The God of the Gaps

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By Sean Pitman The term “God-of-the-gaps argument” is often used to refer to a position that assumes an act of God as the explanation for any unknown phenomenon – which is a variant of an argument from ignorance. The origin of the term goes back to Henry Drummond, a 19th century...

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The term “God-of-the-gaps argument” is often used to refer to a position that assumes an act of God as the explanation for any unknown phenomenon – which is a variant of an argument from ignorance.

The origin of the term goes back to Henry Drummond, a 19th century evangelist lecturer, from his Lowell Lectures on the Ascent of Man. In his lectures he chastised those Christians who pointed to the things that science can not yet explain as “gaps which they will fill up with God” and urged them to embrace all nature as God’s, as the work of “… an immanent God, which is the God of Evolution, is infinitely grander than the occasional wonder-worker, who is the God of an old theology.” (Link)

In short, a “God of the Gaps” (GoG) argument is thought to be a logical fallacy since anything that cannot be currently explained by naturalistic science can always be explained by the argument that, “God did it.” After all, God can explain anything and everything. The problem is, an argument that can actually explain anything isn’t that much more useful than an argument that explains nothing at all. It is for this reason that critics of creationists and those who promote “intelligent design” as a scientific theory argue that such ideas are not scientific or empirically rational because they are directly dependent upon the GoG logical fallacy. After all, throughout history people have appealed to
God to explain things like the origin of lightening and thunder during a storm, or the storm itself or massive plagues like the great Bubonic Plague of Europe during the Middle Ages. Only later did science discover perfectly natural reasons for such phenomena which did not require the direct act of a God or God-like being. Therefore, it only stands to reason that science will continue to provide naturalistic answers for those phenomena that are not currently understood from the perspective of naturalistic science – like the origin of life or the fine tuning of the anthropic universe itself.

The only problem, of course, is that the \textit{a priori} conclusion of naturalism, that a mindless mechanism of some kind was most likely responsible for all natural phenomena, is itself a form of the GoG logical fallacy. In both situations there is a gap in knowledge. The only difference then is what one chooses to fill in the gap. Should the gap be filled with an all-powerful intelligent God or with an all-powerful non-intelligent force of nature? – a mindless non-caring God, but a God none-the-less who has the power to explain anything and everything that is currently unknown?

How did life arise? I don’t know but I’m pretty sure it was as the result of some mindless natural mechanism…

You see, if one replaces an intelligent God with a non-intelligent Force as the ultimate answer to everything, the GoG fallacy hasn’t really been solved. All that’s been done is a substitution of one type of god with another type of god to stuff in the gap.

So, what’s the solution to this conundrum? How can the GoG fallacy be solved?

Consider that science itself is based on a very simple method by which one can attempt to bridge gaps in knowledge with something better than random guesswork, blind leaps of faith, or wishful thinking. Science only comes into play when there is some kind of limitation in knowledge – when what is known cannot completely explain that which is unknown regarding the nature, origin, or character of a particular phenomenon. If complete knowledge or information were ever available, science would no longer be needed at that point since the answer would already be definitively known.

For example, I like vanilla ice cream. I have perfect knowledge of this fact. I need no further testing or peer review.
to establish this fact or improve the predictive value of my current knowledge on this point. Therefore, science is simply not useful here.

However, when we start talking about realities that exist outside and independent of our own minds, external empirical realities, we enter a realm where we have incomplete knowledge on the nature of everything. Science comes into play in that it allows us to formulate hypotheses to try to explain the external world in which we live in a manner than can be tested and potentially falsified. In other words, all of our ideas about external empirical realities are subject to the potential for error and the need for revision or complete discard in favor of entirely new hypotheses given additional information. This is because science cannot definitively prove the truth of any hypothesis. It only has the power to disprove hypotheses. While limited, this feature of science is still quite useful in that it narrows the places where truth is most likely to be found. In this way, it helps us to make more and more educated or useful leaps of faith into the unknown.

The question is, what hypotheses are valid when one is trying to solve the riddle of the nature of a particular phenomenon? – what hypotheses avoid the GoG logical fallacy? Well, in order to be scientifically useful, a hypothesis must be testable in a potentially falsifiable manner. If one proposes that a supernatural God can explain a particular phenomenon, that hypothesis may in fact be true, but can it be tested in a potentially falsifiable manner? The answer, of course, is no. A supernatural God can theoretically explain the existence of anything and everything. He can explain car pile-ups on the freeway, leukemia in children, weather patterns, crop circles, the individual symmetry of snowflakes, etc. God can explain it all. Therefore, there is simply no way to test the “God did it” hypothesis in a way that would definitively falsify it in favor of any competing hypothesis. Therefore, the “God did it” hypothesis is outside of the realm of a truly scientific hypothesis.

Now what? As a creationist and proponent of Intelligent Design as a valid scientific theory, I’ve really dug a big hole for myself! Haven’t I?
Well, consider that there are numerous modern scientific disciplines that are based on the human ability to detect the need to invoke intelligent design to explain certain empirical phenomena. For example, consider that forensic science, anthropology, and even the search for extraterrestrial intelligence (SETI science) are all based on the science of detecting the need to invoke intelligent design hypotheses. Without this ability of science it would be impossible for anyone of us to actually detect the difference between a murder and a natural death, an arrowhead and a natural rock, or an intelligently-coded radio signal and a natural radio signal.

So, how is this done without ending up with the “God did it” fallacy? Well, the science of detecting design is based on two simple criteria:

- The phenomenon in question is well beyond the creative potential of any known non-deliberate force of nature.
- The phenomenon in question is within or close to the creative potential of known intelligent agents (i.e., humans).

That’s it. If these two criteria are met, the phenomenon in question is most likely the result of intelligent design as far as we know given the limited information that is currently in hand.

But, is the hypothesis that only ID could have produced the phenomenon in question potentially falsifiable? Absolutely. All that needs to happen to falsify the ID-only hypothesis for SETI, anthropology, or forensics is to demonstrate the ability of some mindless mechanism to likely produce the phenomenon in question, or something close to it, in a reasonable amount of time on average. Such a demonstration would effectively falsify the hypothesis that only a mechanism with access to deliberate intelligence on at least the human level is likely to be able to do the job in a reasonable amount of time.

What is most useful about this ID-only hypothesis is that it can be universally applied. It can be used to investigate any type of natural phenomenon to see if it was or was not most likely the result of ID. This includes the world of living things – of biology. There simply is no inherent reason why the argument for ID can be used by SETI scientists for certain features of radio signals or anthropologists when it comes to ID behind certain rock formations, but not for certain features of living things. It is a philosophical
argument, not a scientific one, that biology is out of bounds when it comes to the potential for detecting design.

Consider, for example, that even human level intelligence and design capabilities are able to produce various features that closely resemble those found in living things. The first fully synthetic genome has been produced by humans. Daniel Gibson and his colleagues at the J. Craig Venter Institute in Rockville, Maryland, synthesized the genome of the bacterium Mycoplasma mycoides, consisting of about 1.1 million base pairs (Link). The same thing is true for high levels of functional complexity and structural systems that resemble various biosystems found within living things.

The only question that remains is, are these features also within the creative realm of any known mindless force of nature? If not, then intelligent design, on at least the human level of production, would be a valid scientific conclusion – just as valid as is the case for forensic science, anthropology, or SETI science. There simply is no fundamental difference between the scientific arguments presented. On the other hand, if a mindless mechanism is discovered that can actually explain these features in a testable potentially falsifiable manner, then the ID-only hypothesis would be effectively falsified.

But what about God? The ID-only hypothesis might be scientific if we’re only talking about human-levels of intelligent design, but what about those features of living things or of the fine tuned universe itself that some suggest require a God or God-like being to explain? Well, this does become more difficult, but it is arguably within the realm of science to detect the need for advanced intelligence and/or technology that is currently beyond our human ability to achieve – to the level indistinguishable by us as requiring a God or God-like Intelligence.

So, while the truly supernatural nature of God can only be fully known by God himself, we can get a very good idea that certain features of nature cannot be explained from our current perspective without an appeal to a level of intelligence and creative power that only a God or God-like being could explain. And, I’m not the only one who has come to this conclusion. Many well-known modern scientists have also come to this very same conclusion.
For example, Australian astrophysicist Paul Davies makes the following argument along these lines:

The temptation to believe that the Universe is the product of some sort of design, a manifestation of subtle aesthetic and mathematical judgment, is overwhelming. The belief that there is “something behind it all” is one that I personally share with, I suspect, a majority of physicists...

The force of gravity must be fine-tuned to allow the universe to expand at precisely the right rate. The fact that the force of gravity just happens to be the right number with stunning accuracy is surely one of the great mysteries of cosmology...

The equations of physics have in them incredible simplicity, elegance and beauty. That in itself is sufficient to prove to me that there must be a God who is responsible for these laws and responsible for the universe.


British mathematical physicist, Sir Roger Penrose, was among the first to voice the obvious philosophical conclusion:

The extremely high level of fine-tuning astronomers and physicists discern powerfully suggests a purpose behind the universe.

Nobel laureate Arno Penzias makes this observation about the enigmatic character of the universe:

Astronomy leads us to an unique event, a universe which was created out of nothing and delicately balanced to provide exactly the conditions required to support life. In the absence of an absurdly-improbable accident, the observations of modern science seem to suggest an underlying, one might say, supernatural plan.

Freeman J. Dyson distinguished mathematical physicist, says,

As we look out into the universe and identify the many accidents of physics and astronomy that have worked to our benefit, it almost seems as if the universe must in some sense have known that we were coming.
Sir Fredrick Hoyle, famous British astronomer who early on (1951) argued that the coincidences were just that, coincidences. But, by 1953 he had evidently changed his mind and wrote:

Such properties seem to run through the fabric of the natural world like a thread of happy coincidences. But there are so many odd coincidences essential to life that some explanation seems required to account for them… A superintellect has monkeyed with physics, as well as with chemistry and biology.

http://www.leaderu.com/offices/bradley/docs/universe.html


Charles Hard Townes, winner of a Nobel Prize in Physics and a UC Berkeley professor noted:

“This is a very special universe: it’s remarkable that it came out just this way. If the laws of physics weren’t just the way they are, we couldn’t be here at all….

Some scientists argue that, “Well, there’s an enormous number of universes and each one is a little different. This one just happened to turn out right.

Well, that’s a postulate, and it’s a pretty fantastic postulate. It assumes that there really are an enormous number of universes and that the laws could be different for each of them. The other possibility is that our was planned, and that is why it has come out so specially.”

http://www.berkeley.edu/news/media/releases/2005/06/17_townes.shtml
Regarding the origin of living things:

From the beginning of this book we have emphasized the enormous information content of even the simplest living systems. The information cannot in our view be generated by what are often called ‘natural’ processes, as for instance through meteorological and chemical processes. . . Information was also needed. We have argued that the requisite information came from an ‘intelligence’.


“It is quite a shock. From my earliest training as a scientist I was very strongly brainwashed to believe that science cannot be consistent with any kind of deliberate creation. That notion has had to be very painfully shed. I am quite uncomfortable in the situation, the state of mind I now find myself in. But there is no logical way out of it. I now find myself driven to this position by logic. There is no other way in which we can understand the precise ordering of the chemicals of life except to invoke the creations on a cosmic scale. . . . We were hoping as scientists that there would be a way round our conclusion, but there isn’t.

3 Responses to “The God of the Gaps”

1. Holly Pham  
   Reply February 13, 2012 at 2:21 pm

   Great article Sean! Please continue them on a regular basis!

2. David Read  
   Reply February 13, 2012 at 7:44 pm

   The key point about the “God of the gaps” argument was made early in the article, when Sean pointed out that the “God of the gaps” argument depends upon one’s beginning or default assumptions.

   If we assume that the universe and life on this planet self-created and self-organized, then the fact that we cannot presently explain exactly how is merely a “gap” in our knowledge, a gap that will eventually be filled in by future scientific discoveries. (This is the assumption Darwinists make when they accuse creationists of worshiping a God of the gaps.)

   But if we assume that God created the universe and life on this planet, then the fact that we cannot presently explain how these things came into being by random processes is not a “gap” in our knowledge, but positive evidence that God did, in fact, create these things, and future scientific discoveries will tend to confirm this. (And creationists do assume that God created, which is why we are not impressed by the Darwinists’ “God of the gaps” taunt.)

   It all depends upon one’s starting assumptions.

   By the way, it is clear that as science has progressed, and gained more knowledge of the complexity of life, the assumption of abiogenesis (the idea that life came from non-life by naturalistic, unguided processes) has become less and less tenable. This is an instance where science has tended to confirm creationism.

3. BobRyan  
   Reply February 13, 2012 at 8:22 pm

   Another area where science confirms the I.D. model is in the area of entropy – where even Isaac Asimov admits that evolutionist paradigm requires a massive
decrease in entropy as the “net” over billions of years of time and the level of “all of planet earth”.

A most glaring violation of the 2nd law.

Another area where “observations” in science confirms the I.D. and also the Creationist model is in the area of static genetic domains instead of seeing simple phyla give rise to complex ones – we see them all – remain static.

in Christ,

Bob