

The Other Side of the Coyne



Douglas Wilson

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PREFACE

Möbius Strip Reason



It has been a while since I have gone through a book chapter by chapter and, weather permitting, the next one I shall attempt is *Why Evolution is True* by Jerry Coyne.¹ Coyne is a big-time Johnny in the world of evolution, so I will definitely be punching up out of my weight class. The closest I have ever gotten to the big-time in the world of evolution was that tour of the Smithsonian I took as a kid.

This review of his preface will serve, in a neat, chiasmic way, as my preface to the review. Coyne begins by discussing a legal fracas in 2005 in Dover, Pennsylvania, a case precipitated by a school board instructing that the ninth graders under their charge be told that evolution was a theory, not a fact, that they ought to keep an open mind, and that the book *Of Pandas and People* was available to them in case they wanted to check it out for themselves. Of course, planes started falling from the sky at the very prospect, and the trial would have gone very badly for the Truth had not Bruce

1. Jerry Coyne, *Why Evolution is True* (Oxford University Press, 2009).

Willis parachuted in and saved the judge from those hostage-taking creationists who had him in a back room and were showing him flannelgraph pictures of Noah's Ark. Still, for all that, it was a close call.

In his preface, Coyne complains about the staying power of creationism. He says that (in the trial) "*Of Pandas and People* was shown to be a put-up job, a creationist book in which the words 'creation' had simply been replaced by the words 'intelligent design'" (p. xii). He says a moment later that the judge, deciding for evolution, had opined that "intelligent design was just recycled creationism" (p. xii). And he gives us credit for being . . . um . . . pretty resilient. "Creationism is like the inflatable roly-poly clown I played with as a child: when you punch it, it briefly goes down, but then pops back up" (p. xiii). And as if I were trying to make this particular point for him, here I show up reviewing his book, with a red nose and as irrational as all get-out.

But let me begin my engagement with Coyne with a brief, flickering moment of agreement. One evolutionary scientist once said that intelligent design was simply creationism in a cheap tuxedo. I agree with the central point there, but I actually think it is a very fine tuxedo. Many of the ID folks simply want to maintain that the world around us exhibits design, meaning there was a *some* kind of designer, and they are not saying who that designer might be. Might be God, who knows, might be somebody else. Right. We are not saying that it was God who created the world . . . just someone with the same skill set.

This ID coyness really has been unfortunate. If the designer of this world who scattered evidences of design throughout His handiwork is God, well, then, there

you are—creationism. But if that designer is not God, but rather a really smart angel/alien, what ID argument from design could not be applied to *him*? Does not this non-Deity creator of the whole shooting match exhibit at least as much design as, say, mitochondria? A 3-D printer that prints, say, a domino, has printed a domino that exhibits design. But when my gaze moves from the domino to the printer itself, why do I have to stop asking questions? That exhibits a heckuva lot *more* design, if you ask me, which you should.

But my agreement with Coyne on this point really is fleeting. The arguments of ID, although unfortunately mislocated by many ID advocates on the cosmic flow chart, are nonetheless unanswerable by someone in Coyne's position. It is high dogma with these guys that materialism is an axiomatic given. In their minds, no scientific evidence, by definition, can legitimately lead to a questioning of this materialism. This is his *faith* position, and let us be blunt—this was not something that was scientifically ascertained. What scientific experiment could possibly be constructed, or scientific computer model programmed, that would show that the only way to find out anything whatever is through such experiments and modeling? This is not reason—it is Mobius strip reason. What my net don't catch ain't fish.

Coyne is unable to answer the ID challenge on two levels. The first is within the framework of science and reason that he accepts as given, a framework that collides with his *a priori* materialism. With regard to the first framework, if confronted with an argument from (say) irreducible complexity, he has to say (instead of answering the argument) that only a creationist would

argue from irreducible complexity. Okay, and at least I grant the point. Now, how about it? Tell me how a small wooden platform can catch mice in the course of its evolution up to a working mechanism that catches mice more efficiently.

The second framework is his materialism, which renders all argumentation—whether in favor of evolution or not—absurd. Coyne revealed his hard materialism when he wrote elsewhere that “the view that all sciences are *in principle* reducible to the laws of physics must be true unless you’re religious.” But if our thoughts are simply what these chemicals in my bone box do under these conditions and at this temperature, then (of course) I have no reason for supposing my beliefs to be true. But—and follow me closely here—this would include the belief that my bone box has any chemicals in it, or that my chemicals have a bone box to hold them. The belief that the universe is simply and solely atoms in motion has a hard time accounting for the existence of anything that would not be atoms in motion. But my knowledge that the universe is atoms in motion is not . . . wait for it . . . is not atoms in motion. Knowledge is as immaterial as the Queen of Fairie. Farley’s ghost, call your office.

Coyne wants this volume of his to give “a succinct summary of why modern science recognizes evolution as true” (p. xiv). And in the spirit of good sportsmanship, I would like to wish him luck.

CHAPTER 1

Occam's Shaving Kit



Jerry Coyne's first chapter of *Why Evolution Is True* begins with something of a patronizing quotation from Jacques Monod: "A curious aspect of the theory of evolution is that everybody thinks he understands it" (p. 1) Well, excuse us.

But after that, he starts at the right place, which is the appearance of design. Coyne quotes Paley's form of the argument from design,² which he then calls "both commonsensical and ancient" (p. 2). Beginning this way, Coyne acknowledges that evolutionists must walk up something of an incline until we all come out on the sunny uplands of enlightenment. That incline is the fact that the *appearance* of design is all around us. Coyne believes, however, that if we just define our terms properly, the problem evaporates.

Let me begin with his definition of evolution, followed by a brief definition of the six constituent elements of it.

2. William Paley's *Natural Theology* proposed the now famous "watchmaker" analogy (the existence of a watch implies the existence of a watchmaker).

“Life on earth evolved gradually beginning with one primitive species—perhaps a self-replicating molecule—that lived more than 3.5 billion years ago; it then branched out over time, throwing off many new and diverse species; and the mechanism for most (but not all) of evolutionary change is natural selection” (p. 3).

The six components of this are as follows—evolution, gradualism, speciation, common ancestry, natural selection, and evolutionary change by nonselective means (p. 3). Evolution means that genetic changes occur over time. Gradualism means that the time involved is a long time. Speciation means that different groups split, and go their separate ways, developing in different directions over time. Common ancestry is the “flip side of speciation” (p. 8), pointing out that all these variegated species didn’t used to be variegated—they came from a common source. Natural selection is what accounts for the appearance of design. It is that when there are genetic mutations in a group, and some of those differences provide a survival advantage, then those helpful differences will be passed on down the line. Survival-friendly genes have a “unfair” advantage. The last tenet (evolutionary change by nonselective means) is that some events may help out with evolution without using natural selection, as, for example, when different groups have differing numbers of offspring. This means that some changes “have nothing to do with adaptation” (p. 13).

Okay, so back to Paley. When we find a watch in the woods, we may infer a watchmaker. Not so fast, Coyne says, and then provides us with an alternative way of getting to the watch. Now most creationist critiques at this point show that it is not quite so simple as all that, and

argue with the alternative way of getting to the watch. I am entirely on board with all of that, but want to make another point. But before getting to my different point, however, let me just tip my hat to the traditional critiques—which I will no doubt be offering myself later on in this book review. For one example, the chasm between inorganic and organic is enormous, and it is a gap for which Coyne's six component parts of evolution have absolutely no relevance. So what happened *there*? For another example, why should any of the genetic changes confer any survival advantage at all? And so forth.

But here is the different point, one that grants, for the sake of the argument, that Coyne has offered us a way of getting to a watch without a watchmaker. That still doesn't prove that there was no watchmaker . . . but Coyne thinks it does.

Once the mechanism of natural selection was pointed out, Coyne thinks the discussion is over.

"The more one learns about plants and animals, the more one marvels at how well their designs fit their ways of life. What could be more natural than inferring that this fit reflects *conscious* design? Yet Darwin looked beyond the obvious, suggesting—and supporting with copious evidence—two ideas that forever dispelled the idea of deliberate design. Those ideas were evolution and natural selection" (p. 3).

Now look at what he does here. There are two possible explanations for something, one kind of obvious, and the other far-fetched. Darwin, and Coyne after him, show that the far-fetched option is a possibility, yay, and Coyne therefore thinks this "forever dispelled" the other option. But to show that something with the appearance

of design *might* have been the result of an impersonal process does not show that it *had* to have been the result of an impersonal process. How could that follow? To go from the possibility of no God to the certainty of no God is an exercise in wish fulfillment.

If Paley's companion, arguing with him, showed (with copious evidence) that the watch could have assembled itself, why can Paley not still reply that he thinks it is simpler to surmise that somebody lost his watch. "Look. There is a name inscribed on the back of it. William of Occam. And here's his shaving kit. It has a razor in it."

This is to argue, in effect, that if there is the slightest possibility that there is no God, then we must conclude decisively that there is no God. But to go from "there might not be a designer" to "there must not be a designer" is a great leap—almost as great as the leap from inorganic to organic, and like that earlier chasm, there is no natural selection to help you get across it.

This is because bad arguments, being inorganic, don't have any genetic material.