

Pamphlets  
for the People

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No. 11

**DEITY AND  
DESIGN**



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## Deity and Design

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THE one certain thing about the history of the human intellect is that it runs from ignorance to knowledge. Man begins knowing nothing of his own nature or of the nature of the world in which he is living. He continues acquiring a little knowledge here and there, with his vision broadening and his understanding deepening as his knowledge increases. Had man commenced with but a very small fraction of the knowledge he now possesses, the present state of the human mind would be very different from what it is. But the method by which knowledge is acquired is of the slowest. It is by way of what is called trial and error. Blunders are made rapidly, to be corrected slowly; some of the most primitive errors are not, on a general scale, corrected even to-day. Man begins by believing, on what appears to be sound evidence, that the earth is flat, only to discover later that it is a sphere. He believes the sky to be a solid something and the heavenly bodies but a short distance away. His conclusions about himself are as fantastically wrong as those he makes about the world at large. He mistakes the nature of the diseases from which he suffers, and the causes of the things in which he delights. He is as ignorant of the nature of birth as he is of the cause of death. Thousands of generations pass before he takes the first faltering steps along the road of verifiable knowledge, and hundreds of thousands of generations have not sufficed to wipe out from the human intellect the influence of man's primitive blunders.

Prominent among these primitive misunderstandings is the belief that man is surrounded by hosts of

mysterious ghostly agencies that are afterwards given human form. These ghostly beings form the raw material from which the gods of the various religions are made, and they flourish best where knowledge is least. Of this there can be no question. Atheism, the absence of belief in gods, is a comparatively late phenomenon in history. It is the belief in gods that begins by being universal. And even among civilised peoples it is the least enlightened who are most certain about the existence of the gods. The religious scientist or philosopher says: "I believe"; the ignorant believer says: "I know."

Now it would indeed be strange if primitive man was right on the one thing concerning which exact knowledge is not to be gained, and wrong about all other things on which knowledge has either been, or bids fair to be, won. All civilized peoples reject the world-theories that the savage first formulates. Is it credible that with regard to gods he was at once and unmistakably correct?

It is useless saying that we do not accept the gods of the primitive world. In form, no; in essence, yes. The fact before us is that all ideas of gods can be traced to the earliest stages of human history. We have changed the names of the gods and their characteristics; we even worship them in a way that is often different from the primitive way; but there is an unbroken line of descent linking the gods of the most primitive peoples to those of modern man. We reject the world of the savage; but we still, in our churches, mosques, synagogues and temples, perpetuate the theories he built upon that world.

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In this pamphlet I am not concerned with all the so-called evidences that are put forth to prove the existence of a God. I say "so-called evidences," because they are not grounds upon which the belief in God rests; they are mere excuses why that belief

should be retained. Ninety per cent. of believers in God would not understand these "proofs." Roman Catholic propagandists lately, as one of the advertisements of the Church, have been booming the arguments in favour of a God as stated by Thomas Aquinas. But they usually preface their exposition—which is very often questionable—by the warning that the subject is difficult to understand. In the case of Roman Catholics I think we might well raise the percentage of those who do not understand the arguments to ninety-five per cent. In any case these metaphysical, mathematical, and philosophic arguments do not furnish the grounds upon which anyone believes in God. They are, as I have just said, nothing more than excuses framed for the purpose of hanging on to it. The belief in God is here because it is part of our social inheritance. We are born into an environment in which each newcomer finds the belief in God established, backed up by powerful institutions, with an army of trained advocates committed to its defence and to the destruction of everything that tends to weaken the belief. And behind all are the countless generations during which the belief in God lived on man's ignorance and fear.

In spite of the alleged "proofs" of the existence of God, belief in him, or it, does not grow in strength or certainty. These proofs do not prevent the number of avowed disbelievers increasing to such an extent that, whereas after Christians proclaiming for several generations that Atheism—real Atheism—does not exist, the defenders of godism are now shrieking against the growing number of Atheists, and there is a call to the religious world to enter upon a crusade against Atheism. The stage in which heresy meant little more than an exchange of one god for another has passed. It has become a case of acceptance or rejection of the idea of God, and the growth is with those who reject.

This is not the way in which proofs, real proofs, operate. A theory may have to battle long for



general or growing acceptance, but it grows provided it can produce evidence in its support. A hypothesis is stated, challenged, discussed, and finally rejected or accepted. On the question of the hypothesis of God the longer it is discussed the less it is believed. No wonder that the ideal attitude of the completely religious should be "on the knee," with eyes closed and mouths full of nothing but petitions and grossly fulsome praise. That is also the reason why every religious organization in the world is so keen upon capturing the child. The cry is: "If we lose the child we lose everything"—which is another way of saying that if we cannot implant a belief in God before the child is old enough to understand something of what it is being told, the belief may have to be given up altogether. Keep the idea of God away from the child and it will grow up an Atheist.

If there is a God, the evidence for his existence must be found in this world. We cannot start with another world and work back to this one. That is why the argument from design in nature is really fundamental to the belief in deity. It is implied in every argument in favour of Theism, although nowadays, in its simplest and most honest form, it is not so popular as it was. But to ordinary men and women it is still the decisive piece of evidence in favour of the existence of a God. And when ordinary men and women cease to believe in God, the class of religious philosophers who spend their time seeing by what subtleties of thought and tricks of language they can make the belief in deity appear intellectually respectable will cease to function.

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But let it be observed that we are concerned with the *existence* of God only. We are not concerned with whether he is good or bad; whether his alleged designs are commendable or not. One often finds people saying they cannot believe there is a God

because the works of nature are not cast in a benevolent mould. That has nothing to do with the essential issue, and proves only that Theists cannot claim a monopoly of defective logic. We are concerned with whether nature, in whole, or in part, shows any evidence of design.

My case is, first, the argument is fallacious in its structure; second, it assumes all that it sets out to prove, and begs the whole question by the language employed; and, third, the case against design in nature is, not merely that the evidence is inadequate, but that the evidence produced is completely irrelevant. If the same kind of evidence were produced in a court of law, there is not a judge in the country who would not dismiss it as having nothing whatever to do with the question at issue. I do not say that the argument from design, as stated, fails to convince; I say that *it is impossible to produce any kind of evidence that could persuade an impartial mind to believe in it.*

The argument from design professes to be one from analogy. John Stuart Mill, himself without a belief in God, thought the argument to be of a genuinely scientific character. The present Dean of St. Paul's, Dr Matthews, says that "the argument from design employs ideas which everyone possesses and thinks he understands; and, moreover, it seems evident to the simplest intelligence that if God exists he must be doing something, and therefore must be pursuing some ends and carrying out some purpose." (*The Purpose of God*, p. 13.) And Immanuel Kant said the argument from design was the oldest, the clearest and the best adapted to ordinary human reason. But as Kant proceeded to smash the argument into smithereens, it is evident that he had not a very flattering opinion of the quality of the reason displayed by the ordinary man.

But what is professedly an argument from analogy turns out to offer no analogy at all. A popular Non-conformist preacher, Dr. Leslie Weatherhead, whose

book, *Why do Men Suffer?* might be taken as a fine text-book of religious foolishness, repeats the old argument that if we were to find a number of letters so arranged that they formed words we should infer design in the arrangement. Agreed, but that is obviously because we know that letters and words and the arrangement of words are due to the design of man. The argument here is from experience. We infer that a certain conjunction of signs are designed because we know beforehand that such things are designed. But in the case of nature we have no such experience on which to build. We do not know that natural objects are made, we know of no one who makes natural objects. More, the very division of objects into natural and artificial is an admission that natural objects are not, *prima facie*, products of design at all. To constitute an analogy we need to have the same knowledge that natural objects are manufactured as we have that man's works are manufactured. Design is not found in nature; it is assumed. As Kant says, reason admires a wonder created by itself.

The Theist cannot move a step in his endeavour to prove design in nature without being guilty of the plainest of logical blunders. It is illustrated in the very language employed. Thus, Dr. Matthews cites a Roman Catholic priest as saying, "The adaptation of means to ends is an evident sign of an intelligent cause. Now nature offers on every side instances of adaptations of means to ends, hence it follows that nature is the work of an intelligent cause." Dr. Matthews does not like this way of putting the case, but his own reasoning shows that he is objecting more to the argument being stated plainly and concisely rather than to its substance. Nowadays it is dangerous to make one's religious reasoning so plain that everyone can understand the language used.

Consider. Nature, we are told, shows endless

adaptations of means to ends. But nature shows nothing of the kind—or, at least, that is the point to be proved, and it must not be taken for granted. If nature is full of adaptation of means to ends, then there is nothing further about which to dispute. For adaptation means the *conscious* adjustment of things or conditions to a desired consummation. To adapt a thing is to make it fit to do this or that, to serve this or that purpose. We adapt our conduct to the occasion, our language to the person we are addressing, planks of wood to the purpose we have in mind, and so forth. So, of course, if nature displays an adaptation of means to ends, then the case for an adapter is established.

But nature shows nothing of the kind. What nature provides is processes and results. That and nothing more. The structure of an animal and its relation to its environment, the outcome of a chemical combination, the falling of rain, the elevation of a mountain, these things, with all other natural phenomena, do not show an adaptation of means to ends, they show simply a process and its result. Nature exhibits the universal phenomenon of causation, and that is all. Processes and results looked like adaptations of means to ends so long as the movements of nature were believed to be the expression of the will of the gods. But when natural phenomena are regarded as the inevitable product of the properties of existence, such terms as "means" and "ends" are at best misleading, and in actual practice often deliberately dishonest. The situation was well expressed by the late W. H. Mallock:—

When we consider the movements of the starry heavens to-day, instead of feeling it to be wonderful that these are absolutely regular, we should feel it to be wonderful if they were ever anything else. We realize that the stars are not bodies which, unless they are made to move uniformly, would be floating in space motionless, or moving across it in random courses. We realize that they are bodies which, unless they moved uniformly, would not be bodies at all, and would exist neither in movement nor in



rest. We realize that order, instead of being the marvel of the universe, is the indispensable condition of its existence—that it is a physical platitude, not a divine paradox.

But there are still many who continue to marvel at the wisdom of God in so planning the universe that big rivers run by great towns, and that death comes at the end of life instead of in the middle of it. Divest the pleas of such men as the Rev. Dr. Matthews of their semi-philosophic jargon, reduce his illustrations to homely similes, and he is marveling at the wisdom of God who so planned things that the two extremities of a piece of wood should come at the ends instead of in the middle.

The trick is, after all, obvious. The Theist takes terms that can apply to sentient life alone, and applies them to the universe at large. He talks about means, that is, the deliberate planning to achieve certain ends, and then says that as there are means there must be ends. Having, unperceived, placed the rabbit in the hat, he is able to bring it forth to the admiration of his audience. The so-called adaptation of means to ends—properly, the relation of processes to results—is not something that can be picked out from phenomena as a whole as an illustration of divine wisdom; it is an expression of a universal truism. The product implies the process because it is the sum of the power of the factors expressed by it. It is a physical, a chemical, a biological platitude.

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I have hitherto followed the lines marked out by the Theist in his attempt to prove that there exists a "mind" behind natural phenomena, and that the universe as we have it is, at least generally, an evidence of a plan designed by this "mind." I have also pointed out that the only datum for such a conclusion is the universe we know. We must take that as a starting point. We can get neither behind it nor beyond it. We cannot start with God and deduce the

universe from his existence; we must start with the world as we know it, and deduce God from the world. And we can only do this by likening the universe as a product that has come into existence as part of the design of God, much as a table or a wireless-set comes into existence as part of the planning of a human "mind." But the conditions for doing this do not exist, and it is remarkable that in many cases critics of the design argument should so often have criticized it as though it were inconclusive. But the true line of criticism, the criticism that is absolutely fatal to the design argument is that *there is no logical possibility of deducing design from a study of natural phenomena*. And there is no other direction in which we can look for proof. The Theist has never yet managed to produce a case for design which upon examination might not rightly be dismissed as irrelevant to the point at issue.

In what way can we set about proving that a thing is a product of design? We cannot do this by showing that a process ends in a result, because every process ends in a result, and in every case the result is an expression of the process. If I throw a brick, it matters not whether the brick hits a man on the head and kills him, or if it breaks a window, or merely falls to the ground without hurting anyone or anything. In each case the distance the brick travels, the force of the impact on the head, the window, or the ground, remains the same, and not the most exact knowledge of these factors would enable anyone to say whether the result following the throwing of the brick was designed or not. Shakespeare is credited with having written a play called *King Lear*. But whether Shakespeare sat down with the deliberate intention of writing *Lear*, or whether the astral body of Bacon, or someone else, took possession of the body of Shakespeare during the writing of *Lear*, makes no difference whatever to the result. Again, an attendant on a sick man is handling a number of bottles, some of which contain medicine,

others a deadly poison. Instead of giving his patient the medicine, the poison is administered and the patient dies. An inquest is held, and whether the poison was given deliberately, or, as we say, by accident, there is the same sequence of cause and effect, of process and result. So one might multiply the illustrations indefinitely. No one observing the sequences could possibly say whether any of these unmistakable results were designed or not. One cannot in any of these cases logically infer design. The material for such a decision is not present.

Yet in each of these cases named we could prove design by *producing evidence of intention*. If when throwing the brick I intended to kill the man, I am guilty of murder. If I intend to poison, I am also guilty of murder. If there existed in the mind of Shakespeare a conception of the plan of *Lear* before writing, and if the play carried out that intention, then the play was designed. In every case the essential fact, without a knowledge of which it is impossible logically to assume design, is a knowledge of intention. We must know what was intended, and we must then compare the result with the intention, and note the measure of agreement that exists between the two. It is not enough to say that one man threw the brick, and that, if it had not been thrown, the other would not have been killed. It is not enough to say if the poison had not been given the patient would not have died. And it certainly is not enough to argue that the course of events can be traced from the time the brick left the hands of the first man until it struck the second one. That, as I have said, remains true in any case. The law is insistent that in such cases the intent must be established; and in this matter the law acts with scientific and philosophic wisdom.

Now in all the cases mentioned, and they are, of course, merely "samples from bulk," we look for design because we know that men do write plays, men do poison other men, and men do throw things

at each other with the purpose of inflicting bodily injury. We are using what is *known*, as a means of tackling, for the time being, the *unknown*. But our knowledge of world-builders, or universe designers, is not on all-fours with the cases named. We know nothing whatever about them, and therefore cannot reason from what is known to what is unknown in the hopes of including the unknown in the category of the known.

Second, assuming there to be a God, we have no means of knowing what his intentions were when he made the world—assuming that also. We cannot know what his intention was, and we cannot contrast that intention with the result. On the known facts, assuming God to exist, we have no means of deciding whether the world we have is part of his design or not. He might have set about creating and *intended* something different. You cannot, in short, start with a physical, with a natural fact, and reach intention. Yet if we are to prove purpose we must begin with intention, and having a knowledge of that see how far the product agrees with the design. It is the marriage of a psychical fact with a physical one that alone can demonstrate intention, or design. Mere agreement of the “end” with the “means” proves nothing at all. The end is the means brought to fruition. The fundamental objection to the argument from design is that it is completely irrelevant.

The belief in God is not therefore based on the perception of design in nature. Belief in design in nature is based upon the belief in God. Things are as they are whether there is a God or not. Logically, to believe in design one must start with God. He, or it, is not a conclusion but a datum. You may begin by assuming a creator, and then say he did this or that; but you cannot logically say that because certain things exist, therefore there is a God who made them. God is an assumption, not a conclusion.



And it is an assumption that explains nothing. If I may quote from my book, *Theism or Atheism*:—

To warrant a logical belief in design, in nature, three things are essential. First, one must assume that God exists. Second, one must take it for granted that one has a knowledge of the intention in the mind of the deity before the alleged design is brought into existence. Finally, one must be able to compare the result with the intention and demonstrate their agreement. But the impossibility of knowing the first two is apparent. And without the first two the third is of no value whatever. For we have no means of reaching the first except through the third. And until we get to the first we cannot make use of the third. We are thus in a hopeless impasse. No examination of nature can lead back to God because we lack the necessary starting point. All the volumes that have been written and all the sermons that have been preached depicting the wisdom of organic structures are so much waste of time and breath. They prove nothing, and can prove nothing. They assume at the beginning all they require at the end. Their God is not something reached by way of inference. It is something assumed at the very outset.

Finally, if there be a designing mind behind or in nature, then we have a right to expect unity. The products of the design should, so to speak, dovetail into each other. A plan implies this. A gun so designed as to kill the one who fired it and the one at whom it was aimed would be evidence only of the action of a lunatic or a criminal. When we say we find evidence of a design we at least imply the presence of an element of unity. What do we find?

Taking the animal world as a whole, what strikes the observer, even the religious observer, is the fact of the antagonisms existing in nature. These are so obvious that religious opinion invented a devil in order to account for them. And one of the arguments used by religious people to justify the belief in a future life is that God has created another world in which the injustices and blunders of this life may be corrected.

For his case the Theist requires co-operative

action in nature. That does exist among the social animals, but only as regards the individuals within the group, and even there in a very imperfect form. But taking animal life, I do not know of any instance where it can truthfully be said that different species of animals are designed so as to help each other. It is probable that some exceptions to this might be found in the relations between insects and flowers, but the animal world certainly provides none. The carnivora not only live on the herbivora, but they live, when and where they can, on each other. And God, if we may use Theistic language, prepares for this, by, on the one hand, so equipping the one that it may often seize its prey, and the other, that it may often escape. And when we speak of a creation that brings an animal into greater harmony with its environment, it must not be forgotten that the greater harmony, the perfection of the "adaptation" at which the Theist is lost in admiration, is often the condition of the destruction of other animals. If each were equally well adapted one of the competing species would die out. If, therefore, we are to look for design in nature we can, at most, see only the manifestations of a mind that takes a delight in destroying on the one hand what has been built upon the other.

There is also the myriads of parasites, as clear evidence of design as anything, that live by the infection and the destruction of forms of life "higher" than their own. Of the number of animals born only a very small proportion can ever hope to reach maturity. If we reckon the number of spermatozoa that are "created" then the number of those that live are ridiculously small. The number would be one in millions.

Is there any difference when we come to man? With profound egotism the Theist argues that the process of evolution is justified because it has produced him. But with both structure and feeling there is the same suicidal fact before us. Of the

human structure it would seem that for every step man has taken away from mere animal nature God has laid a trap and provided a penalty. If man will walk upright then he must be prepared for a greater liability to hernia. If he will live in cities he must pay the price in a greater liability to tuberculosis. If he will leave his animal brothers behind him, he must bear reminders of them in the shape of a useless coating of hair that helps to contract various diseases, a rudimentary second stomach that provides the occasion for appendicitis, rudimentary "wisdom teeth" that give a chance for mental disease. It has been calculated that man carries about with him over one hundred rudimentary structures, each absorbing energy and giving nothing in return.

So one might go on. Nature taken from the point of view most favourable to the Theist gives us no picture of unified design. Put aside the impossibility of providing a logical case for the inferring of design in nature, it remains that the only conception we can have of a designer is, as W. H. Mallock, a staunch Roman Catholic, has said, that of "a scatter-brained, semi-powerful, semi-impotent monster . . . kicking his heels in the sky, not perhaps bent on mischief, but indifferent to the fact that he is causing it."

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