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Expelled: No Intelligence Allowed

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Expelled: No Intelligence Allowed

Abstract

This is a review of *Expelled: No Intelligence Allowed* (2008).

In the independent documentary, *Expelled: No Intelligence Allowed*, comedian Ben Stein (who famously played the economics teacher in the 1986 movie *Ferris Bueller's Day Off*) sends the cultural conflict between science and religion boiling ever hotter as the religiously tinged notion of Intelligent Design freshly confronts the well-established, neo-Darwinian theory of biological evolution. In a sense, the movie is the newest face of the classical argument from design, or the 'teleological' argument. At the heart of the film lies the age-old philosophical question: does the complexity and intricacy of life in the world suggest a designing intelligence?

Those who would answer in the negative are the primary objects of criticism in the movie. Neo-Darwinians are famous for their commitment that evolutionary descent occurs in tiny, blind steps, changing purposelessly only via genetic variation and natural selection. No appeal to an intelligent agency (or divinity) is needed. Quotations from iconic atheists like Richard Dawkins (author of *The God Delusion*) and Daniel Dennett (author of *Consciousness Explained*) are used effectively as foils for the movie's Design-agenda by further associating evolution with atheism in the minds of the audience. However, along the way toward exploring the philosophical question of Design, some insights are also gained as to how the battle on each side is being waged. Questions arise like: is the battleground for the argument even? How do personal or collective biases color the way evidence

is evaluated for and against the ‘Design’ argument? Is it possible to be a ‘conscientious objector’ in a scientific world committed to the naturalistic worldview of neo-Darwinism?

In Stein’s view, the answers are dire. The opening scene of the film shows Stein addressing an enthusiastic crowd and essentially accusing the scientific establishment of censoring free-speech in science. He confidently declares that America is under assault from (neo) Darwinian, materialist-atheism, and later clips show him balefully meandering from monument to monument in Washington D.C., apparently contemplating the sad loss of freedom in American science. The film also suggests a kind of conspiracy theory on the part of scientific establishment to keep Intelligent Design out of mainstream scholarship and science education.

However, the flag-waving, pseudo-patriotism comes across as disingenuous on a few levels. First, it unfortunately turns the attention away from the legitimacy of the philosophical question being asked and obscures the issues by making it seem that evolutionary theory is somehow un-American. Second, by turning the issue to free-speech, rather to the argument from Design, the contents of the Intelligent Design (ID) argument are never presented in the film, which could either intentionally or unintentionally mislead viewers who are unfamiliar with the ID literature into believing that ID is identical to young-Earth creationism. What is most astonishing and disappointing about the film is that the actual ID argument,

based in the argument of Irreducible Complexity in biology, is never even presented to the viewer.

Instead, a retinue of prestigious theistic scientists and philosophers (e.g. Stephen Meyer, John Polkinghorne, William Dembski, etc.) are interviewed who confidently assure the audience that ID is a legitimate pursuit. Some of the interviewees claim to have lost positions, prestige, or funding because of their commitment to the pursuit of the Design question. While raising the issue of bias in science is certain to be unpopular in certain circles, Stein's accusation of dogmatism in the scientific establishment is not without teeth. Those sympathetic to Design are given some ammunition to feel outraged, but again, the Design argument itself seems out-of-focus the whole time. It almost appears as if the sense of victimhood should be satisfying enough without the need to fully articulate the ID argument.

The vaguely propagandist elements of the documentary are taken to an even higher level when the argument is suggested that Darwinism, and therefore social-Darwinism, contributed to the Holocaust. To be fair, Stein, himself Jewish, states explicitly on film that he realizes the connection is a loose one, but nonetheless, the movie juxtaposes quotes from evolutionary biologists with Nazi footage, as if to imply guilt by association. The question regarding the extent to which the Nazis employed Darwin, or Darwinian logic, in their execution of 'inferior' peoples is a

hotly contested historical point, and one might just as easily point to the anti-Semitic impulses present throughout Christian Europe for centuries. Even so, there is little attempt at interpretive subtlety here, unfortunately.

For the most part, *Expelled* is an intellectual disappointment, often substituting values like repugnance for the Holocaust, nostalgic patriotism, or love of free speech for articulate arguments or subtly-made insights. However, the final scenes are partially redeeming. They feature an interview between Stein and biologist Richard Dawkins regarding how living organisms could have emerged purposelessly from dead matter. The question is universally acknowledged as being an intractable scientific ambiguity. Dawkins, a famous atheist and critic of ID, appears undaunted by the question. He is essentially agnostic, but he finally admits that his best guess is that life was seeded onto the earth by Aliens (a recycling of the famous assertion made by Nobel Prize winning biologist, Francis Crick)! Stein is, rightfully, flabbergasted and exultant, noticing that, even according to Dawkins, life on Earth is produced by intelligence after all! When really pinned to the wall by some difficult scientific mystery, apparently even the hardest scientists will abandon the 'scientific method' for a bit of irresistible speculation about an intelligent designer. Had the film stayed focused on the philosophical or scientific aspects of design, it would certainly have been far more useful in the science/religion dialogue, or even in philosophy of religion classroom as an

illustration of the classical design argument. It may yet have some value in the attempt to define exactly what 'science' is, and is not. However, the film really documents a recent moment in the ongoing culture war, and therefore has only limited application to those contexts.