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Atheists and the Design Argument

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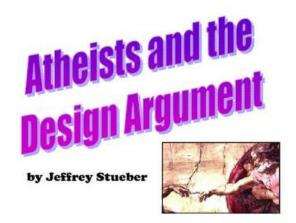
Around 1998 I had just embarked on my new "career" as a part-time Christian philosopher. After reading numerous Christian publications and obviously getting one consistent view of what I was exploring, I felt, to be taken seriously, I must explore the other side. With that fact in mind, I picked up a copy of B.C. Johnson's Atheist Debater's Handbook at a local library and decided to test my new mental skills. **1**

Now, my critique of this book is important because, even today, I find praise for it. For instance, a writer on the "Skeptic's Guide to the Universe" web site says "I bought this at Randi and Friends a couple of weeks ago and I'll tell you what it's fantastic! It's not a big book so it wastes no space with lengthy exposition, rhetoric or digression but gets straight to the point of annihilating theism with crushing logic, rationality and unrelenting presentation of argument and analysis." **2**

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1. B.C. Johnson, *The Atheist Debater's Handbook*, (New York, Promethes, 1981). Page numbers for all quoted text will appear in body of my essay.
2 From Dave the Drummer, http://sguforums.com/index.php?topic=10221.0 (accessed 11/22/11)

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Johnson's criticizes the theistic argument to/for design which often uses for evidence an accurate adjustment and assortments of parts that serve a purpose and could not have arisen by chance (such as in William Paley's example of a watch or the organization of the human eye today).

This argument arrives at its conclusion - that the eye is designed - by starting with a claim about the way we identify watches as designed objects. It argues that we must identify products of God's design by the same method we use to identify watches as designed. The only examples the theist can use are instances - such as watches - which are not thought to be designed by God. The theist's argument must begin this way because any non-hypothetical argument must proceed from what is presumed to be true. Arguments supporting Divine design will be based upon examples where design is presumed. Without assuming God's existence, the only things presumed to be designed are objects not designed by God. Hence, to start with presumed examples of God's design would be to assume just what we are attempting to prove - namely, that there are such examples. Therefore, the only reliable method available for detecting design is the one we have successfully used to detect products not designed by God. (p. 37-38)

Here was the first challenge to my faith and I had to ponder this mental retort Johnson has provided. Is it true that we can't attempt to find examples of what God has fashioned using criteria from things not produced by God? Put differently, he proposes that if one is to discover whether A created (a_1, b_1, and c_1), we can never, for our criteria, use items not created by A.

This reasoning seems faulty as far as the search for design is done in science, particularly in searching for evidence of outer-space alien intelligence where nobody proposes that we cannot detect alien design because we only have, for our examples of design, things not created by them. Carl Sagan, for instance, spent a great deal of his life speculating about life on other planets and, in fact, his book Contact – which was made into a movie – featured aliens sending prime numbers as signals.[3] Similarly, no one protests when we debate whether aliens helped create the Egyptian pyramids or designed crop circles. Lastly, when encountering ancient societies that have long disappeared, we do not suppose that we cannot detect their design because for our examples of design we only have items not designed by them. For instance, with Stonehenge researches never suggest we cannot discover who put the stones in that shape and why it was done because we do not have any other examples of design by them. Clearly something is wrong with Johnson's reasoning.

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3. Carl Sagan, *Contact,* (New York, Simon & Schuster, 1985).
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Christian philosopher J. P. Moreland has also pointed out flaws in Johnson's reasoning. He notes Johnson's methodology of insisting that we can only infer design by using criteria from objects we know are designed begs the question by ruling out creatures as designed even though they are at issue. Also, Johnson's criteria are too strong and make it impossible for God to be known by man. This reasoning, if applied consistently, as I stated, makes it impossible to recognize as designed any object created by alien beings or other cultures. Lastly, Moreland says Johnson and others who argue similarly do not understand the nature of a criterion. Our criteria for recognizing design in human artifacts may serve in many purposes but do not constitute the totality of the criteria of design in other cases. **4**

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4. J. P. Moreland, *Scaling the Secular City,* (Grand Rapids: MI, Baker House, 1987), 68-69.
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Let me expand on what Moreland has said. The "accurate adjustment of parts" criterion is used in identifying messages as designed (as in text on parchment) and also watches but the criteria by which we identify messages or watches is not limited to that criterion alone. Similarly, this criterion is not the only one used to identify products of a divine designer.

After jumping from the "accurate adjustment of parts" criterion to one that proposes that we only recognize design in items that "differ" from nature (a method that is totally useless), Johnson continues by drawing a comparison between the eye and a whirlwind as if to suggest that the eye is no more designed than the whirlwind. This analogy is spurious though. It is one thing to create a whirlpool or whirlwind but yet another to create DNA or an eye and a brilliant explanation of the difference is given by Sean Pitman who explains the difference between chaos and complexity. If you have air in a room and remove 10% of it, not much changes except the pressure. However, if you take away 10% of someone's leg, that person might suffer impairment of function (a simplistic example, but it makes the point). Humans are complex while gases in a container are not and, for that matter, neither are whirlwinds **5** DNA and eyes are complex and these are among things that creationists believe are designed. Johnson simply cannot see the differences in degree between the two. It is not just any arrangement that peaks a creationist's interests, but specific irreducible complex arrangements.

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5. Sean Pitman, "Chaos and Complexity," http://naturalselection.0catch.com/Files/chaoscomplexity.html (accessed 11/29/11)

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 However, some unintended events can happen without planning and that point is made by Johnson in suggesting the eye is the result of unintended consequences. Johnson's uses the example of meeting someone on a bus to demonstrate this. Surely the odds are incredibly high against meeting someone on a bus and perhaps those odds do not rule out such a consequence no more than they rule out the existence of the eye. Johnson forgets that the only reason one meets a person on the bus is because intelligent action was involved: two people choosing to take the bus. The meeting did not happen by random occurrence.   Duane Gish mentions how this type of argument was used on him in a debate and his refutation of it.

 In the exchange between Sluijser and Gish, Sluijser attacked Gish's probability argument by asserting that he had calculated the probability that Gish would be on that particular spot in the world at that particular time and, according to these calculations, it was impossible for him to be there. Gish was quick to point out that his being there was not due to random chance processes but that he was there because he had been invited and had used deliberate processes to get there. Response from the audience showed that they realized that Sluijser had strengthened Gish's probability argument by unwittingly demonstrating that random chance processes could never accomplish events that would require deliberate actions by an intelligent being. **6**

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6. Duane Gish, *Up With Creation,* (San Diego: CA, Creation-Life Publishers, 1978),   45.

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 Returning to Johnson, we could say that the meeting on the bus was accidental but being there was a result of intelligent planning. So, if Johnson wanted to apply this analogy to the eye, he would have to say that the eye may be an unintended consequence but putting the processes in place for it to develop would require an intelligent designer or planner. So his arguments do not eliminate the need for God and actually strengthens the design argument.

 Johnson again stumbles when he tells about a rock formation that spells out a phrase that says George Washington was the first president and suggests that this message would not convey useful information if we believed that the sentence is an accidental arrangement of rocks. That is true enough, but he then suggests that if we believe the eyes gives us correct information we must believe they are designed and if they are not designed they would not give us useful information. Accidental eyes give us no more correct information than accidental sentences. However, he says, purpose is a necessary component in sentences but not in eyes – because humans must agree on what parts constitute a sentence – and hence undermines the theists' analogy between sentences and eyes. Merely because eyes give us useful information is no reason to conclude they are designed, he thinks.

 However, Johnson again is wrong. First, the reason for concluding the eyes are designed is the particular arrangement of its parts, not whether or not they give us useful information. If, for example, we were to view incorrect information we would still consider them designed. Things created by an intelligent agent or unintelligent cause can relay both useful and correct or incorrect and useless information. There is no logical connection between an arrangement of parts and its accuracy of information.

It's understandable why Johnson would include an attack on probability-based arguments because many theists suggest evolution is just too improbable to even generate a cell much less anything else. He mentions the eye again and states the combination of atoms that make up an eye is "only one out of billions of possible combinations" (p. 53) and therefore the eye combination is just as probable as any other combination. Therefore he concludes that it is incorrect to say that the eye is improbable because its probability is the same as any other combination. Ergo, the eye is not that incredible after all.

I must remember that logic if I ever go to a gambling casino and decide to mess with the dice so they give me constant roles of seven (which, by the way, I have no knowledge of doing). When the head of the casino questions me if I rigged the dice, I will tell him that the combination of sevens he witnessed is not to be unexpected because it has the same probability as any other combination, and therefore merely an inevitable result of chance.

Johnson's interpretation of the probability argument is not correct and certainly does not match the interpretation chance a casino boss would use. The casino boss would not reason as Johnson, but instead would reason as so: "The long succession of sevens being rolled by Mr. Stueber is so improbable because there are so many successions of rolls that are not rolls of sevens. Therefore the probability is so much greater for rolls that are not sevens than for rolls that are sevens. Therefore Mr. Stueber must be rigging the dice." Thus a theist argues, "There may be one possible combination that makes an eye work, but perhaps a few million or billion may make it not work. Therefore the probability against the right combination of an eye is extremely large."

I will stop rhapsodizing on Johnson's errors here, but not without drawing intellectual blood one last time. If you remember, Johnson argued that we cannot use criteria for design using items not designed by that supposed designer. If Johnson is serious about this, then he should not even be able to complain about the evil which God permits in this world – a topic to which he devotes an entire chapter. He must suppose that we would not design a world where evil was permitted, but apparently God has designed such a world. However, Johnson making such a judgment would involve him doing the very thing he said we could not do: using criteria based on what beings other than God would do. How exactly does he know what God would create anyway when all he knows is what we would or would not create?

Other Voices

Johnson, of course, is not the only critic of the argument to/for design. Atheists have their own niche on the internet and have compiled several common responses to the design argument which includes the following:

The Watchmaker analogy suffers from three particular flaws, over and above those common to all Arguments By Design. Firstly, a watchmaker creates watches from pre-existing materials, whereas God is claimed to have created the universe from nothing. These two sorts of creation are clearly fundamentally different, and the analogy is therefore rather weak. Secondly, a watchmaker makes watches, but there are many other things in the world. If we walked further along the beach and found a nuclear reactor, we wouldn't assume it was created by the watchmaker. The argument would therefore suggest a multitude of creators, each responsible for a different part of creation (or a different universe, if you allow the possibility that there might be more than one). Finally, in the first part of the watchmaker argument we conclude that the watch is not part of nature because it is ordered, and therefore stands out from the randomness of nature. Yet in the second part of the argument, we start from the position that the universe is obviously not random, but shows elements of order. The Watchmaker argument is thus internally inconsistent. Apart from logical inconsistencies in the watchmaker argument, it's worth pointing out that biological systems and mechanical systems behave

very differently. What's unlikely for a pile of gears is not necessarily unlikely for a mixture of biological molecules. **7**

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7. "Common Arguments 1997," Secular Web, http://www.infidels.org/library/modern/mathew/arguments.html#design (accessed 11/29/11)

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The first response above is weak because the two types of creations are different only in the respective makeup of that creation (pre-existing material vs. material already existing) but this does not suggest anything else about the makeup of the designed object or objects. The second response does make a valid point but the creationist has the rejoinder that he or she can add other evidence which suggests which designer did the creating. This, to me, harkens back to B. C. Johnson's point about animals made by God or made by alien beings. The accurate-adjustment-of-parts criterion is not the only one used to match a particular item with a particular designer. The third reply misunderstands theist arguments about the design of the watch and the universe. The watch stands out from the randomness of the beach, not the randomness of the entire Earth and universe and that is why people would suppose it was designed. Not every facet of the universe or Earth is designed (certainly not the beach) and so there are areas that are not designed in a way that the design of a watch can stand out from it.

Some evolutionists oppose the design argument because it posits an unscientific explanation – a creation by a divine being. A scientific explanation to them is one that appeals to a cause guided by natural law. This was part of the criteria in Judge Overton's 1982 court ruling against an Arkansas act requiring balanced treatment of evolution and creation. The best response to this reasoning comes from Jonathan Wells who quotes philosopher of science Larry Laudan. Galileo and Newton established the existence of gravity long before anybody could give an explanation for gravity. There must, therefore, be something wrong with this judge's ruling. **8** Lawyer Phillip Johnson, author of Darwin on Trial, reflects on this trial and notes that "Philosophers of science have found much fault with Judge Overton's definition" and have hinted that many evolutionist witnesses at the trial "got away with a philosophical snow job." **9**

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8. Jonathan Wells, *The Politically Incorrect Guide to Darwinism and Intelligent Design*, (Washington D.C., Regnery, 2006), 132-133.
9. Phillip Johnson, *Darwin on Trial*, (Downers Grove: IL, Intervarsity, 1993), 114-115.

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The same reply applies to Richard Dawkins who, like Johnson, attacks theistic arguments from improbability. A tornado going through a junkyard could not assemble a Boeing 747 - according to an argument by Fred Hoyle - and, Dawkins says, creationists have misappropriated this argument to suggest improbable things cannot originate without creation. Sometimes, he says, this suggestion takes the form of the idea there is no "free lunch" (In other words, there is no existing without something bringing it into existence.) Dawkins laments that "However statistically improbable the entity you seek to explain by invoking a designer, the designer himself has got to be at least as improbable. God is the ultimate Boeing 747." **10**

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10. Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, (New York, Houghton Mifflin, 2006), 138

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First, this assumes, of course, that God is an entity composed of parts that have to be combined in some fashion like molecules would in DNA. Second, this assumes that there is a top-down (or perhaps bottom-up) level of complexity where highly complex things can never be made by simpler beings or organisms. What evidence does Dawkins have that this is so? Lastly, we do not have to explain the existence of God to believe in or argue for His creation any more than we have to explain the existence of any being before we posit that being may have interacted in the world to create or produce something.

What of the position that any attempt to posit that life is created by an intelligent divine being is merely an attempt to push religious belief? That argument, of course, is not surprising considering in American a large portion of those who believe in intelligent design also are Christian or are heavily indebted to creationism in the Bible. However, Moslems also believe in a divine creator. Aaron Schachter, in an article in The World, tells of Adnaan Akhtar who, at an interfaith conference in Tel Aviv, told delegates to unite against Charles Darwin and materialism which are "the foundation of the conflict and corruption going on in the world." His latest book, The Atlas of Creation is an 800-page refutation of evolution which he delivers to schools and research institutes around the world. While the Koran does not giving the timing of creation as the Genesis account does, Adnaan believes that God created the world and denounces believers in evolution as pagans and crackpots. **11** There may be good scientific reasons to suppose a divine creator did something, but science won't by itself tell you who that creator is. That question remains within the realm of theology.

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11. Aaron Schachter, "Islamic creationism," The World, Sept. 10, 2009, http://www.pri.org/stories/world/middle-east/islamic-creationism1616.html

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Lastly, I'll mention one of the most pertinent intellectual thought stoppers in this debate: the fear of creation as nothing but "god of the gaps." David Mills sarcastically suggests that

Historically whenever primitive man lacked scientific understanding of an observed event, he created a "God of the Gaps" to fill the intellectual vacuum. A sailor who knew nothing of astronomy would interpret an eclipse of the sun as a sign from the Almighty. A mother, unaware of the existence of viruses and microorganisms, would ascribe her daughter's illness as to the wrath of God (or perhaps the devil). A 14th-century farmer, knowing nothing of soil chemistry, would attribute crop failures to the sins of his family. Unaware of biological evolution, medieval man considered the complexity of his own anatomy to be evidence of Divine Creation. The wider the gaps in scientific understanding, the greater the historical need for a miracle-working "God of the Gaps." **12**

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12. David Mills, Atheist Universe: a Thinking Person's Answer to Christian Fundamentalism, (Berkeley: CA, Ulysses Press, 2006), 85

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Mills, of course, does land some punches. Too often people have attributed events to untrue causes (and not always for religious reasons). However, Mills is out of touch with modern scholarship on this issue, particularly William Dembski's "explanatory filter" which, he says, "is a criterion for distinguishing intelligent from unintelligent causes." **13** Whether it is accurate is another question that will be debated for a long time, but it does represent an attempt not to argue for design based on mere uncertainty. While there will continue to be skeptical arguments against the possibility of divine design, this essay has shown that, despite the appeal to common sense, a large portion of skeptics' arguments simply have no logical appeal. *LSI*

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13. William Dembski, "Redesigning Science," in William Dembski ed., *Mere Creation: Science, Faith & Intelligent Design*, (Downers Grove: IL, Intervarsity Press, 1998), 104

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