theory. Thus, the result is an unfortunate and clumsy mish-mash of science and religion, rather than a sophisticated, coherent or helpfully articulated approach that engages science, philosophy and theology in a collaborative conversation.

⁶ <https://www.stonybrookmedicine.edu/fullbio?pid=208&name=Michael%20Egnor%20MD>.

⁷ <https://evolutionnews.org/2020/03/to-ask-where-is-god-in-this-pandemic-is-to-acknowledge-that-god-exists/>.

⁸ It does not appear that Behe paid appropriate heed to what Pope Francis warned against: "we run the risk of imagining God was a magician, with a magic wand able to do everything" (2014 <https://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2014/10/28/359564982/pope-says-god-not-a-magician-with-a-magic-wand>).

Responses to the DI's COVID-19 Claims

Over at the forum Peaceful Science (PS)—a recent project of WUSTL MD, computational biologist, apologist, and former speaker at BioLogos, S. Joshua Swamidass—one of the moderators, Dan Eastwood, an “Agnostic Biostatistician,” notes, “ID [theory] offer[s] no way to distinguish between what can and cannot evolve.” The DI makes no clear distinction between what “evolves” and what doesn’t “evolve,” which is a glaring contradiction in the ID movement. The DI flat-out refuses to acknowledge real “design theory” and “design thinking,” which no one would argue is being persecuted or “expelled” from universities, while acting as if ID theory is on the cutting-edge of “good science.” This merely changes the standard meaning of “science” by inserting a disembodied, quasi-mystical “Intelligence” (which they avoid capitalizing) into natural-physical sciences. By refusing to acknowledge “design theories” and “design thinking” that apart from ID theory, the DI demonstrates its unwillingness to have a serious, open conversation free from ideology and PR campaigns. This is likewise reflected in its approach to COVID-19.

In the thread titled, “Behe says viruses are designed,” Swamidass nevertheless responded positively to Behe, suggesting he was talking about theology, not natural science, when speaking about “design [Design].”⁹ Swamidass wrote:

I think this is a really helpful post [article on ENV] by Behe. I think it is good for him to work out his theology like this. ... I think Behe’s position raises important theological questions that deserve exploration. It is good to see him beginning to stake out his theological claims here.” Swamidass expanded this into a longer post on his blog by posing an evangelical “US culture/creation war” dichotomy: “Is COVID-19 Created or Designed?”¹⁰

While Swamidass defends the ideology of methodological naturalism (MNism, which he calls “incorrectly named”), he has not acknowledged the positive, rather than just the negative, proposition of “naturalism” he is putting forward.¹¹ This is a point that Steve Fuller has made many times.¹² MNism often just means “anti-supernaturalism” and explicitly denies

⁹ <https://discourse.peacefulscience.org/t/behe-says-viruses-are-designed/9900>

¹⁰ <https://peacefulscience.org/covid-19-created-designed/>

¹¹ Says Swamidass: “Mainstream science seeks “our best explanation of the world, *without considering God*.” This limiting clause, “without considering God,” is the rule of Methodological Naturalism (MN). ... science is limited effort to explain the world on its own terms, without invoking God, His action, or intelligent design.”

<https://peacefulscience.org/methodological-naturalism/>

¹² “[The NAS [National Academy of Sciences, U.S.] would have scientists pledge a loyalty oath to a particular philosophical world view before being licensed to practice. This world view goes by the name of ‘methodological naturalism’, a phrase adopted from the wishfully named National Center for Science Education (NCSE), a California-based intellectual vigilante group that supplies pro-evolution propaganda at all levels of sophistication, contributes to the aggressively populist science blog, ‘The Panda’s Thumb’ (nicknamed ‘Darwin’s Brownshirts’ by its detractors) and, most notably, cooperates with the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) in its campaign to ban the teaching of creationism and ID in science classes. Specifically, the NCSE has on tap a battery of well-rehearsed expert scientific witnesses like Kenneth Miller, co-author of the best-selling US high school biology textbook, willing to testify under oath to the exclusive prerogative of Darwin’s theory of evolution.” ... “‘Methodological naturalism’, despite its philosophical sounding name, has no

any role for a divine Creator or meaningful discussion of spirituality in natural science from the outset. Outside of natural-physical sciences, more reflexive fields of thought involve human choice, meaning, purpose, and morality, so the restriction of “anti-supernaturalism” makes a big difference where it does not in Swamidass’ lower-level view of science as a form of ideological naturalism. Social epistemology is one of those fields left out by appeals to MNism.

Swamidass reveals himself, like his ID movement opponents, to be philosophically stunted on difficult issues in the philosophy of science.¹³ Regarding Behe’s theological view of IDT and COVID-19, Swamidass is left to conclude, “This description of viral innovation does not seem consistent with ID defined as the action of a mind [that is, Divine Mind].” In a masterful turn of contradiction and appeasement, Swamidass openly agrees with Behe that “the virus is designed,” meaning God designed the pandemic, but COVID-19’s “evolution into a disease causing pathogen is not designed.” This is at least a less far-reaching claim than Behe’s view, though it still needs clearer parsing than Swamidass provides.

These long and oftentimes exhausting “neo-creationist” (scientism vs. fideism) discussions aside, as far as I see it as a non-scientist and non-medical expert, the most important issue for almost everyone reading this is the dangerous and rapid spread of COVID-19, rather than the “ontological” question of whether it is “Designed” or “Created” by whom or Whom. Covid-19 threatens theists, atheists and agnostics alike; the virus does not discriminate on the basis of religion or worldview, nor does it care about evangelical appeals for scientific legitimacy. Covid-19 is no respecter of persons, whatever their ideology. If I am wrong, surely the DI and Swamidass will quickly respond here or on their respective apologetic sites to let us know why their “Design vs. Creation or Evolution” view is supposedly important to people who face real health concerns around the world today. For most of us, it is best to leave both Behe’s IDism and Swamidass’s methodological naturalism safely behind and instead focus on more urgent social issues involving containment of COVID-19.

How is the (Biological) Evolution of Covid-19 Now Relevant?

The “design vs. evolution” question that IDists are asking and that Swamidass is trying to turn into a non-mainline “theology” of “Design vs. Creation” come across as semantic red herrings. They are not really as important on the larger social scale of things as IDists and Swamidass suggest them to be. However, one obvious caveat to this general claim is that *if* COVID-19 was human-made (or manipulated by human beings before it spread to humans)

clear meaning outside of attempts to demonstrate that creationism and ID are non-scientific. Professional philosophers, not least those who hold no brief for creationism, have squirmed at the apparent manufacture of a pseudo-doctrine customised to restrict the ranks of scientists. This so-called principle conflates two 20th-century pro-science movements: ‘logical positivism’, which defined science in purely procedural terms as a method for testing theories, and ‘metaphysical naturalism’, which defined science as a world view that admits only causes like the ones already observed in nature.” (*Dissent from Descent: Intelligent Design’s Challenge to Darwinism*. Icon Books, 2009, 34, 36).

¹³ Nevertheless, Swamidass offers IDists this compromise: “ID could make sense as a philosophy or theology of science. This would mean giving up on opposing MN in science, and it would mean giving up on the label ‘science’” <https://peacefulscience.org/methodological-naturalism/>.

as a bioweapon and released intentionally or accidentally, that information *would be* quite important. I remain cautious and skeptical about that caveat, as it seems too conspiratorial.

Nevertheless, the warning of a former YECist, David MacMillan (March 18) may provide context for what is happening to fight COVID-19, specifically in the U.S. He writes, “At a time when it is vitally important for [US]Americans to follow CDC [Center for Disease Control and Prevention] recommendations and take this pandemic seriously, creationism has taught a broad suspicion of science and public health that weakens officials’ ability to do their jobs.”¹⁴ The lack of ability to “take this pandemic seriously” is revealed by *Answers in Genesis* (AiG). AiG “is an apologetics ministry” run by Australian-American YECist Ken Ham. The AiG ministry has added little if any value to the conversation involving the design, evolution, or extension of COVID-19. Instead, AiG continues to promote a distorting anti-science ideological agenda among evangelical Protestants, coming up with terms like (March 20) “creation virology.”¹⁵ Indeed, AiG seems to be as “conspiratorial” as any of several non-mainstream approaches to COVID-19 and should thus be treated with caution and skepticism by any thinking Abrahamic monotheist.¹⁶ (Atheists and agnostics already are immune to AiG propaganda.)

A helpful, if short, discussion of the topic appears at BioLogos, started by Dr. Francis Collins before he joined the NIH, via forum moderator Matthew Pevarnik.¹⁷ It was disconcerting to read the comments of biologist Steve Schaffner of Harvard’s Broad Institute: “Keep in mind that the Spanish [sic] flu [of 1918] seems to have mutated to become much more virulent ... so that’s also a possibility [with COVID-19].” The chance that COVID-19 may mutate/evolve into a deadlier strain is frightening, to say the least.

Does this mean that the “evolution” of COVID-19 is a significant issue for most people to face at the current time, or is it rather something to keep on the “back burner” as a worst case scenario? Collins gives two scenarios regarding the emergence of COVID-19 into the threat it has become:

In the first scenario, as the new coronavirus evolved in its natural hosts, possibly bats or pangolins, its spike proteins mutated to bind to molecules similar in structure to the human ACE2 protein, thereby enabling it to infect human cells. This scenario seems to fit other recent outbreaks of coronavirus-caused disease in humans, such as SARS, which arose from cat-like civets; and Middle East respiratory syndrome (MERS), which arose from camels.

The second scenario is that the new coronavirus crossed from animals into humans before it became capable of causing human disease. Then, as a result

¹⁴ <https://medium.com/@davidstarlingm/creating-coronavirus-f0cfbc3429f3>.

¹⁵ <https://answersingenesis.org/biology/disease/covid19-coronavirus-and-creation-virology/>.

¹⁶ <https://www.livescience.com/63388-conspiracies-creationism-share-teleological-thinking.html>.

¹⁷ <https://discourse.biologos.org/t/when-does-the-chinese-coronavirus-become-the-american-coronavirus/42539>.

of gradual evolutionary changes over years or perhaps decades, the virus eventually gained the ability to spread from human-to-human and cause serious, often life-threatening disease.¹⁸

The second scenario in particular provides reason to question the standard narrative that COVID-19 originated in the Wuhan Seafood Market in China as a kind of “rapid mutation” that jumped from bats to human beings in late 2019. It also leaves open the possibility that the emergence of COVID-19 as a deadly pathogen may not have happened recently, as mainstream news sources have reported.

We can nevertheless accept, with little reason to be skeptical, the possibility of COVID-19 mutating, which could change the global social challenge of this pandemic. Nevertheless, this is clearly a different dimension of the conversation than the economic, social, cultural, political, and religious dimensions of our response to the virus. COVID-19’s global spread involves international and local travel and trade, national borders and migration, hospital workers, medical supplies and patient capacities, among many other things. To understand this, alternative language beyond the narrow focus of “evolution” or “design” is needed. For that, we turn to another conceptual option—“extension.”

Which (What is) Extension?

The extension (spreading out or stretching out) of COVID-19 is really the main concern on most of our hearts and minds these days. Who or what are the carriers of this virus, and how do we avoid contact with it? This differs significantly from asking about the “design” or “evolution” of COVID-19.

One way to ask specifically about the “origin” and “spread” of the virus is: what does COVID-19 extend from and to? The shortest, simplest answer is: nobody knows for sure its origin story (cue long line of both scientific and conspiracy options). But we are already quite aware of how it is transmitted from human-to-human, i.e. how it extends from person to person. Much work has been done “contact tracking” for patient 0, patient 1, patient 2, etc., in a number of locations that COVID-19 has reached. This combined biological and social reality is what makes “extension” thinking the go-to linguistic terminology for understanding the current pandemic. In short, while design and evolution have their limited place in the conversation, the rapid extension of COVID-19 is what keeps most people up at night.

As someone trained in social sciences, as well as an ordinary concerned citizen, I’m interested in the human-to-human transmission of COVID-19 and the responses by governments and communities to the pandemic. To me, the responsive actions of people to the virus are clear and present examples of “extension,” not of “evolution” nor the apologetics-oriented “theistic science” of ID theory. That is, COVID-19 “extends” by transmission from someone who has it to someone who doesn’t have it, or by a person coming into contact with the virus on some surface where the virus awaits a living host. As a way to fight COVID-19, we need to make more collective and individual efforts of “extension” in the sense meant by the Australia-Pacific Extension Network, which states generally that “extension is the process of enabling change.”

¹⁸ <https://directorsblog.nih.gov/2020/03/26/genomic-research-points-to-natural-origin-of-covid-19/>.

“Contact tracking” doesn’t involve “evolution,” only “extension.” Similarly, government and citizen actions stem from extensions, i.e. choices made to engage in “social distancing,” ban large public gatherings, wash our hands and faces frequently, and generally avoid putting ourselves at risk of contact with the virus. This shouldn’t be an ideological exercise. It is simply adopting the most effective language to describe “social distancing” and “lockdown” as a kind of “social fact,” which is what has led to the situation many of us now face.

The linked image illustrates well the reason for “social distancing” as a means of slowing or stopping the extension of COVID-19.¹⁹ People around the world are now focusing on broad societal attempts to “flatten the curve,” meaning to curb or slow the extension of COVID-19 via human-to-human transmissions. The more contacts people have with others who may themselves have the virus, the harder it becomes to contain its spread. Indeed, while governments may learn from the natural evolution of previous viruses, such as SARS or MERS, the main priority now is to fight the extension of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The logic of “extension” thinking, for newcomers to the term, is both theoretically and practically visible in the global applications and history of agricultural extension (aka cooperative extension, 1914, Smith-Lever Act, U.S.), university extension (Oxbridge 1860s to present time), and educational extension (cf. distance learning, lifelong learning). The “extension services” that have grown out of these “movements” of human effort around the globe are arguably among the most significant systems in human history.

Yet the notion of “extension thinking” often has been downplayed, forgotten, or never learned by most people, largely due to the rise and growth of “evolutionary” biology, which in the 20th century was transferred as a paradigm into the social sciences and humanities through “sociobiology” and then “evolutionary psychology,” which wreaks havoc with the social epistemology of free will and moral decision-making. The recent notion of “viral media,” for example, doesn’t properly “evolve” like a biological unit because such media is artificial, i.e. human-made, and thus only properly understandable in the context of life in the electronic-information era.

This is one area where Richard Dawkins’ ideology of “memetics” reaches its limits; where “human extension” takes over from the merely biological “extended phenotype” and the “long reach of the gene,” which were rather poor attempts to transfer biological categories into cultural fields of study and experience. Since we can track the intentional variations of a viral “meme” (media unit, e.g. video, audio or image), there is no need to accept Dawkins’ playful ruse by applying a reductionistic biological metaphor, except perhaps for those ideologically committed to Dawkins’ anti-religious worldview. Instead, we may turn our attention to a more appropriate, human-oriented sociological or social epistemological metaphor for more fruitful analysis, interpretation, and collective understanding.

Indeed, what the COVID-19 pandemic makes clear is the need for a new understanding of human development through purposeful extension rather than random evolution. Human development is at least as important, and many would argue more important, than human

¹⁹ <https://twitter.com/i/status/1241520087418515462>.

evolution, the latter which operates on time scales beyond single generations or human lifetimes. Human development is inevitably invested with values, meaning, purpose, and morality, whereas simply speaking about human evolution from an “objective, scientific” viewpoint does not and cannot logically or intuitively address those things. This is because the notion of “human evolution” is presented as a “strictly scientific” approach to the natural world, whereas “human development” is a “social science” or “humanistic” approach (religious or secular) to the topic of change-over-time in human activities and existence. To increase the opportunities for human development, we must work together intentionally and with our collective and personal values at the forefront, through social distancing and other counter measures, to halt the extension of COVID-19 as soon as possible.

One practical example of this quickly drives home the message. In Australia, "The Extension Disaster Education Network (EDEN) is a collaborative multi-state effort by Cooperative Extension Services across the country to improve the delivery of services to citizens affected by disasters."²⁰ We need more EDENs rising up around the world today to work collectively against the COVID-19 pandemic. Many more examples of this type of thinking are available and waiting to be found, once the tired old conversation/polemic involving “design vs. evolution” or “design vs. change” are put aside to instead embrace proactive principles of social activation based on purposive, planned thinking. Teleology, in other words. If we extend our efforts on this common goal together, we can reduce and slow the spread of COVID-19. This requires more than chaotic coordination characterized by “random,” “unplanned” or “unguided” decision-making. Even while external circumstances are changing rapidly, by concentrating our common efforts, by collective and individual extensions, we may win the fight against COVID-19.

Conclusions and Lessons

Regarding the virus’ unique “origin story,” we can be both skeptical and watchful at this early stage of research and testing. Let us not jump to conclusions without sound evidence; we must push aside conspiracies and seek rigorous scientific knowledge. I am not a natural scientist, so I’m depending on those with natural scientific training to correct any errors of science that may be found in this paper. Yet the fact of the matter is, only a very small percentage of people who have been tracking the virus to “patient zero” in each country are really knowledgeable about this topic, and the concerns of most people around the world differ from the scientific detective work of a few.

This paper asked two questions at the outset:

1. What would it look like if the DI went too far with their “design” metaphor?
2. Has ID theory gone too far promoting design, especially when there are other, more appropriate and accurate terms that should be used?

The simple answers are:

²⁰ <https://extensiondisaster.net/>.

1. Behe went too far with his claim that God “designed” COVID-19.
2. Yes.

As a result, I predict Behe, Egnor, Axe, and with them the ID movement are going to come out of this looking like broken ideologues promoting “bad theology” by attributing to “the Designer” something awful—a pandemic. Most natural scientists I’ve met who are familiar with ID theory, especially the atheists and agnostics, always have considered Behe, Egnor, Axe, and the DI to be ideologues, so this is not new to them. It is, rather, the religious believers who support the DI and promote ID theory who really need to pause and re-think the “implications” of ID theory, given what IDists have said about COVID-19, within a broader discourse involving science, philosophy, and theology. As an Abrahamic monotheist, I believe there is nothing whatsoever wrong or anti-religious in viewing ID theory as an affront to traditional theology, as well as a distorted socio-philosophical assault on “good science” in the bargain.

There is also, as it turns out, a strong precedent for the anti-science bias similar to what we are seeing with regard to COVID-19. It’s found in what the “grandfather of the ID movement,” Phillip E. Johnson, wrote and believed about HIV and AIDS (see links in Resources below). The evidence doesn’t need to be rehashed here, other than noting the “conspiracy” mindset present among leading figures in the history of the ID movement. Johnson’s claims weren’t a joke then, and nor are Behe’s, Egnor’s and Axe’s now. While a person may still value Johnson’s contribution to “other topics,” he was simply wrong regarding the natural-physical science of HIV and AIDS, and thus his claims regarding supernatural science, which lie at the heart of the IDM should be treated with great caution.²¹

No matter what the origin of the virus, the most important issue for people around the world is still stopping it from spreading, i.e. shrinking its impact, containing it. Stepping up to this challenge requires new language of action and intention that is absent from the “design” or “evolution” paradigms. As much as I wish it weren’t, this particular moment seems the right time for people to take seriously this “method of observation” that I’ve been working on for over 15 years (see Resources below) after “borrowing” it from Marshall McLuhan, and applying it in social sciences. Now is the time for “extension” thinking, as the spread of COVID-19 poses an existential threat to our lives. In sum, “extension” and “stopping the spread” are much more important issues for us now than arguing whether COVID-19 was “designed” or “naturally evolved.”

What is most urgently needed to stop the spread of COVID-19 is coordinated “extension services” that can provide medical, economic, educational, or spiritual support for people in need. The “evolution” of COVID-19 is largely, if not entirely, beyond human control. Likewise, there is little need to speak about the “design” or “Design” of COVID-19, since the proverbial cat is out of the bag. (This is not a criticism of or any attempt to downplay the

²¹ Such as the “free schooling” approach of John Mark Reynolds, one of Johnson’s closest disciples and beneficiaries.

normal theological language and meanings people may invoke to help them deal with suffering and death.) Collective and individual efforts to curb the spread are of primary importance during this difficult period on planet Earth, to which I hope this paper may add its voice of support.

Instead of accepting ID theory as a tool in the ongoing “culture wars” perpetuated by the DI in the U.S., I stand with my faithful brothers and sisters around the world in the belief that “This pandemic does not come from the Lord.” May we show mercy towards others, work together to reduce the pain and sufferings of people in need. Arguing about “design vs. evolution” or “design vs. chance” makes no improvement in our lives; as if “science and religion” simply *must* be antagonistic to each other on an existential level. It is time to press pause and say “No” to such uncooperative ideological posturing.

The so-called “Green Patriarch,” Bartholomew of Constantinople, recently stated that “science, by the grace of God, will overcome this virus ... We are certain that through our prayers as well, science will indeed prevail.”²² For those who believe in God, regardless of the design, evolution or extension of COVID-19, there is one best option in response to it: to commit ourselves more deeply to hope and pray for the world, that we may overcome this pestilence as soon as possible ... together.

Resources

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