

LITERATURE REVIEWS

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SON OF PANDA

The Design of Life: Discovering Signs of Intelligence in Biological Systems. William A. Dembski and Jonathan Wells. 2008. Dallas, Texas: The Foundation for Thought and Ethics. 401 pages. Hardcover, \$ 35.00.

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Of Pandas and People,¹ first published in 1989, provided a high school biology text uncommitted to materialistic Darwinism. This text was greeted with the consternation that, with law-like predictability, emanates from those who believe any text or teacher who does not subscribe to Darwinism is an outrage. While *Pandas* represented a solid first effort, and is still a valuable book, the second and most recent edition was published 15 years ago. Much has changed since then as understanding of genomes and other areas of biology has rapidly progressed. In addition, the idea that Intelligent Design (ID) is evident in nature has blossomed into a rigorous and vigorously debated field of study. It is time for a new book building on the lessons learned and incorporating the amazing advances in science since *Pandas* was published; that book is *The Design of Life*.

This new book is a much more substantial volume than *Pandas*, with over twice as many pages, but it does a remarkably good job of retaining the readability of the book it is designed to replace. Further, while some images are reused from *Pandas*, the quality of the liberally used illustrations is, in general, at a higher standard than what was available almost 20 years ago. Having said that, it is hard to argue that this is a book that would be as easily used in a high school setting. *Pandas* was designed as a supplementary book for use with regular high school biology texts, but the more comprehensive nature of *Design* makes it better suited as a stand-alone text for a class specifically dealing with issues of design in nature. This would probably work best for a high school AP biology class or in a lower

division college level class. It is hard to imagine unmotivated high school students wading through all of the material in *The Design of Life*.

Thanks to the Foundation for Thought and Ethics and the efforts of the authors, William Dembski and Jonathan Wells, a full-fledged ID textbook now exists for anyone wishing to teach a course dealing with both the philosophical issues and scientific evidence pointing to design. One great strength of this text is the generally fair and comprehensive way in which objections to design are addressed. Another strength is the abundant documentation supporting the claims that are made. Not only are there many endnotes to each chapter, there are also extensive “General Notes” supporting various arguments made within the main text. Each chapter ends with a series of thought-provoking discussion questions that encourage further thought. These additional resources, as well as a glossary, make *Design* a superb text for those wishing to investigate ID beyond the text itself.

In general, *Design* makes a point of not dealing with theological issues, but because many of the objections raised to ID are theological and not scientific in nature, it is impossible to do this and still address objections to ID. As a consequence, some theological considerations — for example, God of the gaps — are discussed. One area in which *Design* takes a studiously agnostic view is with theological questions about the age of the universe and life, generally reporting currently accepted ages without endorsing them. For those who are interested, the epilogue discusses the political and legal issues relating to the teaching of ID in the United States and some of the maneuvers that have been used to prevent anything other than the Darwinian view being mentioned in public high schools.

Reading any textbook will inevitably cause those who are experts in the areas being discussed to cringe. *The Design of Life* is no exception to this. Most of the quibbles that I have do not relate to the substance of what is being stated, but with what is sometimes left unsaid. For example, discussing a cross between guinea pigs and failing to mention whether the parents are homozygous or heterozygous for dominant or recessive traits (p 97) is unnecessarily vague, treating the bill of a duck and a platypus as essentially the same structure (p 62) seems a weak argument² and failure to provide a scale for Figure 5.8 (p 122) leaves readers with the impression that the skull of a giant panda is significantly smaller than the skull of a red panda when the opposite is actually true. Unfortunately, the 98% similarity between human and chimpanzee genomes (p 7) is mentioned in the main text as if this might be a meaningful statistic,³ while an excellent

discussion of problems with such simplistic genome comparison statistics is in chapter notes buried at the back of the book.

Where *Design* really shines is in its discussion of evolution and development (evo-devo), information theory and some aspects of molecular genetics. Not surprisingly, this reflects the expertise of Dembski and Wells. Ultimately it is the careful logic applied to the data that makes this book immensely valuable. Whether or not one is sympathetic to ID, the comprehensive scope, clarity and readability of *The Design of Life* makes it a must-read for all who wish to have a grasp of the scientific arguments for design in nature independent, as far as it is possible, of theological considerations.

Endnotes

1. Davis P, Kenyon DH. 1993. *Of Pandas and People: The central question of biological origins*, Second edition. Dallas, Texas: Haughton Publishing Company. 170 p.
2. The superficial morphology of the two is similar, and thus might be viewed as the same if there were only a few poor quality fossils to deal with, but the bills of ducks and platypuses are profoundly different organs.
3. Publication of the Chimpanzee genome sequence put the similarity at 96%. In reality, statistics of this sort are far more vague than the precise sounding numbers suggest and depend very much on the criteria and technique used. The Chimpanzee Sequencing and Analysis Consortium. 2005. Initial sequence of the chimpanzee genome and comparison with the human genome. *Nature* 437:69-87.