

The Design Argument

A Perry

Introduction

There has been an explosion of 'Bible-science' literature in the last twenty years. This has been partly driven by the revolution in molecular biology, which has given rise to a renewed advocacy of the concept of design¹ in the form of 'intelligent design' (ID). It has also been driven by a cluster of thinkers arguing for atheism (the 'new atheists'), which has in turn engendered a response from Christian apologists. The Internet is also a factor. There are now many websites devoted to bible-science issues, with many forums discussing what is true and false in this area. In this essay, we will argue that nature shows design and therefore we can infer that there is a divine designer – God.

Naturalism

The natural sciences operate with a methodological naturalism, i.e. they proceed without reference to intelligent causes.² The basis for this methodology is not a denial that God is involved with his creation. Rather, it is that a description involving *agency* does not have to be given if your focus is *process*. There is an *independence* to the natural order: i.e. from a creationist viewpoint it can *up to a point* be described using concepts linked to 'chance and necessity'. However, methodological naturalism is not the same as metaphysical naturalism. If we espouse metaphysical naturalism, we affirm that the natural order is *all that there is*—this is false because there is a God who exists, Mind, and Value, all of which have so far proved intractable to metaphysical naturalism.

Intelligent Design

The slogan 'intelligent design' came to prominence in the 1990s starting with the work of P. E. Johnson and his book *Darwin on Trial*.³ This was built upon by the biochemist Michael Behe in his book *Darwin's Black Box* in 1996.⁴ Several likeminded scholars got together and decided to promote the idea of intelligent design and, hence, critics refer to an 'intelligent-design movement'. A research institute, the Discovery Institute, was set up in the USA and two philosophers of science joined the cause—W. A. Dembski and S. C. Meyer.⁵ The movement gained notice, and apologists for evolution responded with criticism—scientists such as K. R. Miller, in *Finding Darwin's God*.⁶

The intelligent-design movement seeks to disconnect the metaphysical naturalism of the evolutionists from the day-to-day practices of science. If intelligent design is to be admitted to the range of scientific hypotheses, this disconnection is essential. Advocates of ID also disassociate themselves from religious creationism. They are not in the business of defending the Bible. They are

¹ By 'design' we refer to the arrangement of parts in a whole; by 'intelligent design' we refer to the thinking behind such an arrangement.

² P. Harrison, "Introduction" in *Science and Religion*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 1-17 (12), who cites the medieval precedent; see also M. Ruse, "Atheism, naturalism and science: three in one?" in *Science and Religion* (ed. P. Harrison; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 229-243 (229).

³ P. E. Johnson, *Darwin on Trial* (3rd edition; Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 2010); the original edition was published in 1991.

⁴ M. J. Behe, *Darwin's Black Box* (10th anniversary edition; New York: Free Press, 2006).

⁵ For a history of the movement see A. Menuge, "Who's Afraid of ID? A Survey of the Intelligence Design Movement" in *Debating Design* (eds. W. A. Dembski and M. Ruse; paperback edition; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 32-51.

⁶ K. R. Miller, *Finding Darwin's God* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2007); the original edition was published in 1999.

merely arguing that we can make an inference from a kind of complexity in nature to an intelligent cause.

Philosophically, the intelligent design argument (i.e. that there is intelligent design in nature) can be made into the traditional 'design argument for the existence of God'. It is well known that complex coded information and complex functional systems are the result of intelligent agency, including those produced by scientists in biology laboratories. It is reasonable therefore to infer an intelligent cause (God) for at least some specified complexity in nature. Regardless of this use of the intelligent design argument, however, ID theorists see the increasing complexity of nature in biological understanding as the driver for a move away from metaphysical naturalism to intelligent causation in biological explanation—and this is the significant claim—regardless of any argument for God's existence.

The Design Argument

Intelligent Design theorists present design as an inductive inference in this way: all complex and functional objects whose origin we know are the products of intelligent design; we do not know the origin of complex and functional biological systems but we can legitimately infer that they were so designed. Thus, our recognition of design in the human sphere allows us to infer design for, say, the bacterium flagellum. The inference is often supported with a probabilistic argument eliminating a chance explanation; this then makes the argument an inference to the best explanation.

The core of this argument is an **analogy** between complex structures, objects, devices or machines that we know have been designed and the complexity we see in biological systems—a functional or structural complexity. The point here is that the analogy is between *our* designing and making things and someone *like*¹ *us* (e.g. God and the angels) designing and making complex things.² So, the philosopher David Hume, a critic of the Design Argument, defines it in this way:

The curious adapting of means to ends, throughout all nature, resembles exactly, though it much exceeds, the productions of human contrivance; of human design, thought, wisdom, and intelligence. Since therefore the effects resemble each other, we are led to infer, by all the rules of analogy, that the causes also resemble; and that the Author of nature is somewhat similar to the mind of man; though possessed of much larger faculties, proportioned to the grandeur of the work, which he has executed.³

The argument starts with observation, and so it has an evidential basis; it is an empirical argument. Nature provides an abundance of illustrations of design, but we will not describe any in this essay (see the next essay by John Thorpe). We will discuss the design argument in a general way.

Two types of evidence for design are presented.⁴ The first is about complexity and the second is about regularity. In biological systems we readily see many inter-dependent things presented together in a complex whole. We may even add to our description a specification of the functionality

¹ The theological basis for this use of analogy would be the point that we are in the image of likeness of God, i.e. what we ascribe to ourselves can be ascribed to God unless it is not a 'likeness' aspect.

² This is an application of Alvin Plantinga's thesis about the role of analogy in talk about 'other minds'—see A. Plantinga, *God and Other Minds: A Study of the Rational Justification of Belief in God* (Paperback Edition; Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990), chap. 8.

³ D. Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* (ed. N. K. Smith; 2nd ed; London: Nelson, 1947), 143.

⁴ R. Swinburne, *The Existence of God* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), 138-139.

of the arrangement upon which we have focused. We treat this complexity as a design on the basis of an analogy with the complexity of human contrivances and so infer the existence of a Designer. It is like seeing design in a watch, (but not the purpose of a watch). From the watch, we infer a watchmaker; equally, from a complex functioning arrangement in nature, we infer a designer and maker.

The second type of evidence for design is about the laws of nature which describe regularities of succession—regularities about what succeeds or follows on from what—and the analogy here is with regular types of behaviour in human society. For example, the singing of a song or the performance of a dance follows rules and a composition or choreography that has a human author. This is about what steps and moves follow on from others or what notes and vocal sounds should be made and in what order. The design argument says that regularity in nature is *like* regularity displayed in human behaviour and so has a corresponding divine author.¹ The point here is that while we can explain some laws of nature in terms of more basic laws, there comes a point where this reductionism stops and we just have ‘the basic laws of nature’. If we are to further explain the existence of these, we have available to us a ready-made analogy with human behaviour: an agent has set up the basic regularities of nature.

The two types of evidence are very different. The first is about *the particular* and the second is about *the universal*. A classic example for the former type of evidence would be the human eye; any basic law of nature will be evidence for the latter type of evidence; the so-called ‘Fine-Tuning’ of the universe is an argument of the second type.² Each type of evidence is persuasive especially if we are open to the idea of there being a god.

Albert Einstein was an agnostic but he incidentally shows why the Design Argument is persuasive. He says,

In every true searcher of Nature there is a kind of religious reverence; for he finds it impossible to imagine that he is the first to have thought out the exceedingly delicate threads that connect his perceptions. The aspect of knowledge which had not yet been laid bare gives the investigator a feeling akin to that experienced by a child who seeks to grasp the masterly way in which elders manipulate things.³

The force of the Design Argument is seen here in the phrase ‘exceedingly delicate threads’; in the impossibility of imagining that the scientist is the first to work out these threads (i.e. it has been worked out by God); and in the simile of the child and his elders.

Information and the Natural Order

The characteristics of the natural order are such that we can *up to a point* explain its workings without recourse to the supernatural. This is not an accident but a consequence of God having created the natural order with independence in its law-like regular behaviour and in its open-ended

¹ R. Swinburne, “The Argument from Design” *Philosophy* 43 (1968): 199-212 (202).

² P. Jeavons, “Fine-Tuning” in *Reasons* (ed. T. Gaston; Sunderland: Willow Publications, 2011), 39-54; see also R. Swinburne, *Is There a God?* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 2. There is a qualification to be made with the second type of evidence. When we consider just one law of nature and seek to account for it alone, the argument is that it has its cause in the action of a creator; this is a eutaxiological argument. Where we take several interdependent laws of nature together, then we are considering them in terms of a design and the argument is that this design is the work of a designer.

³ Quote cited from J. Bernstein, *Einstein*, (London: Fontana, 1973), 20.

creative potential. An example of the limits of our abilities can be seen in our treatment of molecules. We might ask about the origin of biological *information* in DNA, but we have no explanation as to how and when the chemistry of a stage in the 'evolution' of a DNA molecule that such chemistry became informational.¹ Instead, we have the ready-made analogy that such information has its origins in intelligent design.

Our broader point here is about the implications of methodological naturalism. The independence of the natural order is constituted by it having the **information** inherent within it to function. This is particularly seen in the case of the genome. This information, which is massive in scope, is evidence of intelligence (God) having been at work. This argument is broader than an 'intelligent design' argument based on complexity or a kind of complexity since we are not characterizing the information being processed in this or that natural system as complex as if this is the marker of design; rather, we are just pointing to the information encoded in nature by God.

Objections to Design

Atheist and agnostic philosophers and scientists have made objections to the Design Argument and in turn Christian scientists and philosophers have defended the argument. Three broad objections are made to the Design Argument: the first centres on the limits of the analogy; the second states that the argument cannot be verified; and the third says that if there is design it is so bad that we cannot infer the existence of God.

First, that there are limits in an analogy is accepted. The question is whether these are sufficient to vitiate the analogy. For example, living biological organisms are not much like a watch in that the latter doesn't reproduce. Or again, we cannot infer anything much about a divine designer or even know that there is only one such designer from the analogy; it is argued that the limitations of finite human beings are not a satisfactory basis for inferring an infinite being.

Pointing out the limits of an analogy does not vitiate the analogy unless the process of limitation so chips away at it that people see no point in drawing the analogy any longer. This is obviously not the case for the analogy of design in respect of the complexity and regularity that we see in nature. This argument has been made for thousands of years and continues to be made today. The fact that some people see no design while many others see design actually vindicates the logic of the argument.

Secondly, the charge that a claim of design cannot be verified requires a specification of what would count as verification. Within the human sphere we can verify claims of design. For example, we can seek out knowledge of the designers and their design principles. For the Design Argument, it is only the *fact* of intelligent design that is drawn as an analogy; nothing is said about the 'intelligence'. In Christian doctrine, verification (talking to the designers and ascertaining their design principles) lies in the future;² for the present, the 'verification' lies in the complementary teaching of Scripture.

The third objection is about 'bad design'. It is said that nature shows a lot of apparently bad design and so it cannot be evidence for a benevolent and omniscient God. It makes no sense to attribute this or that badly designed feature to the work of a designer-creator. The problem with this objection for an intelligent design theorist is that it pitches 'value' against 'fact'; it switches the focus

¹ This challenge is the thrust of S. C. Meyer's book, *Signature in the Cell: DNA and the Evidence for Intelligent Design* (New York: HarperOne, 2009).

² This is not a trivial point. It is assumed by critics that because verification now is not possible, that the argument from design fails, but the time and opportunity for verification is not part of the *logic* of the argument.

to evaluation and away from a non-evaluative stipulation of design. The notion of 'intelligent design' is not about the *quality* of design but the *fact* of design (or not) in empirical phenomena.

In Christian doctrine, the 'bad design' objection pitches our design skills **not** against an omniscient God, but against the creative work of angels. Genesis captures this involvement of angels in the 'And God said...' and 'Let us...' utterances, and God also gives approval by seeing that creation was 'good'.¹ A judgment that something is bad presupposes standards of evaluation that are applied in some context—the principles of the design project. So what might be good for a first year undergraduate architect may be truly woeful for a post-graduate. The context for angelic creative work is unknown and we are not part of that context. What we claim as bad might not be bad in that divine context of appraisal or the principles of design that were in operation. For example, if that context was a 'learning environment' or a 'work-in-progress' laboratory. The Design Argument and its analogy will work with either good or bad design since we are capable of both.

Finally, there is perhaps a fourth objection that ought to be mentioned. Evolution is often presented as an *exclusive* alternative to design. Organisms adapt to their environment as a result of what appears to be random variations and natural selection. This is incontrovertible and legitimately characterizes small-scale evolutionary changes. The question is whether this adds up to the whole story. Clearly it does not because nature shows a quality of intelligent design. Thus we can say that the character that an old earth has (see the chapter 'Science and the Bible: Days and Ages') suggests both the existence of slow gradual processes to effect change and adaptation in life *as well as* multiple pre-Adamic creative acts on the part of God and the angels. The reason for the latter point is that the character of life on earth (its regularity and order) implies intelligent design and a creator.

Conclusion

As a word, 'design' covers many different ideas. In this essay 'design' is about the actions of designing and making. Many things in nature *look* designed and therefore made, and on the basis of an analogy with the things that we design and make, this implies that divine actions of designing and making are ubiquitous throughout the history of life on earth. The Design Argument does not, of itself, furnish the full concept of God but, inasmuch as it points towards an intelligent agent, it is a powerful argument in favour of God's existence.

Further Reading: For a presentation of intelligent design by one of its leading proponents, see M. Behe, *Darwin's Black Box* (10th Anniversary Edition; New York: Free Press, 2006) or S. C. Meyer, *Signature in the Cell: DNA and the Evidence for Intelligent Design* (New York: HarperOne, 2009). For the philosophy of science and the biblical interpretation underpinning this essay see A. Perry, *Old Earth Creationism* (2nd ed.; Sunderland: Willow Publications, 2013); *Historical Creationism* (Sunderland: Willow Publications, 2013); and *Special Creationism* (2nd ed.; Sunderland: Willow Publications, 2014).

¹ We could model this element of the account as a *prediction* that any creative work is susceptible to evaluation and, for that matter, an evaluation that it is not good. This would make the 'bad design' objection into an argument for the existence of God.