

# The ‘God of the Gaps’ Is Growing

*The story of the god of the gaps ends like a bad dream. The scientist has scaled the mountains of ignorance, he is about to conquer the highest peak; as he pulls himself over the final rock, he is greeted by a band of theologians who have been sitting there for centuries...*

Atheists have a tale they love to tell: *The Tale of the Ever-Shrinking God of the Gaps*. It goes like this:

*Man used to chalk up every natural mystery to the gods—lightning bolts, plagues, you name it. They stuffed a god into the gaps of their knowledge, shrugged, and moved on. The god of the gaps was a busy god. But as time went on, one scientific discovery after another filled in the gaps, shrinking the god of the gaps. The moral of the story: Even when the evidence seems to point to intelligent design, hold out for a purely materialistic, designer-free explanation. One is sure to come along—sooner or later.*

The tale is a grand one. It’s also a myth. The myth says all the action’s been in one direction—design explanations collapsing in the face of purely materialistic, designer-free explanations, and never the other way around. But that’s a myth. Things *have* gone the other way around.

## **Microminiaturized Factories**

In Charles Darwin’s time, science assumed that single-celled organisms were simple, and that creatures routinely sprang to life out of things like dew and rotting meat—*spontaneous generation*, it was called. So the chance origin of the first living cell, deep in the past, seemed like no big deal.

But in 1861 an experiment by Louis Pasteur discredited the idea of spontaneous generation.

Then other scientists began figuring out how complex even 'simple' cells are. Today, the picture of the single-celled organisms is radically different. "Each is in effect a veritable micro-miniaturized factory," writes geneticist Michael Denton, "containing thousands of exquisitely designed pieces of intricate molecular machinery, ... far more complicated than any machine built by man and absolutely without parallel in the nonliving world."

A micro-miniaturized factory, and jam packed with genetic information. We know minds can design factories and produce new information. But could blind forces have managed the job—the first living organism? The notion now seems so hopeless that some atheists have retreated to the idea that life on Earth was first seeded by ... space aliens. These include mainstream scientists such as Francis Crick and Richard Dawkins.

So, scientific discoveries collapsed a trusted no-designer explanation for the origin of life, and bolstered the intelligent design explanation.

The so-called *god of the gaps* ... grew.

## **In the Beginning**

Another example. In the 19th century, the smart money in science said we don't need to explain how the universe came to be because, well, it had *always* been. But discoveries in physics and astronomy put an end to the idea. Cosmologists now agree that our universe had a beginning.

So, what many thought never happened and didn't need explaining—the origin of the universe—suddenly cried out for an explanation.

Next scientists uncovered what's now known as the *fine-tuning problem*. They discovered that the laws of the universe appear fine-tuned to allow for life. If the strength of gravity, or electromagnetism, or the speed of light—on and on the list goes—if any of these were even a little different, you couldn't get any atoms beyond hydrogen and helium. You couldn't get life-essential carbon and water. You couldn't get stars and moons and planets. You couldn't get Louis Armstrong singing "what a wonderful world."

The fine-tuning is so striking that even committed atheists have abandoned ordinary appeals to chance. Instead they say there must be countless universes—a multiverse—and ours is just one of the lucky ones right for life.

Some physicists see the evidence pointing in a different direction. "Intelligent design, as one sees it from a scientific point of view, seems to be quite real," said Nobel Laureate Charles Townes. "This is a very special universe: it's remarkable that it came out just this way."

And this from astrophysicist and Nobel Laureate Arno Penzias: "Astronomy leads us to a unique event, a universe which was created out of nothing, one with the very delicate balance needed to provide exactly the conditions required to permit life, and one which has an underlying (one might say 'supernatural') plan."

So are these physicists "giving up on science," as some would claim? Not at all. Being open to the possibility of intelligent design isn't giving up on science or rationality or the experimental method. It's giving up on the myth of the ever-shrinking god of the gaps. It's letting the book of nature tell its own story, and following the story—the evidence—wherever it leads.

And being open to the possibility of design doesn't require that one reflexively assume design every time one doesn't

understand a natural phenomenon. Theists open to the possibility of intelligent design in the natural world are free to hone their methods of scientific detection and hold an explanation for this or that phenomenon provisionally, reassessing the explanation as additional evidence arises. This is in contrast to the dedicated materialist who must always force their god-blind material forces—into the gaps in their knowledge of the natural world.

## **Voyage and Return**

To be sure, scientific investigators keep discovering new ways that material forces cause and shape various things in nature. But atheists don't own the insight that we live in a world with underlying physical laws. Far from it. The idea was encouraged by the Christian belief that nature is the rational and orderly work of a divine mind, a cosmic law giver. And that faith spurred Christians like Copernicus, Galileo, and Kepler to go looking for the underlying laws.

These Christians looked for them. They found them. And in the process, they launched the scientific revolution.

Christians invented modern science. But a later generation discarded science's fertile theological soil and insisted science trade only in theories that fit materialism, fit atheism. They even redefined science as atheistic.

Harvard geneticist Richard Lewontin frankly admits this. "We take the side of science *in spite* of the patent absurdity of some of its constructs, ... *in spite* of the tolerance of the scientific community for unsubstantiated just-so stories, because we have a prior commitment, a commitment to materialism," he writes. He continues:

*"It is not that the methods and institutions of science somehow compel us to accept a material explanation of the phenomenal world, but, on the contrary, that we are forced by our a priori adherence to material causes to create an*

*apparatus of investigation and a set of concepts that produce material explanations, no matter how counter-intuitive, no matter how mystifying to the uninitiated. Moreover, that materialism is absolute, for we cannot allow a Divine Foot in the door."*

The most basic of those unsubstantiated stories is the myth of an ever-shrinking god of the gaps. The myth ignores major developments in origin-of-life studies, physics, and astronomy. It ignores the reality that in significant areas, the evidence for intelligent design is not shrinking, but growing.

The renowned NASA astronomer and agnostic Robert Jastrow understood as much. He wrote that for the scientist like himself, "the story ends like a bad dream. He has scaled the mountains of ignorance, he is about to conquer the highest peak; as he pulls himself over the final rock, he is greeted by a band of theologians who have been sitting there for centuries."

The English poet Gerard Manley Hopkins had it right. "The world is charged with the grandeur of God./ It will flame out, like shining from shook foil." That shining light has penetrated the telescopes and microscopes of science, and even the eyes and minds of some scientists who would rather not see it.

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