Commentary on Kidd

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Kidd describes two methods of reasoning supposedly employed by Darwin, both put forward by Darwin’s contemporaries in Victorian England. These are “analogical deduction,” which he attributes to John Herschel, and “consilience of inductions,” ascribed to William Whewell. Kidd then attempts to show that the arguments of intelligent design theorists do not conform to these methods of reasoning.

Kidd’s critique of intelligent design would be more effective if he could tell us why anyone writing today should be guided by the canons of these eminent Victorians. He introduces his discussion with the sentence “Before looking at the arguments of the intelligent design advocates, we should first examine the initial arguments used by the scientists they are responding to” (p. 1). But why should we? Surely the design arguments stand or fall on their own. To fault them for not employing the same methods of reasoning as their opponents seems to beg the question in favor of the latter. Kidd needs to do more to show that these methods have the universal validity he seems to attribute to them.

What, exactly, is analogical deduction? Kidd’s example is Darwin’s comparison between natural selection in the wild and artificial selection in domestication. I can see how this is an analogy. In what sense is it deductive? Later we read: “The use of such deductive analogies by Dembski differs greatly from their use by Herschel and Darwin, however, in that they [sic] are not axiomatic; they make no attempt to deduce their hypotheses upon [sic] laws which may be inferred from observations…” (p. 3).

If a hypothesis is deduced, in what sense is it hypothetical? The appropriate role of analogy would seem to be in suggesting hypotheses. Once one has a hypothesis, one can see what follows from it together with other statements one believes. That is the role of deduction. If one of these deductive consequences conflicts with experience, either the hypothesis or one of these other beliefs has to be given up. Where one’s hypotheses come from is of little consequence. They may as well be arrived at by consulting sacred texts or a Ouija board. Or from analogical thinking. But, I repeat, this process does not appear to be deductive in any way. Perhaps Kidd is trying to address this problem when he says that according to Herschel “scientific theories are axiomatic, and that laws governing natural processes can be discerned through empirical understanding” (p. 2). But this unclear statement is pretty much all we get. Is some kind of special insight or intuition being postulated here?
Kidd accuses Dembski and other proponents design of arguing as follows: if it is conceivable that x is designed, and if we have not yet found an adequate naturalistic explanation for x, then x must be designed (p. 4). I leave it to others to judge whether this is a fair interpretation of Dembski.; it is hard to believe that anyone would consciously employ such a patently flawed pattern of reasoning. Kidd rightly points out that a scientific theory may allow for gaps that need to be filled in by further research.

Indeed, perhaps Kidd should have stuck to trying to show in detail that the writings of intelligent design advocates tend not to conform to standard “epistemic norms” or criteria for judging scientific theories, such as those that Kidd attributes to Ruse: “internal coherence, external consistency, predictive accuracy, fertility, unificatory power, and simplicity” (p. 2).

Surely, Kidd’s main point is right (even if difficult to extract): that intelligent design is presented as a competing scientific theory to evolution, and as such, should be held to universal standards for judging scientific theories. Support for intelligent design as a scientific theory from the domains of law, politics, religion, etc. is simply irrelevant. It involves a (mis)application of extraneous rules of discourse—a “conflation of debates,” as Kidd puts it.