WHO DESIGNED THE DESIGNER?: A DIALOGUE ON RICHARD DAWKINS'S *THE GOD DELUSION*
Douglas Groothuis

In The God Delusion*, Richard Dawkins argues that any designer capable of creating the universe and the things we find in it would have to be at least as complex as his creation. If complexity requires a designer, then the designer will require a designer, and so on to infinity. Rather than actually providing an explanation for complexity we see around us, those who invoke a cosmic designer merely postpone the problem. Here, Douglas Groothuis challenges Dawkins's argument.*

The following was overheard at a book discussion group, which took on Richard Dawkins's controversial best-seller, *The God Delusion*. Passions were high, but reasoning, nevertheless, was in evidence. Socrates would have been excited. Our interlocutors are Anthony, the atheist; Agnes, the agnostic; and Theo, the theist. We join the discussion in progress.

Anthony: . . . There is one argument against theism that Dawkins returns to repeatedly. It isn't new, but he uses it powerfully. And it can be stated simply, I think.

Theo: I think I know what is coming.

Anthony: Dawkins says that believers in God use God as a kind of philosophical trump card to explain certain aspects of nature. When they cannot explain something scientifically, they simply invoke God to end the argument. So, if we cannot explain something very complex and seemingly designed, like the rotary motor attached the back of the bacterium in the cell, God is invoked. I'm talking about the bacterial flagellum, the poster child for the Intelligent Design (or ID) movement. These people say, 'It was designed by an intelligence, not brought about by nature alone'.

Theo: That's right. ID thinkers call it 'the design inference.' It appeals to empirically observable facts – from biology and cosmology – and infers from these facts that the best explanation is design, rather than some combination of chance and necessity, which are unintelligent, nondirective causes.

Agnes: It sounds like these ID people are at least trying to give a scientific argument, aren't they?

Anthony: Agnes, it's a ruse, a charade really. Think of the Wizard of Oz. He seems to be a supernatural wizard, when in fact he is a mere human with special effects. As Dawkins says, ID is 'creationism in a cheap tuxedo.'

Theo: That smells like a false analogy, but go on. And watch out for *ad hominem* fallacies as well.

Anthony: I am happy to do so. I'm just getting warmed up. At an intuitive level, it seems that a designer is the most commonsensical explanation for some things in nature. If you see Mount Rushmore or 'John Loves Mary' written in the sands of a beach, you infer a designer. Fair enough.

Theo: That's right! You seem to get the design inference at a basic level, although it can be put more technically. You have a complex phenomenon that fits a specifiable pattern: either the faces of presidents (Mount Rushmore) or a known and meaningful sentence ('John loves Mary'). Design is, therefore, a warranted inference.

Anthony: Don't get your hopes up, Theo. We have to look for the man behind the curtain and there is no one there – only nature! You see, as Dawkins points out, any supposed designer would be a case of specified complex itself (or herself or himself). Therefore, that designer's existence would need to be explained by a previous designer. And that designer, being complex, would have to be explained by another designer, *ad infinitum*, *ad nauseum*. There is a vicious and infinite regress in which nothing at all gets explained. It goes on forever and that is philosophically nauseating.

Agnes: I see. It would be like jumping out of a bottomless pit!

Anthony: That's it exactly, Agnes. You see, the appeal to a designer does not really explain anything. It just seems to, since we explain things like sculptures and sentences on the basis of intelligent agents who design them. But the sculptors and sentence-writers are not the last word. Their own existence needs explanation. So, the ID examples are misleading. Atheism is superior, since it explains everything according to what is simple: particles and natural laws banged into existence about 14 billion years ago.

Theo: It's about time I slowed down this atheistic train and made some distinctions, Anthony. You are asserting that ID thinkers assume this principle: *any complex entity that is specified in its pattern requires a designer outside of itself as a sufficient explanation.*

Anthony: I suppose I am, and so does Dawkins. What's wrong with that?

Theo: Everything is wrong with that. It's a straw man fallacy. ID attempts to explain certain features of nature that indicate intelligence. These artifacts or systems are *finite and material* in nature. That is the *explanandum* if you will.

Anthony: Stop showing off, Theo. What does *explanandum* mean?

Theo: It simply means: the thing explained. The *explacans* is what does the explaining.

Anthony: OK. Very impressive. But I don't discern an argument as yet.

Theo: Be patient. The point is this: ID is not operating from the premise that everything that is complex requires an explanation outside itself. Rather, it attempts to explain certain *finite and material states of affairs* through the design inference. It does not operate on some general philosophical principle that anything at all that is complex requires an explanation outside itself.[1]

Agnes: Dawkins never mentioned this. Did he misrepresent the ID argument?

Theo: In spades, he did! Dawkins is not the most sympathetic interlocutor. Moreover, a bona fide explanation can be given even if the thing that explains something else is

not itself explained. For example, if I explain that Sam slipped because he stepped on a banana peel that is a genuine explanation. I do not have to explain how the banana peel got there!

Anthony: I suppose so. But what if the designer is a finite, material thing with specified complexity? Then it, too, requires an explanation.

Theo: Yes, but ID only tries to explain finite, material, complex states that are empirically observable. It leaves certain aspects of the designer or designers unspecified.

Anthony: Hah! So what kind of natural theology is that?! You don't even know who the designer is.

Agnes: Right. So even if I accept the design inference, I can still remain agnostic about the existence of the full-strength monotheistic God: personal, all-powerful, all-knowing, totally good, and so on.

Theo: Fine. ID doesn't claim to be a full-fledged program of natural theology, but rather an alternative means of explaining some things in nature according to design. It attempts to separate empirical science from a dogmatic commitment to philosophical materialism, as Philip Johnson puts it. If successful, a design inference is 'friendly toward theism,' as Stephen Meyer says.

Anthony: OK, but I'm still not convinced that the 'Who designed the designer' objection has been defeated. After all, the design inference is a science stopper. As Dawkins says, ID thinkers are lazy. They cannot find a plausible naturalistic explanation, so they say 'God did it' and science can just take a hike.

Agnes: Yes, that worries me. Even though I'm not committed to philosophical materialism – being an agnostic – I cannot support arguments that would stifle scientific investigation. That would be positively irrational and thwart progress.

Theo: Don't worry. I believe in scientific investigation, my friends. I'm happy for microscopes and telescopes and everything in between. I even thank God for them! You know that the leaders of the Scientific Revolution in Europe

were all theists, and mostly Christians. They were motivated to unlock nature by their commitment to theism. But that's another story. The design inference does not put an end to science or retard scientific possibilities. Rather, it claims that the design inference is the *best scientific explanation* for certain *empirical* facts. It does not rely on any uniquely religious presuppositions nor does it appeal to any sacred texts as premises or conclusions. However, it does challenge any *definition* of science that limits scientific explanations to only material, or unintelligent, causes.

Anthony: But we haven't observed any designer putting together the bacterial flagellum or any other supposedly designed system. It's about an invisible, theological, supernatural world – not something science can speak to at all. So, it *is* a science stopper. Theology replaces science, and we are worse off for it.

Theo: Not so fast. First, I said that the exact identity of the designing being is not fleshed out by ID arguments alone. It may be that there are solid philosophical arguments that show the designer is a monotheistic God, but that is not part of the design inference per se. Second, we don't have to observe something being designed to know that it is designed. No one observed the creation of the strange, haunting statues on Easter Island, but we infer – from their specified complexity – that they are the results of intelligent design.

Agnes: He got you, Anthony.

Anthony: Well, yes and no. We cannot directly observe the making of the statues, but we infer natural causes because those are the only kind we ever see.

Agnes: You are begging the question, Mr. Science – or I should say, Mr. Scientism. This is the question at issue: Is everything caused by merely natural forces or is design a better explanation for some natural things?

Anthony: I am not begging the question, but being scientific! Natural causes explain natural events in biology, chemistry, physics, and so on. Without this idea, science is dead in the water.

Theo: I wasn't there when they voted on that definition of science, Anthony. Moreover, as I said, the leaders of the Scientific Revolution didn't believe this either, but that didn't exactly retard their discoveries. Should not science better be understood as the giving of good and sufficient rational explanations for empirical objects and events? I agree that science cannot speak to the existence of angels, since they do not leave recognizable empirical patterns in nature; but our concern is the explanation of certain finite and material states that meet the criteria of specified complexity, as I said earlier.

Agnes: Anthony, I think Theo is making a levelheaded point. Your approach, and that of Dawkins, disallows any design explanation *in principle*. That is called methodological naturalism. But if you follow that principle, and if there is a designer out there, our science would never be allowed to detect it! It puts an epistemological veto on the whole thing. How is that rational or scientific? And. . .

Theo: It isn't, if I may jump in. Science needs a full toolbox, with intelligent design as one possible explanation for aspects of nature. If there is design in nature, methodological naturalism would consign us to perpetual ignorance because of a paucity of categories – material causes or nothing. I like your phrase 'epistemological veto,' Agnes. May I steal it in further arguments?

Agnes: By all means, if you duly cite me.

Anthony: Oh, so now you are both are teaming up against me.

Agnes: I'm just trying to follow out the argument. Now it's your turn to rebut Theo, Anthony.

Anthony: As Dawkins says, explanations should move from the simple to the complex, not the other way around. Whether or not a designer needs to be explained in terms of another designer, the designer would exhibit some complexity. But science always moves in a reductive direction: it explains things according to their most basic and simple parts. That rules out a designer.

Theo: I wasn't there when they voted on that epistemic principle either. In fact, there is no universal rule of science to that effect, anyway.

Anthony: Really? You are bluffing. Give an example to the contrary.

Theo: Fine. One can easily invoke something less than absolutely simple to explain something in nature. For example Ludwig Boltzmann's kinetic theory of heat required the idea of unobserved particles (which we now call atoms and molecules) to explain heat, but those particles themselves were not explained as absolutely simple. But Boltzmann's theory was superior to the old phenomenological approaches to heat. You cannot say that Boltzmann's theory was unscientific for that reason.[2]

Anthony: I guess I cannot – if what you are saying is right. But isn't that the goal of science: an absolutely simple, material explanation? It's that the ideal?

Theo: I don't see why, really. Maybe material explanations only go so far; they only do so much work scientifically. You see, ID attempts to explain material, finite, objects and events in nature by virtue of design. Since the designer – whoever or whatever it is – is not observable in nature, it is not subject to a design inference, which works only on empirical states of affairs.[3]

Anthony: But if the designer is finite and material, then it requires a design inference and there we go into the infinite regress pit!

Theo: Yes, if the designer is finite and material, that would be so. *But* since we are not observing the designer – but rather using the designer to explain what we observe – the problem does not arise. It is a mere hypothesis with no evidence one way or the other.

Agnes (jumping in as Anthony scratches his head in silence trying not to look flummoxed): This discussion of the philosophy of science, explanation, and evidence has been fascinating. But, Theo, I know you are interested in a lot more than this. So, can I ask you a more theological question?

Theo: You can ask, but I'm not sure I can answer.

Agnes: Good enough. Let's just say, for the sake of argument, that the designer of parts or all of nature is God. I mean the God of classical monotheism.

Theo: OK. Yes, that's what I believe, in fact, for a lot of different reasons.

Agnes: Even though that designing being is not, as you said before, finite or material, why can't we still ask the question: Where did this designer come from? Isn't it still a legitimate question from a broader metaphysical perspective?

Theo: It is a perfectly good question, and philosophically-oriented theists have a ready answer – two answers, in fact. First, God is understood in monotheism as self-existent. God does not depend on anything outside of himself for divine existence. That is, God is the ultimate explanation for the universe and its form, but to ask where God came from or who designed God from this perspective is a nonsense question, something like: 'What is north of the North Pole?' or 'What word do you use when no words will do?' So, Dawkins and Anthony to the contrary, this is a perfectly good concept. There is no infinite regress such that nothing gets explained. There is, rather, a *finite* regress to an *infinite* being; that is, a self-existence being. The technical term for self-existence is *aseity*. The Apostle Paul spoke of this when he said to the philosophers of Athens in Acts, chapter seventeen: 'The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by hands. And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything. Rather, he himself gives everyone life and breath and everything else'.

Agnes: You mean there are metaphysical concepts applied to God in the Bible? I thought it was all stories and mystical poetry.

Theo: There are metaphysical concepts, but let me go on. Second, there is a significant tradition in Christian theology that claims that God's existence is simple. That is, God has no parts. So, while God is the ultimate being in

existence, God is not composed of discrete sections or aspects, so to speak. If that view is correct, then God would not be complex at all, but perfectly simple. On Dawkins's reasoning, therefore, what is perfectly simple is supposed to be the end of the line in terms of explanation. Thus, Dawkins couldn't complain that an absolutely simple being needs to be explained on the basis of something simpler than itself.

Anthony: Well, that was almost a lecture in itself. Did you memorize that quote from Paul verbatim?

Theo: Yes, I did memorize the quote. I have thought quite a bit about this, and I was bursting with some theistic metaphysics that had to come out.

Anthony: Impressive – at least the memorization part. But I'm not sure I buy the simplicity of God idea. How could an all-powerful and all-knowing being be simple when he knows so much and can do so much?

Theo: You don't have to buy into simplicity necessarily, since *self-existence* is the main argument I want to present. But Dawkins never takes seriously the arguments for divine simplicity. He just ridicules it.

Agnes: I noticed that about the book in several places, especially when he treats the ontological argument.

Theo: I agree, but let's try to finish up on the design issue.

Anthony: Let's do that. I have another comment apart from the simplicity escape route. If God is self-existent, doesn't that mean that God's existence is a brute fact: the unexplained thing that explains everything else? And if so, why not just stop at the universe as a brute fact? As Bertrand Russell said in his 1948 debate with Friedrich Copleston, the universe is 'just there'.

Theo: Good question. First, theists are divided on this. Some, such as Oxford philosopher Richard Swinburne (whom Dawkins tries to belittle as a mere 'theologian'), argues that God's existence is a brute fact that cannot be explained. God might not have existed, but does, in fact, exist. Since God does exist, his existence explains

everything else. And without God, nothing ends up getting explained. Others, such as Saint Anselm (and me) take God's existence to be logically necessary. If that is right, then God must exist just as the law on noncontradiction must be true. Thus, God's existence would be self-explanatory, and not a brute fact that might have been otherwise. But God, of course, still ends up explaining the existence and design of the universe...

Anthony (breaking in): You certainly know your theology and metaphysics on this, but either way – and I cannot judge which account would be right on a theistic worldview – why not just leave it all at the level of the universe?

Theo: I was getting to that, but I had to set the table.

Anthony: Fine. Now serve the meal.

Theo: We are back to where we started on this, really. The design inference claims that given what we know about design and designers from the human realm, nature is simply not up to the task of explaining the bacterial flagellum, the information-rich nature of DNA, the fine-tuning of the universe, or many other things. But design is a 'can-do' principle, as William Dembski puts it.[4] We know how to spot design in archaeology, cryptography, SETI, and other areas. You need to find examples of specified complexity, which rules out chance and/or physical law as the most likely explanation. Unless you lock out design as a possible explanation in principle (as you attempted to do earlier), you cannot disallow it as a way to explain physical states. And since our conversation took a specifically theological turn (thanks to Agnes), an explanation beyond the universe (God), I tried to show that the idea of God as a self-existent being (simple or not) makes good sense and blocks Dawkins's move.

Anthony: But the idea of God contains a whole truckload of philosophical problems: the problem of evil, the coherence of the divine attributes, and more.

Theo: I know that very well, but it is irrelevant at this point. I have argued that ID gives a genuine scientific inference (it is not a theological presupposition or dogma) to

design in nature that is not defeated by Dawkins's 'who designed the designer?' move. Then we looked at God as the possible designer, in light of Agnes's question on accounting for the existence of God. Whatever other issues arise concerning the existence of God, you need to take seriously what we have argued so far.

Agnes: Anthony, Theo is right. Although I'm not ready to join a church, I find Theo's arguments pretty solid. At least he has given Dawkins a run for the money.

Anthony: Well, I'm not ready to join a church or even give up my atheism at this point, but I do see that there are plausible responses to Dawkins's dismissal of design on the basis the one argument we have been discussing. But aren't there perfectly good naturalistic explanation for the apparent design in nature, nevertheless, apart from Dawkins's problem we have been discussing?

Theo: That is exactly what we need talk about our next discussion, my friends.

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Notes
[1] See William Dembski, *The Design Revolution* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), pp. 197-199.

[2] *Ibid*, p. 198.

[3] *Ibid*, p. 199.

[4] See Dembski, *Design Revolution.*