

The idea of "intelligent design" is gaining currency in post-modern America as a perfectly decent "alternative" to evolution, solid enough to be taught in schools alongside arithmetics and physics. Those who defend it feel reassured by it: they do not always have a good argument for it, but they would subscribe to its premise that the more complex an organism, the more likely it is that an intelligent entity created it. What gets lost in here is the possibility that this "entity" might be a process, rather than a being; the fact that it takes a human brain to evaluate anything as complex, or simple for that matter; and, last but not least, the logically fallacious nature of the argument, which takes the result of evolution as a starting-point.

"Intelligent design" is indeed a return to the teleological mind-set, according to which bodies, physics, biology, or the cosmos must be understood in terms of their end; and a return to a normative conception of end, according to which the status quo - where we are now - is necessarily the best, desired state. The only basis for affirming that our current state is necessarily perfect is the presupposition of a perfect God, who wills everything to be perfect. The argument for "intelligent design" is therefore circular: a necessarily perfect end presupposes the existence of God. It does not prove it. The starting point for the argument is the perfection of nature. The end of the argument is the existence of a benevolent God; but God is inherent in the normative notion of perfection.

This attractive view, which wipes nature's less attractive features under the lawn, so to speak, was popular for millennia. Aristotle made the distinction between "final causes" and other - "material", "instrumental" or "efficient" - causes, and believed that entities existed for the sake of the qualities they exhibited. Galen, in the 2nd century AD, adopted Aristotelian finalism and, although he was a talented physician and formidably prolific theorist, he held on to the idea that, for instance, eyes existed in order that we may see - today we would rather say that we see because we have eyes. This rigid, perfectly circular structure slowed down the evolution of biological thought; but it began to break towards the end of the seventeenth century, when it became possible to poke fun at its most absurd arguments, and to observe nature for its own sake. Continued reference to the "divine architect" was mainly rhetorical, even though the investigators of nature - "natural philosophers" - could be as pious then as had been their predecessors. As the decades wore on, they freed themselves from the need to refer to any divinity at all when investigating nature; some in the eighteenth century advocated atheism, Voltaire turned the idea of "all for the best in the best possible of worlds" on its head, while others chose to leave theology to the theologians, on the model of what Galileo Galilei had done early in the seventeenth century.

Indeed, there was no need to encroach on that territory. Given everything that science - "natural philosophy" - has given humanity since its foundation as a modern set of disciplines in the early Enlightenment, one can only suppose that those seventeenth-century thinkers would turn in their graves if they witnessed this desire to return to Galenic reflexes. It is extraordinary that schools should be able to advocate a patent fallacy as legitimate instruction on the basis of "tolerance"; teachers who defend this position do not realize that they are returning to the past because they have clearly not studied it. Galileo was strong-willed enough to realize that the earth was not at the center of the universe, yet he did not think it impious to say so: the Bible could be interpreted metaphorically, as a text worthy of spiritual attention. Words are not things, and so metaphorical thinking is embedded in their use; painstaking observation of things, on the other hand, is not metaphorical. The Book of Nature, as it was called, was there to be read, but it was not written in

words. True piety has nothing to do with the study of this book, just as it should have nothing to do with the promotion of lies.