

Disappointed with Michael Shermer. C Crocker PhD

Recently I attended a lecture by Michael Shermer at the UCSD Biological Science Symposium (4/2/09). His title was, “Why Darwin Matters,” but his topic was mostly religion. He started by defining science as “looking for natural explanations for natural phenomena” and said that his purpose was to “debunk the junk and expose sloppy thinking.”

I must go on to the content of the lecture — or rather the lack of content. What a disappointment! I was hoping to hear some reasoned thoughts, maybe even something to challenge my way of thinking. Instead we were all subjected to an evening of slapstick comedy, cheap laughs, and the demolition of straw men. There were lots of cartoons, a film of the evolution of Homer Simpson, photos of the Creation Science Museum, with lots of ridicule. I wondered if the 1500 people listening registered how their intelligence was being insulted, since Shermer obviously did not consider them capable of logical thinking — only of bully-like laughter.

Is it possible that Shermer is actually unable to understand what intelligent design (ID) theorists have been trying to explain for so long? His characterization of ID was that the theory says, 1) If something looks designed, 2) We can't think how it was designed naturally, 3) Therefore we assert that it was designed supernaturally. (God of the gaps.) Okay everyone, laugh away at the stupid ID theorists.

Shermer then went on to give the example of Sir Isaac Newton who he said, assumed that the planets line up in a plane because God made things that way. Shermer told us that ID theorists do not talk about this because science has now discovered a natural explanation for this phenomenon.

But, is this what ID really says? Not at all! ID theory suggests that it is possible to objectively detect the action of intelligent agency in the world, by the presence of two features: complexity and specificity. Our experience of the world shows that if something that is highly complex, ALSO conforms to a pre-existing pattern or contains information, then it has been designed by an intelligent being. When ID theorists see these features in naturally-occurring objects, we posit that an intelligent being may have had a part in their design. Science of course need not speculate about the identity of this being.

What about Newton's planets? They do not exhibit much complexity, and lining up in a single plane is not exactly spectacular specificity. Perhaps that is why ID theorists do not talk about Newton's ideas.

Shermer then made a quick foray attempting to explain away some of the concerns that ID theorists have with regard to evolution. The Cambrian explosion, and the lack of transitional forms in the fossil record were addressed by saying that the Cambrian period was actually quite long. Also many of the transitional forms would have had soft bodies — and anyway, we do have some transitional forms, like *Ambulocetus*.

Irreducible complexity was quickly dismissed by a slide of a bird with wings that are not used for flying, and pictures of a mousetrap with fewer than all of its parts. He did not attempt an

explanation of how it would work. Shermer did not explain specified complexity. Does he understand the concept at all?

Following this, Shermer began to air his personal philosophical and theological ignorance (yes, in a “science” lecture). I was astonished at how a convinced Darwinist, who complains about mixing science and religion, spent most of his time at the Biological Science Symposium talking about religion. He made the ironic point that he is not opposed to discussing religion, just not in science class! One is forced to wonder at the duplicity of his actions. Shermer repeatedly complained that the design seen in nature is not intelligent. For example, why would a designer cause the eye to see upside down and backwards? Obviously, Shermer could have done it better. So, his argument, if I am understanding him, is that if something is designed badly, it was not designed. Hmm, does that apply to faulty appliances, automobiles, and even rockets? Those that malfunction were not designed but evolved?

When Dr. Shermer came to the question that children always ask, “Well, if God made everything, who made God?” The answer the children were hoping for was, “Oh, yeah, you’re the first one to think of that! Hmm, guess He doesn’t exist.” But this is an age-old question, almost the *pons asinorum* of philosophy and theology. An immensely sophisticated literature has been developed around the First Cause question, and Shermer spoke as if he’d never heard of it. Some more astute readers may have noticed that what Shermer is presenting is definitely not science, as he defined it, but he seemed oblivious to that. Shermer thinks all good scientists will ask “Who made the designer?”, and who made the designer of the designer and so on. He seemed to have forgotten the first few sentences of his lecture where he said that science looks only for natural explanations for natural phenomena.

The lecture went from bad to worse. Now, Shermer began to throw in a few mistakes, claiming that all ID advocates believe in the God of Abraham, and are motivated by wanting to share Jesus. As evidence Shermer claims that after two beers, all ID advocates admit that they are Christians (the closet variety I presume). Has Shermer never heard of Sir Anthony Flew who is no longer an atheist, but is certainly not a Christian? What about Dr. David Berlinski, Ben Stein and Dr. Steve Fuller, none of whom would claim to be Christians, not all of whom are even theists. Of more concern is that Shermer seems to think that having a religious belief makes one unable to think scientifically.

You are on dangerous ground Dr. Shermer, since atheism has also been defined as a religion (7th Circuit Court of Appeals)! From his talk it seems that Shermer’s atheism (he calls it skepticism) is even evangelistic religion.

The talk was concluded with a consideration of the Anthropic Principle, or the fact that the universe is fine-tuned for life. Shermer admitted that he has been given cause for thought by six key physical constants, and the narrow range of values that enable our existence. He went on to dismiss their significance by suggesting the possibility of parallel universes, which also “evolve.” He admitted that there is no evidence for a multiverse, but claimed that since religion is “anthropocentrically absurd” we need to “climb to a higher plane of humanity and humility” and embrace “sciensuality” and buy his book. Are you convinced? I am not.

