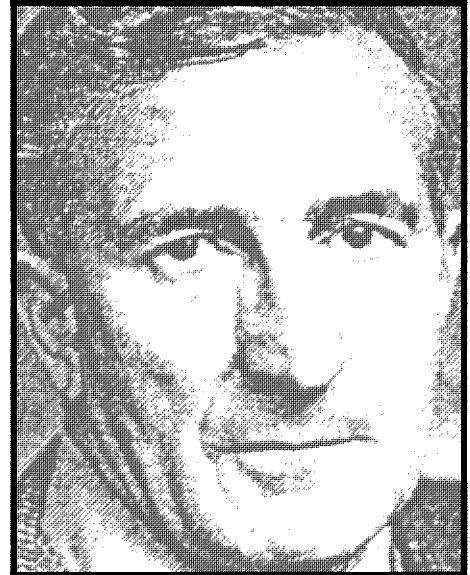


# ARGUMENTS TO DESIGN: WHY LIFE'S COMPLEXITY DOES NOT PROVE THE EXISTENCE OF GOD



ANTONY FLEW



It is high time and overtime to take a fresh, open-minded, sceptical look at arguments to design. It has to be *to* not *from* because such arguments — which have been and remain the most widely employed and effectively persuasive of all arguments for the existence and activities of a creator God — are supposed to be arguments from experience. Given agreement that something is in truth an artifact, then the inference to a designer or designers becomes immediate and altogether compelling. It is precisely and only in so far as there is dispute as to whether objects of some kind are indeed artifacts that there is need for argument to settle the question; and, in particular, for argument from experience.

## “BECAUSE SOMEONE WANTED IT TO HAPPEN THAT WAY”

Consider, for example, the classic statement from William Paley's *Natural Theology*; a treatise which Charles Darwin read during his student days at Cambridge:

Suppose I had found a watch upon the ground, and it should be inquired how the watch happened to be in that place, I should hardly answer that for anything I knew, the watch might always have been there. The watch must have had a maker, who comprehended its construction and designed its use. Every indication of contrivance, every manifestation of design which existed in the watch, exists in nature, with the dif-

ference on the side of nature of being greater or more, and that in a degree which exceeds all computation.

If I spotted a watch under the heather in Wester Ross, then I should certainly recognize it as an artifact; just as Robinson Crusoe, if he had found a watch lying on the beach of his island, would also have recognized that as an artifact. But we could both have also recognized as artifacts objects requiring far less skill and knowledge for their manufacture than watches; archaeologists, for instance, are doing it all the time. For what makes an artifact an artifact is the fact that it was made: not that it is something of mind-boggling complexity; but that it is something of a kind which does not grow on trees, and is not to be found in untrodden territories.

It has been wisely and relevantly said that “the simplest and most psychologically satisfying explanation of any observed phenomenon is that it happened that way because someone wanted it to happen that way.”<sup>1</sup> All arguments to conclusions so satisfactory ought to be suspect as possibly self-decluding exercises in wishful thinking. And even before Darwin a straightforward, supposedly empirical argument to design should not have appeared well founded. Remember that such arguments are presented as arguments of natural theology. They are, therefore, supposed to be addressed to natural reason, unenlightened by any prior supernatural revelation of beings undetectable by human sense and of their allegedly all pervasive ongoings. Yet, of all the sorts of objects known to us absent any such prior supernatural revelation, by far and away the most complicated and sophisticated are in fact not products of human industry but the producers of those products.

## FROM COMPLEXITY TO SUPERNATURAL CONTRIVANCE

Some lines from *Uncle Tom's Cabin* are more revealing here than perhaps the authoress herself recognized. For, unlike the Yankee Miss Ophelia, poor Topsy had never been theologically indoctrinated by either parent or preacher. Yet she had had abundant opportunity to learn from rural observation what in my young day urban fathers used to reveal to schoolbound sons as ‘the facts of life’. So it is Topsy who answers for unprejudiced common sense and common experience:

## Atheist Notes No. 5

ISSN 0953-7791 ISBN 1 85637 119 0

An occasional publication of the Libertarian Alliance,  
25 Chapter Chambers, Esterbrooke Street, London SW1P 4NN  
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This article was first published in *Cogito*, Summer 1992.

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The views expressed in this publication are those of its author, and not necessarily those of the Libertarian Alliance, its Committee, Advisory Council or subscribers.

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**FOR LIFE, LIBERTY AND PROPERTY**



‘Do you know who made you?’ ‘Nobody, as I know on,’ said the child with a short laugh. The idea appeared to amuse her considerably; for her eyes twinkled, and she added: ‘I s’pect I grow’d. Don’t thin nobody never made me.’<sup>2</sup>

Paley’s argument to design appears to proceed, as if this was a movement warranted by all our experience of nature: *from the observation* that organisms, and in particular human beings, which so far as we know are the most complex sort of objects in the universe, appear not to have been made but to have developed naturally; *to the conclusion* that these objects, and indeed all other sorts of objects also, must nevertheless have been made — must have been, that is to say, created supernaturally. A less popular, more technical, but equally unsound variation upon the same theme was developed centuries earlier by Aquinas. For the fifth of his supposed five ways of proving the existence of God takes off from:

... the guidedness of nature. An orderedness of actions to an end is observed in all bodies obeying natural law, even when they lack awareness ... Nothing however that lacks awareness tends to a goal, except under the direction of someone with awareness and with understanding; the arrow, for example, requires an archer. Everything in nature, therefore, is directed to its goal by someone with understanding, and this we call ‘God’.<sup>3</sup>

I shudder to imagine Topsy’s reaction had anyone drawn her attention to this argument. For Aquinas is confidently offering all those apparently teleological phenomena which to all appearance proceed without “the direction of someone with awareness and with understanding” as premises from which to derive the contradictory conclusion that “Everything in nature ... is directed to its goal by someone with understanding.” He too is taking as premises for his argument to (supernatural) design what ought instead to be seen — absent revelation to the contrary — as conclusions about what actually occurs, and hence what is naturally possible, without supernatural contrivance.

### GIGANTIC BEGGING OF THE QUESTION

Aquinas, like Aristotle, maintained that “An orderedness of actions to an end is observed in all bodies obeying natural laws, even when they lack awareness.” This form of orderedness towards an end, which we call teleological, is something which scientists today discern primarily if not exclusively in the development of living things. So it would be prudent to point, less comprehensively and hence less controversially, to the familiar teleological phenomena studied by biology; to make it not “all bodies”, without exception, but only all living things. Aquinas, however, proceeds from his own unqualified major premise to his minor:

Nothing that lacks awareness tends to a goal, except under the direction of someone with awareness, and with understanding; the arrow, for example, requires an archer.

Certainly an arrow requires an archer if it is to be shot. But what about all those other teleological phenomena which can be observed in the progress of organisms through their life cycles? At any rate to all appearance, as Topsy would have insisted, living things just grow. Certainly there are in these cases no observable archer-substitutes. So to conclude from the two premises presented by Aquinas that “Everything in nature ... is directed to its goal by someone with

understanding, and this we call God” is to conclude, on the basis of evidence largely if not exclusively contrary, that always and absolutely everywhere, even where there seems to be no human or other natural direction, all development is nevertheless always completely subordinate to and dependent upon supernatural control. This argument constitutes a most gigantic begging of the question, and a begging of it in defiance of the evidence actually offered in support of the conclusion thus illicitly attained. Such a performance by the goy Aquinas demands a Yiddish-type response: “And that you call an argument?”

### UNPLANNED AND UNINTENDED BY-PRODUCTS

Presumably it is in part by equivocating in the employment of such terms as ‘teleological’ and ‘goal-directed’ that Aquinas and others have continued to reach the conclusion desired: in one understanding these terms entail conscious direction; and in another they do not. Those outside a Thomist tradition are perhaps more likely to reach the same conclusion — that all such teleological phenomena must be the products of conscious direction — in another way. For to many people it has seemed and still seems, as it did to Descartes, self-evidently necessary: not only that nothing can possibly come about without some kind of cause; but also that those causes necessarily have to be somehow proportionate and adequate to their effects.<sup>4</sup>

Descartes himself spoke of perfection, rather than of adequacy or proportion. But our contemporaries are more inclined to urge that self-consciousness, the capacity for reasoning discourse, and various other characteristics, most of which so far as we know are the prerogatives of human beings, simply could not have emerged as the unplanned and unintended by-products of interactions between entities which could not themselves be significantly described as possessing any such characteristics. Such characteristics, it is sometimes added, cannot conceivably characterize anything purely and simply material.

But now remember Hume’s fundamental insight, that we do not and cannot know *a priori* that any particular thing or sort of thing either must be or cannot be the cause of any other particular thing or sort of thing. For anyone maintaining either that these characteristics cannot result from interactions between entities not themselves possessed of them, or that they cannot correctly be attributed to anything through and through material, the crucial question — as always absent special revelation — is how this is supposed to be known. For our only natural knowledge of such characteristics is obtained because, and in as much as, they are characteristics possessed by ourselves and by other members of that very special class of creatures of too, too solid flesh to which all of us belong.

### NOTES

1. Thomas Sowell, *Knowledge and Decisions*, Basic Books, New York, 1980, p. 97.
2. Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, Books Inc., New York, p. 206.
3. St Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Part I, Question 2.
4. These principles appear — as Axioms III and IV, respectively — in a very characteristic exercise included in Descartes’ replies to the second set of solicited Objections to his *Meditations on First Philosophy*: “Reasons which prove the existence of God and the distinction between the mind and the human body, arranged as geometry.” William Paley, *Natural Theology*, 2 Vols., Charles Knight, London, 1836.