

## **On Red Herrings, the Ambiguity of 'Natural' and the Fallacy of Equivocation in the Intelligent Design/Evolution Debate**

Richard G. Howe, Ph.D.

The fallacy of equivocation is when one illicitly shifts the meaning of a term during an argument. This fallacy is especially a danger with a word has shades of meaning that are subtle. In the contemporary debate, such a fallacy is often committed by critics of Intelligent Design.

The term 'natural' is one such term that has a subtle shade of meaning, especially when it comes to causal explanations. On the one hand, 'natural' can be contrasted with 'supernatural.' In this regard, 'natural' has to do with the regularities of the physical world in terms of which events can be understood to be the result of impersonal forces or physical laws. Both sides of the debate acknowledge (or should acknowledge) that when it comes to understanding and doing science, the notion of the supernatural is off limits. This is to say that as a causal explanation for a physical event, to suggest that the cause of such an event is supernatural is to shift the analysis of the event from the domain of science to philosophy and/or theology. One should not use the supernatural as a causal explanation in science. This is not to say that one should never use the supernatural as a causal explanation. Rather, it is to say that in making such an appeal to a supernatural agency, one is no longer doing science.

On the other hand, 'natural' can be contrasted with 'artificial,' 'contrived,' 'intelligently designed' or a number of other related notions. In this regard, something can be denied as being naturally caused without entailing that it is supernaturally caused. Thus, when a scientist finds an arrowhead buried in the ground, he certainly does not ascribe the arrowhead to natural causes. He is not, even as a scientist, obligated to say that the arrowhead is natural. But in doing so, he is not saying that the arrowhead was supernaturally caused. Rather, in denying that he arrowhead was naturally caused, he is affirming that the arrowhead was artificially caused.

Recent years have seen a burgeoning area in the creation/evolution debate that goes by several names, the most common of which is Intelligent Design or ID. The proponents of ID argue that there are a number of features of the physical universe that exhibit the signs of intelligence, including the fine tuning of the universe, irreducible complexity, and information in the DNA. These ID scientists argue that such features cannot be accounted for naturally. But in doing so, they are not necessarily claiming that these features must be accounted for supernaturally. This is so because they are using the term 'natural' in contrast to 'artificial' or, to use their term, intelligently designed. They are not using the term 'natural' in contrast to 'supernatural.'

When it comes to the debate, the critics of ID often commit the subtle fallacy of equivocation regarding the use of the term 'natural.' The argument goes like this.

- ID: Intelligent design is a legitimate category within science. For example, arrowheads exhibit intelligent design.  
Critic: I concur. Things like arrowheads cannot be accounted for by natural causes.

[Note: The critic correctly understands the term 'natural' here to mean in contrast to 'artificial' or 'designed.']

- ID: There are signs of intelligent design in the information contained within the DNA molecule. The information within the DNA cannot be accounted for by natural causes just like the arrowhead cannot be accounted for by the natural laws of wind or water erosion.  
Critic: Wait a minute! You cannot allow a supernatural cause into science! To do so would render it no longer science. You're just trying to sneak religion into the public schools. Blah, blah, blah ....

Notice in this short exchange that the critic has shifted the meaning of the term 'natural.' He has committed the fallacy of equivocation. His objection is predicated on a shift in the meaning of the term 'natural' from a contrast to 'artificial' or 'intelligently designed' to a contrast to 'supernatural.' While allowing for there to be causes which are not natural (i.e., which are

intelligently designed) at the beginning of the argument, he thinks he has won the argument at the end by reminding everyone that supernatural causes should not be allowed in science.

While everyone agrees that supernatural causes should not be allowed in science (which means that science should deal only with natural causes) this is not what the ID proponent was originally asserting. He was asserting that certain things cannot be accounted for by mere natural causes. But he was not using 'natural' in contrast to 'supernatural' but rather he was using 'natural' in contrast to 'artificial' or 'intelligently designed.'

To be sure, most of the ID proponents with whom I am familiar do regard the nature of the designer as God (i.e., supernatural). But they do so not as scientists but as theologians or philosophers. And they never do so in the midst of their arguments for Intelligent Design itself. Interestingly, however, Antony Flew, who has been one of the most prominent atheists in contemporary thinking has come to accept the intelligent cause of first life while denying that this intelligent cause is God. This proves that to argue for ID is not *ipso facto* to argue for a religious notion of God. For the critics to repeatedly steer the discussion this way is a red herring.