

X. - The Design Arguments

The label “design argument” includes a family of arguments which differ in details, but which share a common approach: each attempts to infer the existence of a divine intelligence, a master planner, from alleged evidences of planning in nature. If it can be shown that nature exhibits design, we must conclude that nature had a designer with intelligence and immense power. And this seems to be an excellent candidate for a god.

The design argument has more appeal than the cosmological proofs, probably because it seems more straightforward and forceful at first glance. If we accept the premise that the universe displays planning, the inference to a master designer follows with irrefutable logic (unlike the premise of the first-cause argument where, even if we accept the basic premise of existence—which we must? the inference to a first cause does not follow automatically).

Of course, the problem with any version of the design argument is that the theist must demonstrate that the universe displays intelligent planning. This is the crux of the argument, and this is what needs to be proven. For this reason, the so-called argument from design is perhaps better described, as Antony Flew suggests, as the argument to design—i.e., as an argument to demonstrate the presence of design in the first place.

We shall now examine three common versions of the design argument, and we shall see how each argument totally fails to make its case.

1 - The Teleological Argument

The teleological argument (from the Greek *telos* meaning “end” or “goal”) attempts to establish that natural entities act in such a way as to achieve ends or goals, and that these ends cannot be the result of blind chance. Therefore, we must conclude that these entities fall under the direction of an intelligence, god, who prescribes these ends, just as human beings prescribe ends on a lesser scale. A succinct statement of this argument is found in the classic formulation by Thomas Aquinas:

We see that things which lack knowledge, such as natural bodies, act for an end, and this is evident from their acting always, or nearly always, in the same way, so as to obtain the best result. Hence it is plain that they achieve their end not by chance, but by design. Now whatever lacks knowledge cannot move towards an end, unless it be directed by some being endowed with knowledge and intelligence; as the arrow is directed by the archer. Therefore some intelligent being exists by whom all natural things are directed to their end; and this being we call God.²⁴¹

Aquinas follows the metaphysics of Aristotle in many respects, but this argument runs against the grain of Aristotle’s thought. While Aristotle applied the idea of final causation (i.e., explanation in terms of ends) to nature, he regarded these ends as inherent in nature, rather than as being imposed by an external agent. According to Aristotle, each entity tends to develop in the direction of its natural end—such as with an acorn which, under a given set of circumstances, will naturally grow

²⁴¹ Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, First Part, Q. 2, A. 3.

into an oak tree.²⁴² For Aquinas, however, the fact that acorns continue to grow into oaks, the fact that nature exhibits regularity, constitutes evidence of divine guidance. Apparently, without the assistance of god, nature would degenerate into chaotic randomness.

(1) Let us grant the premises of this argument and see where it leads. Order is exhibited in nature; order requires a designer; therefore, god exists. Surely, the wondrous regularity of nature—where acorns grow into trees and planets revolve around the sun—cannot be the result of mere chance. There must be a master planner at work.

It is now up to the theist to answer the question: Who designed god? Surely, nothing as complex and intricate as a supernatural intelligence can be the result of mere “chance.” Therefore, there must be a super-designer who designed god. But a super-designer would require a super-super-designer, and so on ad infinitum. Thus, by the premises of the teleological argument, we are led to an infinite series of transcendental designers—a “solution” that leaves much to be desired. If an orderly universe requires explanation, the positing of a god does not provide it.

(2) According to Aquinas, natural bodies “act for an end” in the sense that, given the same circumstances, they will always act in the same way. (His statement that they “obtain the best result,” aside from being irrelevant, is simply false. Do the bacteria which cause malaria, typhoid and other diseases “obtain the best result”—For whom?)

The crux of the teleological argument—and its fundamental error—lies in the assumption that order presupposes conscious design (where “order” refers to the regularity in nature). This is demonstrably false. It is true that order exists in the universe, that there is regularity in nature, that entities will behave in the same way under the same circumstances—but it is not valid to infer from this the existence of any master designer. On the contrary, order is simply the manifestation of causality, and causality is a derivative, a logical corollary, of the Law of Identity.

To exist is to exist as something, and to be something is to possess specific, determinate characteristics. In other words, every existing thing has identity: it is what it is and not something else. To say that something has determinate characteristics is to say that it has a limited nature, and these limits necessarily restrict its range of possible actions. The nature of an entity determines what it can do in a given set of circumstances. In *An Introduction to Logic*, H.W.B. Joseph writes:

... to say that the same thing acting on the same thing under the same conditions may yet produce a different effect, is to say that a thing need not be what it is. But this is in flat conflict with the Law of Identity. A thing, to be at all, must be something, and can only be what it is. To assert a causal connection between ‘a’ and V implies ‘a’ acts as it does because it is what it is; because, in fact, it is ‘a.’ So long therefore as it is ‘a,’ it must act thus; and to assert that it may act otherwise on a subsequent occasion is to assert that what is ‘a’ is something else than the ‘a’ which it is declared to be.²⁴³

It is a mistake to confuse “order” with “design.” If there is design in nature, there must be a designer, but the same is not true of order. Order does not presuppose an orderer; it is simply entailed by the nature of existence itself.

²⁴² See John Herman Randall, Jr., *Aristotle* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1962), pp. 225-238. beyond the scope of the present discussion. My point here is one of primacy. In other words, does morality serve man, or must man serve morality? I would defend the former, whereas religious moral codes characteristically defend the latter.

²⁴³ Missing Footnote.

(3) Exactly what does the theist imagine the universe would be like if it was not guided by a master planner? What would a disordered universe be like? What would an acorn do?—grow into a stone, perhaps, and then into a theologian? If an acorn did grow into a stone, it would have to possess qualities radically different from what we now designate by the term “acorn,” in which case it would cease to be an “acorn” in any meaningful sense.

Once we accept the fact of existence, we must also accept the fact that things are what they are (identity), and that they behave as they do in virtue of what they are (causality). The theist’s choice between chance and design is a false alternative. Because the order of nature is not a result of planning, it does not follow that it is the consequence of mere “chance.” Metaphysically speaking, there is no such thing as “chance.” Occurrences do not “just happen” inexplicably, without causes. We speak of “chance” when we are unaware of all relevant factors, such as when we say that the result of a coin toss is a matter of chance. But this simply means that, within one’s context of knowledge, the outcome of the toss is unknown. Nevertheless, causal conditions are at work, and if we were armed with the necessary knowledge—such as the velocity, height and angle of the toss—a prediction of the result would be possible. The concept of “chance” is epistemological, not metaphysical.

The real alternative facing us in the design argument is between natural necessity and supernatural caprice. According to the naturalist, the universe exhibits order because order is one aspect of existence; the two are inseparable. According to the theist, the universe is inherently unstable and chaotic, but god, an unknowable being, somehow glues it together using unspecified and unknowable means. Once again, the choice between naturalism and supernaturalism is a choice between reason and magic.

It is interesting to observe that if an event appears to contravene the order of nature, the theist is the first to proclaim that a natural law has been violated and that this miraculous event is evidence of a supernatural influence. Yet this same theist will appeal to the presence of order and natural law as evidence for god as well. If nature is not uniform, this proves the existence of god. If nature is uniform, this also proves the existence of god. Whichever way we turn, god gets the credit, which, of course, is remarkably convenient for the theist. In the typical style of theology, all exits are covered, contrary evidence is defined out of existence, and the theist is insulated from attack. This is a clear case of eating one’s cake and having it, too.

In the final analysis, the teleological argument has everything backwards. An orderly universe is precisely one in which there is no room for supernatural influence; to admit the existence of order is to eliminate the need for a god. When the French astronomer Laplace was asked by Napoleon why he did not mention God in his writing, Laplace answered, “Sire, I have no need of that hypothesis.” And neither does anyone else.

If acorns start growing into theologians, or if women begin turning into pillars of salt, then we may wish to hypothesize about a supernatural influence. But until such time as nature becomes hopelessly unintelligible and unpredictable, we need look no further than nature itself for explanations.

2 - The Analogical Argument

The analogical argument from design consists of drawing an analogy between natural objects and man-made artifacts. According to the theist, both of these display the intricate adjustment of

various parts, so we are justified in supposing that the natural objects, like the man-made artifacts, are the product of conscious design.

This argument is often associated with William Paley (1743-1805), who popularized it with his famous example of a watch. Suppose, he argues, that one were to find a watch on the ground. How would one go about determining its origin?

... when we come to inspect the watch, we perceive ... that its several parts are framed and put together for a purpose, e.g., that they are so formed and adjusted as to produce motion, and that motion so regulated as to point out the hour of the day; that, if the different parts had been differently shaped from what they are, of a different size from what they are, or placed after any other manner, or in any other order, than that in which they are placed, either no motion at all would have been carried on in the machine, or none which would have answered the use that is now served by it.

... the inference, we think, is inevitable, that the watch must have had a maker; that there must have existed, at some time, and at some place or other, an artificer or artificers, who formed it for the purpose which we find it actually to answer; who comprehended its construction, and designed its use.²⁴⁴

Paley extends this illustration to the natural universe, which he contends must also have been designed by a master intelligence.

... every indication of contrivance, every manifestation of design, which existed in the watch, exists in the works of nature; with the difference, on the side of nature, of being greater and more, and that in a degree which exceeds all computation.²⁴⁵

Many objects are commonly appealed to as evidence of design in nature, the most popular of which is the human or animal eye. The eye is immensely complex, and each of its many components must function in unison with other components in order to produce vision. With this intricate adjustment of parts, we have the adaptation of means to the end of vision. Therefore, concludes the theist, we must infer the existence of a designer, just as we did in the case of the watch. Similarly, when we observe the many elaborate structures and adaptations in nature as a whole, we must conclude that nature itself is the product of intelligent planning. The blind forces of nature cannot explain such wonders.

(1) A number of weak objections have been made against this argument. Some philosophers point out that this argument, even if valid, does not establish the existence of only one designer, so it may be used with equal force to prove polytheism. Of course, since our concern is only with the truth of theism generally (i.e., the existence of one or more gods), this criticism is irrelevant.

Philosophers have also maintained that the analogical argument, if valid, only establishes the existence of a master designer, not necessarily an omnipotent creator (such as the God of Christianity). But this objection misses the point. In most cases, the analogical argument does not even purport to establish the existence of an omnipotent creator (especially as used by modern theologians). The primary purpose of the design argument is to establish that the universe is not causally self-contained, that we must look to a supernatural power as an explanation for natural

²⁴⁴ Missing Footnote.

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phenomena. To criticize this argument on the grounds that it proves only a designer, not a creator, is a concession, not a criticism.

A similar objection with more to recommend it is that the analogical argument, if valid, does not necessarily point to the existence of a supernatural being. It is possible that the designer is a natural creature with superior capacities, in which case the design argument would be incapable of crumbling the naturalistic premise. And, strictly speaking, the designer would not be a “god.” (See Chapter 2.)

Finally, it has been suggested that the analogical argument cannot establish the present existence of a master designer. Few exponents of the design argument maintain that god personally supervises each natural occurrence. Rather, god is said to have directed natural forces in such a way that they continue to operate on their own accord. On this basis, however, there is no reason to suppose that the master designer is still alive; he may have died some time ago (just as a machine may continue to function long after its manufacturer has died).

(2) An interesting sidelight to this argument is the fact that the objects or events which are offered as evidences of design are always things which man considers good or desirable. As W.T. Stace explains:

The argument never selects as proving design those complicated trains of causes which produce blindness in some persons or animals; or the causes which produce, not life, but death. If a city is wrecked by a tidal wave and thousands of its inhabitants are drowned, or any other train of events produces a human disaster, such cases are never chosen as instances which prove design.

But it is obvious that the causes in such cases are just as complex as are the causes which produce valuable things, and that they co-operate with one another and are adjusted to one another to produce the effects which they do produce. ... Why then are not the evil things chosen as showing design as well as the valuable things?²⁴⁶

Most theists assume that the analogical argument, if valid, works in their favor by demonstrating the existence of a benevolent deity. But, as Stace points out, if we admit the desirable aspects of nature as products of design, we must also admit the undesirable aspects of nature as products of design. And this puts the theist in a difficult position. How can he justify a god who purposefully inflicts natural disasters upon man? The theist who accepts this design argument must confront the problem of evil head-on (see Chapter 3). The master designer could very well be a demon or mischievous elf.

(3) Paley’s design argument is open to a number of more serious objections. To begin with, what does the theist mean when he says that both natural and man-made objects display the adaptation of means to ends? What does the theist mean by “end”?

If, by “end,” the theist is calling our attention to the regularity in nature, if he is pointing to the uniform behavior of natural entities, then he is simply pointing to examples of identity and causality which, as previously indicated, are necessary corollaries of existence. There is no argument here; everything, whether man-made or natural, is subject to identity and causality. These characterize all of existence, not merely artifacts. So while it is true that artificial and manufactured

²⁴⁶ Missing Footnote.

objects share the characteristic of resulting in certain ends (in the sense here described), this is irrelevant to whether or not they are the product of conscious intent.

What else might the theist mean by “end”? One basic alternative remains. He may wish to make “end” synonymous with “purpose.” When he claims that natural objects display the adaptation of means to ends, he may mean that various aspects of nature cooperate in pursuit of a given purpose. But this is flagrant question begging. It is precisely the existence of purpose in nature that the theist must demonstrate, so he obviously cannot appeal to the “purpose” in nature as one of his premises.

This brings us to a fundamental objection. The inferential process represented in the design argument is the reverse of what actually occurs. We conclude that a watch is the result of design, not because we see “that its several parts are framed and put together for a purpose,” but because we know by direct experience that watches are made by men. We do not, as Paley insists, infer that a watch is man-made because we perceive design in it; rather, we infer that a watch is designed because we know it is man-made. As Professor Wallace Matson points out in his excellent critique of the design argument:

Proponents of the design argument take it for granted that the properties according to which we judge whether or not some object is an artifact, are accurate adjustment of parts and curious adapting of means to ends. But this is not the way we judge, even provisionally, whether something is an artifact or not. This is clear from our being able to tell whether something is an artifact without knowing what it is for or whether its parts are accurately adjusted.²⁴⁷

According to Matson, if human visitors on another planet were searching the surface for objects indicating the existence of intelligent life, they would look, not for purpose as such, but for “evidences of machining, materials that do not exist in nature, regular markings, and the like.”²⁴⁸ Similarly, if an archaeologist wishes to determine whether an unknown object is a primitive ax or merely a rock, he does not do so by “determining whether the object can serve a purpose; he looks instead for those peculiar marks left by flaking tools and not produced by weathering.”²⁴⁹ In other words, in order to conclude that an object was designed, we must first establish that it was manufactured. Therefore, in order to conclude that the natural universe was designed, we must first establish that it was manufactured by an intelligent being.

It is here that the defender of the design argument faces his most serious problem. How can he demonstrate that the natural universe was in some way manufactured by an intelligent being? Only one way is open to the theist: he must first demonstrate the existence of an intelligent designer, and then—and only then—he can assert that the universe is the product of design. In other words, one must first know that a god exists before one can say that nature exhibits design. And this renders the design argument useless for proving the existence of a god.

The theist will undoubtedly object to his last claim. After all, he may argue, there are many cases where we can have knowledge of design without having prior knowledge of a designer. For instance, suppose that we discovered ancient ruins on another planet; this would convince us that intelligent life existed at one time on this planet. Here we begin with designed artifacts, the ancient ruins, and infer the previous existence of intelligent designers. It seems absurd, then, to claim that we cannot establish the presence of design in nature without prior knowledge of god’s existence.

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This objection ignores an important difference between evidence of design on another planet and evidence of design in the universe as a whole. We would recognize ruins on another planet only insofar as those ruins resembled, at least to some extent, the methods of man. And our ability to recognize man-made characteristics depends on our ability to identify characteristics that are not found in nature. If, for example, a man was to design an object which looked like a natural rock in every respect, then, while this object would in fact be the product of design, another person could not tell this from merely examining the rock. As far as he is concerned, this rock is a product of nature. The closer the resemblance between a designed artifact and a natural object, the more difficult it is to determine that the artifact is in fact a product of design.

We see, therefore, that the characteristics of design stand in contradistinction to the characteristics of natural objects. Thus, if objects on another planet bear marks that are not usually found in nature, we might conclude that these objects were designed by an intelligent being.

Now consider the idea that nature itself is the product of design. How could this be demonstrated? Nature, as we have seen, provides the basis of comparison by which we distinguish between designed objects and natural objects. We are able to infer the presence of design only to the extent that the characteristics of an object differ from natural characteristics. Therefore, to claim that nature as a whole was designed is to destroy the basis by which we differentiate between artifacts and natural objects. Evidences of design are those characteristics not found in nature, so it is impossible to produce evidence of design within the context of nature itself. Only if we first step beyond nature, and establish the existence of a supernatural designer, can we conclude that nature is the result of conscious planning.

To repeat: unless the theist first proves the existence of a god, there is no way, in principle, by which he can demonstrate that the universe exhibits design. Knowledge of god must precede knowledge of natural design, so the design argument has no possibility of success. Appeals to complex and intricate structures, such as the eye, are of no help; the eye does not display characteristics that cannot be accounted for in natural terms, and the similarity between the eye and man-made artifacts is irrelevant. Natural and man-made objects also share the common trait of coloration, but this is no reason to suppose that there exists a master painter-dyer. Paley's design argument must be rejected as a total failure.

3 The Argument from Life

The argument from life is the modern, scientific version of the design argument. It is based on the improbability of life originating from the random movement of atoms. Since, it is claimed, the chance occurrence of the right combination of atoms needed to form even the simplest of living organisms is so remote, life is probably the result of intelligent planning. Theists sometimes use the analogy of an explosion in a print factory creating the *Encyclopedia Britannica* to illustrate the improbability of life originating from non-intelligent causes.

(1) This argument falls prey to what has by now become a familiar difficulty: it assumes that, if life needs explaining, the positing of a god provides that explanation. But this, of course, explains nothing. If god himself is in any sense alive, then he must also be the result of conscious design by a super-god—and so on into our familiar regress.

(2) Most calculations of the probability of life occurring without planning, completely ignore the hierarchical and integrative nature of life. Matson, commenting on one such calculation, writes: