

EDITORIAL

CONFLATING ANSWERS: TO AND FROM DESIGN QUESTIONS

The design argument can be logically divided into two components: the argument TO design and the argument FROM design. The modern Intelligent Design (ID) argument is an argument *to* design about which confusion is commonly caused by jumping to the logically related *from* design side of the argument: If there is an Intelligent Designer, who is it? Opponents of ID frequently attempt to short-circuit the whole argument by conflating ID with arguments *from* design. To spice up these rejoinders, specific answers may be offered as in a recent AFP news article¹ which quotes an opponent of ID, Barbara Forrest, as saying “It [ID] is at its bottom a Christian religious movement.” Some Christian apologists may be tempted to think the same thing, but to do this betrays a misunderstanding of ID.

Clearly, ID does not answer or even address questions about who God is, it only addresses the “*to design*” side of the design argument. On the one hand, there is the question of whether nature, or some part of nature, is the result of an intelligent cause. On the other hand there is the question of what kind of creator could make natural things like the living organisms? Different philosophical positions attempt to answer the second “*from design*” question before the “*to design*” first question. They then attempt to impose their premature answer on the evidence in nature. For example, it might be claimed that the almighty God, who only does good, kind and perfect things, is Creator of all we see; thus everything we see is perfectly good. This view is reflected in much of the natural philosophy of Victorian times and is one of the things that Darwin rightly rejected. Darwin was not alone; for example Voltaire lampooned this kind of “Pangloss” thinking in *Candide*.

Darwin chose to embrace an alternative view generally referred to as materialism. While he himself may not have fully subscribed to this philosophical position, the modern Darwinian synthesis is frequently equated with this train of thought. Materialism is a philosophy that claims the material world is, by definition, all that exists. Thus, the only mechanism available to produce things in nature is nature itself. The belief that natural causes explain everything in nature is commonly called naturalism. Neither materialism nor its logically conjoined twin naturalism are new

ideas. Many ancient examples of these philosophies exist. For example, long before the birth of Christ, Cicero, who advocated naturalism, wrote:

For he who taught us all the rest has also taught us that the world was made by nature, without needing an artificer to construct it, and that the act of creation, which according to you cannot be performed without divine skill, is so easy, that nature will create, is creating, and has created worlds without number. You on the contrary cannot see how nature can achieve all this without the aide of some intelligence....²

Like many theologies — and yes materialism functions as a theology — materialism answers the “from design” question prematurely before looking at the data. Then the answer is imposed on the “to design” question. This may lead to confident statements about where nature, and particularly the living things in nature, came from, but these answers are not well founded in the study of nature itself.

Materialism and theologies/philosophies that answer the “*from design*” question first ultimately must resort to heroic measures to circumvent what the data most reasonably seem to show. For example, a certain parasitic wasp was cited by Darwin as evidence that nature is not the product of a beneficent God³; and it seems reasonable to agree with him. On the other hand, the neo-Darwinian claim that something like amoebas turned into wasps seems unbelievable. When one looks at molecular mechanisms within wasp cells, the claim that they resulted from purely natural causes seems equally untenable.

This is where Intelligent Design provides a useful contribution. Instead of trying to answer the metaphysical question first, ID asks: Is nature best explained in terms of natural or intelligent causes? This allows examination of the evidence without first imposing a “*from design*” answer on it. In some cases, it may be reasonable to say that things most likely resulted from natural causes. For example, in the absence of other evidence, it is logical to conclude that rains falls in part as a result of gravity, a natural law, and thus results from natural causes.

ID is not controversial because it suggests some natural phenomena may result from natural causes. Controversy erupts because in some rigorously defined cases, ID allows those not already committed to materialism to infer an intelligent cause for at least some of the molecular machines found in cells and also the information encoded in DNA. Thus ID in a limited set of cases suggests nature is not exclusively the result of natural causes. By directly contradicting naturalism, ID calls into question

materialist philosophy. ID argues strongly *to design* not because it starts out with the presupposition that nature is intelligently designed, but because this is in fact what nature appears to be.

Other than suggesting the existence of at least one intelligent designer, arguing *to design* does not tell us much about the Intelligent Designer. The “*from design*” argument is ultimately a more complex and nuanced question than the “*to design*” argument. Perhaps this is why answering it first with straightforward appearing philosophical claims before looking at the evidence is so tempting. Arguing in the absence of evidence greatly simplifies things. In reality, limited to the study of nature, learning much about the character of the Intelligent Designer can be confounding. On the one hand, there is evidence of incredible engineering at the molecular level and at higher levels — the designer must be a brilliant engineer. Nature is red in tooth and claw — the designer must be cruel. But there is much benevolence in the ways creatures interact — the designer must be kind. Some things, like human lower backs, are prone to failure — the designer must be incompetent. Gaining a single coherent picture of the Intelligent Designer from nature is problematic.

Arguing *to design* ultimately opens a Pandora’s box of puzzles. However, just because the answer to a question leads to further questions does not mean that the original answer is untrue. An example from the world of art illustrates this. The fact that Leonardo DaVinci painted the Mona Lisa with an enigmatic smile on her face opens up questions about why he painted her that way and how he did it. But questions don’t mean that he didn’t paint the Mona Lisa. In seeking answers to questions raised by DaVinci’s masterpiece, it seems reasonable to search out answers looking further afield than the painting itself. In this case history books, other paintings and geometry classes may all be useful additional sources of information about Leonardo and his paintings.

In reasoning *from design* in nature to the existence of an Intelligent Designer it also seems logical to ask many questions. But nature does not provide all the answers in simple easy-to-understand packages. Answering the question scientists ask about nature requires incredible effort, frequently over the course of a lifetime. Even after all this effort, too often the result is failure. Whether all the answers to questions about nature will ever be in hand is doubtful and thus a complete understanding of the Creator of nature based on nature alone seems beyond the reach of science. Even given a complete understanding of what nature is, the character of the Creator is unlikely to be fully evident. However, just as

one would look beyond the Mona Lisa to find answers about its creator, one is well served to look beyond nature alone for answers to the questions it raises.

Aside from nature itself, there are plenty of books that claim to provide information about the Creator. These range from “Life Itself” by Francis Crick and Leslie Orgel⁴ — in which they suggest that life was sent from outer space — to the Bible and it is ultimately the Bible that, with careful study, yields the most reasonable answers to those questions raised by the observation that much of nature, and particularly life, appears to be the product of Intelligent Design. That is not to pretend that there are not areas of tension between our current understanding of nature — science — and our current understanding of the Bible — theology. Many unanswered questions remain, but this is no reason to reject answers that are currently clear. Rather, this tension should be motivation to keep looking and studying. Life would be boring if one had all the answers in hand and they were all simple!

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ENDNOTES

1. Agence France-Presse. March 6, 2005. <http://story.news.yahoo.com/news?tmpl=story&cid=1540&e=12&u=/afp/ussciencereligion>.
2. Marcus Tullius Cicero c *De Natura Deorum*. <http://www.epicurus.net/en/deorum.html>.
3. Darwin CR. Letter to Asa Gray, May 22, 1860, reprinted in: Darwin F, editor. 1888. *The life and letters of Charles Darwin*. Facsimile reprint 2001. Honolulu: University Press of the Pacific, p 105.
4. Crick FHC, Orgel L. 1981. *Life Itself*. NY: Simon & Schuster.