

Back to Internet Library

23/24 March 2021

Wolf-Ekkehard Lönig to Prof. ABX

[**Introductory note:** Since the following discussion on the topic: *King of Saxony Bird of Paradise (Pteridophora alberti)* about *Gradualism, Macromutations¹ and Intelligent Design* may be informative/instructive/revealing to further people who are especially interested in such and similar questions, I have put it here on my homepage. - Comments in square brackets added.]

Dear [Prof. ABX. My mail of 5 March 2021]

In your mail of 23 February [2021], you have stated *inter alia*:

"*I believe the only reasonable explanation at this time is that feathers are a neomorph, a new invention in birds.* Certainly perfectly modern avian flight feathers did not appear for anything other than flight."

Looking at the ingenious multifunctional complexity of feathers again, I wholeheartedly agree!

And additional fascinating functions occurring solely in a relatively few genera and species (as in the birds of paradise: Paradisaeidae of the order Passeriformes with 42 species in 15 genera) are secondary inventions, for example **the males** of *Pteridophora alberti*:



King of Saxony Bird of Paradise (*Pteridophora alberti*)

<http://01271bfede0954168758-da1041207dde8e2d0a75af6fbedebedf.r83.cf1.rackcdn.com/20081002041419.jpg>
[\[http://planetbirds.blogspot.com/2014/02/king-of-saxony-bird-of-paradise.html\]](http://planetbirds.blogspot.com/2014/02/king-of-saxony-bird-of-paradise.html)

Explanations for the origin of the male's ornamental head plumes:

(1) First let a Darwinian theorist explain the origin of the "two remarkably long (up to 50 cm) scalloped, enamel-blue brow-plumes that can be independently erected at the bird's will". (**Also, "the male's ornamental head plumes are so bizarre that, when the first specimen was brought to Europe, it was thought to be a fake"** - Wikipedia) by "innumerable slight variations", "extremely slight variations" and "infinitesimally small inherited variations" - but, of course, no Darwinian believes in miracles. And, as Ernst Mayr said (1979, p. 20 and p. 84):

¹ If you check the term "macromutation" in Google Scholar, you will immediately get some 2,640 results (24 March 2021). Apart from losses of functions, see for a definition as the term is used here: <http://www.weloennig.de/Feduccia2020.pdf> p. 28 and http://www.weloennig.de/Die_Affaere1.pdf p. 77.

"Niemand, der nicht gründlich über die jüngsten Fortschritte in der Genetik und der Evolutionslehre unterrichtet ist, kann wirklich ganz ermessen, wie stark die Position der Darwinschen Evolutionstheorie ist!" "...Es ist heute unbestritten, dass es keine saltatorische Evolution gibt..."

English translation of the German text (I have got only the German edition):

"No one who is not thoroughly informed of the latest advances in genetics and evolution can really fully appreciate how strong the position of Darwin's theory of evolution is!"Today it is undisputed that there is no saltatory evolution ..."

In my view the gradualistic explanation (here assumed by sexual selection) would not only have been just one miracle but each additional step to elongate the "two remarkably long (up to 50 cm) scalloped, enamel-blue brow-plumes" would constitute another miracle - not only genetically but also ethologically - the female always "counting" (or somehow "sensing") the individual entities/links of these feathers consistently choosing only the males with an additional link in that chain - and this over millions of years until the plumes were "ready" as they are today.

However, this is not all: Even each individual link itself is thought to have evolved by "infinitesimally small inherited variations" - hence altogether *infinitesimally many* miracles!

So, I fully understand that you are dismissing such a gradualistic 'exegesis' - to use this term of many theologians – as unconvincing and that you are looking for a "better", i.e. a really reasonable explanation.



[An illustration of the King of Saxony Bird of Paradise (*Pteridophora alberti*) by Richard Bowdler Sharpe
https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Datei:Pteridophora_alberti_by_Bowdler_Sharpe.jpg
 See more pictures and [an impressive short video](https://featuredcreature.com/king-of-saxony-bird-of-paradise/) in <https://featuredcreature.com/king-of-saxony-bird-of-paradise/>
 (Posted by Carly Brooke 10 December 2012; retrieved 23 March 2021)]

(2) Now, what about your presently more favorable interpretation of the origin of birds and their feathers - that of (in Mayr's term) "saltatory evolution"? May I tactfully ask, whether that would not be another rather illogical miracle? Concretely raising the question concerning our example of the two fantastically long feathers and their functions: In just one step (or only very few ones) these two plumes? Wouldn't the females at this new sight be rather irritated, perhaps even frightened/shocked/appealed panically running away as fast as they could? (You know better than me how exactly mating behavior in birds is coordinated through meticulous morphological and anatomical details: precise key stimuli are necessary and can easily be disturbed by slightly changed characteristics.) And how did the population survive for millions of years before this phenomenon of these long plumes suddenly appeared?

(3) And what about intelligent design?

As I have cited Dembski in <http://www.weloennig.de/PlantGalls.xyz.pdf> pp. 50-53 that in the method to detect intelligent design there is "no magic, no vitalism, no appeal to occult forces" involved (likewise Behe). And, indeed: "Inferring design is widespread, rational, and objectifiable."

"Hardly a dubious innovation, Intelligent Design formalizes and makes precise *something we do all the time*. All of us are all the time engaged in a form of rational activity which, without being tendentious, can be described as inferring design. *Inferring design is a perfectly common and well-accepted human activity*. People find it important to identify events that are caused through the purposeful, premeditated action of an intelligent agent, and to distinguish such events from events due to either law or chance. Intelligent Design unpacks the logic of this everyday activity, and applies it to questions in science. **There's no magic, no vitalism, no appeal to occult forces here. Inferring design is widespread, rational, and objectifiable.** The purpose of this paper is to formulate Intelligent Design as a scientific theory.

The key step in formulating Intelligent Design as a scientific theory is to delineate a method for detecting design. Such a method exists, and in fact, we use it implicitly all the time. The method takes the form of a three-stage Explanatory Filter. Given something we think might be designed, we refer it to the filter. If it successfully passes all three stages of the filter, then we are warranted asserting it is designed. *Roughly speaking the filter asks three questions and in the following order: (1) Does a law explain it? (2) Does chance explain it? (3) Does design explain it?*

The Explanatory Filter faithfully *represents our ordinary practice of sorting through things we alternately attribute to law, chance, or design*. In particular, the filter describes

- [1] how copyright and patent offices identify theft of intellectual property
- [2] how insurance companies prevent themselves from getting ripped off
- [3] how detectives employ circumstantial evidence to incriminate a guilty party
- [4] how forensic scientists are able reliably to place individuals at the scene of a crime
- [5] how skeptics debunk the claims of parapsychologists
- [6] how scientists identify cases of data falsification
- [7] how NASA's SETI program seeks to identify the presence of extraterrestrial life, and
- [8] how statisticians and computer scientists distinguish random from non-random strings of digits."

Applying the method to the origin of birds (and life in general in all its forms), one may leave the answer at that – so, in the case of feathers: they were intelligently/brilliantly/ingeniously designed and leave the question concerning the identity of the designer open.

Because:

"The intelligent design theory basically dispenses with religious sources (ID "is based on science, not on sacred texts" - J.G. West). ID tries to differentiate as precisely as possible between coincidence, necessity and intelligent design in nature using only scientific methods. Among other things, the differentiation methods of forensic sciences, information theory, cryptography, SETI, archeology and artificial intelligence are taken into account. ID leaves the question of the identity of the designer open (*further disciplines and lines of argument are necessary*).

Nevertheless, the question naturally arises: Who was the designer?* The answer is given, for example, in simple words in the brochure, which I have enclosed in the attachment.

So much for today.

All the best,

Wolf-Ekkehard Lönnig

[More on feathers, see <http://www.weloennig.de/Feduccia2020.pdf>, especially pp. 17-20 and **24-26**.]

*As for the question "Who designed the designer" – I have addressed this question in https://mediathek-hessen.de/medienvuew_18233_Hans-R.-Portner-OK-Kassel-Portners-Presseshow--Pal%C3%A4ontologie-und-Evolution.html (see please the English subtitles) and Professor Granville Sewell in his following **brief commentary** at <https://evolutionnews.org/2019/09/once-again-who-designed-the-designer/>

In my view, to rationally identify the designer with the God of the Bible, further studies are necessary, for example: Biblical archaeology, fulfilled prophecy, ethics, and much more (I would need much time to adequately sum up the many more points).

[Epilogue: If these plumes are not embedded in an irreducibly complex system² (there is a wide open genetic and ontogenetic research field for this species – yet, of course, always carefully/strictly considering animal welfare³) – the points made above do not exclude the possibility that due to past⁴ and future randomly/accidentally occurring gene and other mutations producing chaos in the genome intervening with the normal development of the bird's feathers, these smart/imposing/impressive ornamental structures could be (and possibly had been) reduced or even be lost in the past in individual birds – if so, the individuals thus so strongly affected obviously did not survive in the wild.

Now let's assume that such a handicapped bird (re-)appeared and would now survive due to the care and guardianship of a human breeder – would that prove that it evolved these feather step by step? As far as I can understand it at present, this inference would be an unjustified extrapolation, which in essential points and arguments would resemble *the conclusion of an observer who deduces the mode of the origin of automobiles from her as yet only known 'mutations' in vehicles due to traffic accidents*: By accidents (car outside mirrors lost, roof gone, hood lost, windshield/windscreen destroyed and windshield wipers blown away, one or more doors strongly dented or destroyed etc.) – a car can be systematically dismantled by many different accidents and still be driving somewhat (though not particularly cozy) – **would that mean that cars have been produced by car accidents?**]



[The male and female bird according to <https://australian.museum/about/history/exhibitions/birds-of-paradise/king-of-saxony-bird-of-paradise/> (slightly changed). The female looks really astonishingly different.]

² "By irreducibly complex I mean a single system composed of several well-matched, interacting parts that contribute to the basic function, wherein the removal of any one of the parts causes the system to effectively cease functioning." Behe M (2006) Darwin's Black Box: The Biochemical Challenge to Evolution (2nd Edition with Answers to Critics). New York: The Free Press.

³ See more on the topic of animal welfare at http://ad-multimedia.de/evo/long-necked-giraffe_mU.pdf Footnote p. 36.

⁴ See please http://www.weloennig.de/ShortVersionofMutationsLawof_2006.pdf, <http://www.weloennig.de/Loennig-Long-Version-of-Law-of-Recurrent-Variation.pdf>, http://www.weloennig.de/Gesetz_Rekurrente_Variation.html

My mail of 13 March 2021

Dear [Prof. ABX – the author had sent me this link: <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/01/09/magazine/beauty-evolution-animal.html>]

thank you very much for your two mails. Yes, correct, I fully agree: "sexual selection is still a major point of debate", - see please my discussion of the topic at: http://ad-multimedia.de/evo/long-necked-giraffe_mU.pdf pp. 58-60.

Apart from the question of sexual selection in the long-necked giraffe, the quotations from Schmidt, Endler and Eichelbeck have been for me, now in connection with the birds of paradise, especially revealing (but these arguments will probably, of course, be already long known for you).

Schmidt:

"In sexual selection the choice of the sex partner is apparently determined by an inborn behaviour program. In most cases it stands in definite opposition to natural selection. This is illustrated clearly by the birds of paradise. Let us assume, for example, **that a female, due to a highly unusual mutation – for which there is not the slightest evidence** – has obtained a special preference for bright coloured males with long decorative feathers. For the species as a whole, there is no recognizable selection advantage for this mutation. On the contrary: conspicuously coloured males preferentially fall victim to their enemies. ...The long tail feathers reduce the ability to fly and are also a hindrance in the search for food. One should assume, according to the principle of natural selection, that behaviour mutations that lead to sexual selection with a disadvantage for the species as a whole, would be soon eliminated. It can, in the case of the bird of paradise as well as the Irish Giant Deer, be passed on, not in accord with, but only against natural selection. There must therefore be a factor that is stronger than Darwinian selection."

Check please also the arguments by the other authors in the giraffe document, whether you think they are correct also in connection with the birds of paradise.

Thank you very much especially for the link to the article in the *New York Times*, which I hadn't known before.

However, in that article - interesting as it is otherwise - the question of gradualism versus macromutations has not been addressed. The reader does not even suspect that this problem exists at all. If they [the authors] had [addressed it], the wide audience of the *New York Times* with millions of readers (according to wikipedia more than **130 million readers per month**: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_New_York_Times) would have immediately recognized that **there is a much deeper/more extensive/profound evolutionary problem involved in the question of the origin of the feathers of the birds of paradise** - as I have tried to address the problem in my mail to you from 5 March 2021: Neither Darwin's and the neo-Darwinian's gradualistic explanation by "infinitesimally small inherited variations" nor "saltatory evolution" (Mayr) can explain the origin of these fantastic works of artistry transcending all human artistry and skilfulness in the overall and also minutest/microscopic form and function.⁵

So, if the *New York Times* article had addressed that topic clearly and unmistakably/definitely/plainly to its audience of millions of readers, they could have asked the question concerning an **alternative** to the evolutionary answers of gradualism vs. "saltatory evolution" and many could have left (what has been called) the "Darwinian evolutionary box" and several readers may have asked the question whether **the option of intelligent design** could perhaps be a much better solution for the problem (inasmuch as I have cited in <http://www.weloennig.de/PlantGalls.xyz.pdf> pp. 50-53 that in the method to detect intelligent design there is "no magic, no vitalism, no appeal to occult forces" involved (likewise Behe). And, indeed: "Inferring design is widespread, rational, and objectifiable" etc.).

Hence, may I ask the question: what do you think about this possibility? You have stated in your mail of 23 February that the feather is a "new invention" ("**I believe the only reasonable explanation at this time is that feathers are a neomorph, a new invention in birds**"). - Does not a complex new invention involve intelligent/ingenious/insightful design? [An inventor?] Could that perhaps be a logical option in today's science (see also below) - despite of all the opposition of contemporary evolutionary biology ("No one who is not thoroughly informed of the latest advances in genetics and evolution can really fully appreciate how strong the position of Darwin's theory of evolution is" - Mayr)?

So much in this mail.

I hope that you stay healthy and well in this corona pandemic, a pandemic that hopefully will end one day soon.

All the best...

Back to Internet Library

⁵ Instead of addressing the real genetic problems they recycle their mantra: "Of course, it is undeniable that we, like all animals, are products of evolution."