Sahotra Sarkar, Doubting Darwin: Creationist Designs on Evolution (Blackwell Public Philosophy Series)

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As Professor of Integrative Biology and Philosophy at the University of Texas at Austin, Sahotra Sarkar has no sympathy for Intelligent Design. It is not a serious alternative to standard evolutionary theory, nor even of supplemental value in biological coursework. In the opening lines of his Preface, Sarkar mockingly commends President Bush for winning at least one war, the war against science. Then, he sets Intelligent Design within the context of a wider fundamentalist agenda, one insidiously committed to reviving sectarian religion in public life, especially public classroom life. Despite the vitriolic aggression of these early pages, Sarkar promises a fair, nonpolitical assessment of both the scientific and philosophical arguments used by prominent Intelligent Design theorists, most specifically, William A. Dembski and Michael J. Behe. Remarkably, he manages to keep his promise, at least for the most part.

In the first chapter, Sarkar charts the overall plan of his book. Unlike old-fashioned Creationism, which straightforwardly endorsed a crude, literal reading of Genesis, Reformed Creationism is more subtle, and so more dangerous. Conceding bits of contemporary evolutionary theory, it claims that an extra-natural, designing intelligence is needed to guide the process of organic change over time. Sarkar identifies four main stages used by Intelligent Design (ID) theorists to defend this claim. First, they construe standard evolutionary theory as a combination of three elements: the inheritance of traits, blind variation and natural selection. Second, they contend that standard evolutionary theory fails to explain the emergence of biological complexity. Moreover, standard evolutionary theory has no resources to remedy this failure. Finally, ID theorists argue that intelligent mechanisms can, and should, fill the explanatory gaps of
evolutionary theory. Calling this the Central Argument of Intelligent Design, Sarkar devotes most of his attention to assessing the merits of these four claims.

Before launching his critique, the author rounds out his introductory preparations with a blend of historical and philosophical points. Drawing from the fossil record, morphological studies, biogeography and molecular biology, he summarizes the substantial range of evidence used by evolutionists to support their theory. For Sarkar, the explosive growth of biological understanding in these and related fields is due to a pervasive commitment to methodological naturalism. Darwin made this invigorating naturalistic stance possible by replacing William Paley’s mostly sterile, speculative and abstract design arguments with fertile, empirically grounded evolutionary accounts. Of course, like other philosophical assumptions, methodological naturalism remains open to review. Nevertheless, as with the recent repudiation of determinism by quantum physicists, it should be abandoned only for clear, scientific reasons.

Spanning Chapter 2 and much of Chapter 3, Sarkar sweeps through the recent history of evolutionary biology to expose the distortions, even misrepresentations prevalent in the Central Argument’s simplistic characterization of evolution. Like any healthy scientific theory, evolution has matured through an ongoing process of critical scrutiny. From Darwin to the present, evolutionists have confronted a wide range of problems, not merely that of biological complexity, the issue that figures so prominently in the Central Argument. Over time, all sorts of mechanisms beyond natural selection have been recognized as potential instruments for evolutionary change. Incorporating the latest understanding of genetic mutation and inheritance, topics completely unknown to Darwin himself, contemporary evolutionary theory is something quite different, and far more powerfully sophisticated, than Darwin’s original theory. Nevertheless, Darwin’s most pivotal contribution remains prominent, the ability to explain biological adaptations without appeal to final causes, conscious purposes or irreducibly teleological factors.

William Dembski, of course, disagrees. By constructing an explanatory filter, he has devised a decision procedure to check for design in nature. In the closing pages of Chapter 3, Sarkar notes a variety of logical and conceptual problems with Dembski’s filter. Ultimately, the filter does little more than assign a vacuous, honorific title of “Design” to anything that cannot be attributed to regularity or chance. Moreover, Dembski’s filter is strangely porous, permitting an array of known chance occurrences to slip through easily. Even mundane, purely coincidental happenings end up being attributed to “Design.”

While unimpressed with Dembski’s filter, Sarkar does admit a broad range of serious problems for evolutionary theory. In Chapter 4, he argues that these genuine challenges do not spring from abstract threads of philosophical speculation or bits of flawed logical theory. Unlike Dembski’s spurious filter, they sprout from the rich soil of detailed, rigorously conducted scientific research, an environment that also yields the potential for scientifically grounded solutions. The ongoing, dynamic resolution of such problems earmarks contemporary evolutionary theory as a vibrant, maturing scientific research tradition.

In Chapters 5 through 6, Sarkar turns to several of the more recent arguments used to support the middle stages of the Central Argument, the claims that evolutionary theory does not, nor can it ever, explain the emergence of biological complexity.