THE DESIGN ARGUMENT AND INTUITION

WILFORD PAUL

In his *Metaphysics*[1] Richard Taylor presents what he speaks of as a version of the traditional design argument for God's existence. After noting that there is an abundant literature on this classical proof and that most of the arguments in this literature are inconclusive, he says "there is, however, one way of expressing the argument from design which has a peculiarly rational twist and which has, moreover, been hardly more than dimly perceived by most of those who have considered the subject".

It has been common to concentrate attention upon organic structures of great complexity and delicacy, like the human eye. This practice was common in Hume's day (to go no further back), and was especially common in the first half of the nineteenth century. Hume was, of course, skeptical about the overall value of the argument, but he was one with the design theologians in feeling that such "curious adaptations of means to ends" in nature (as e.g., the human eye) do indeed "ravish into admiration all men who have ever contemplated them."[2] But Taylor's chief interest lies in a different direction. He specifies that his version of, or manner of expressing, the proof from teleology "rests upon the consideration that our own faculties of sense and cognition are not only remarkable in themselves but are in fact relied upon by us for the discovery of truth." What is implied by this fact? Taylor's answer to this question constitutes the main thrust of his argument. He maintains that it is irrational *both* to believe our sensory and cognitive faculties had a natural, nonpurposeful origin *and* that they reveal truths respecting matters other than themselves.[3] He says that the idea he wants to share "is not easy to grasp without misunderstanding" and that it is "best to approach it stepwise by considering first an example."

Suppose you are riding in a railway coach and, looking out the window, see a group of stones so arranged as to form the sentence: "The British Railways Welcomes You to Wales." The thought is not likely to enter your mind that these stones just happen accidentally to exhibit this pattern. You would feel certain they were purposefully arranged to convey the message. (Hereafter, I'll refer to this as the stone-message.) Yet their arrangement does not, in itself, prove purpose. It is logically possible the arrangement of stones resulted from purposeless operations of inanimate nature: The "mere fact [writes Taylor] that something has an interesting or striking shape or pattern, and thus *seems* purposefully arranged, is no proof that it is. There might always be some other explanation." Snow-flakes, for instance, exhibit remarkable designs under magnification. But

this phenomenon is commonly thought to be satisfactorily explained in physico-chemical terms. Similarly, the organs of our bodies seem purposefully constructed both in themselves and in their interrelations. Yet these organs and their relationships are, of course, capable of being explained in terms of nonpurposeful concepts such as chance variation, natural selection, and the like. And indeed this sort of explanation is preferred by many learned men.

Thus we see that the design argument, as usually expressed, is a weak argument because the phenomena to which it gives attention are always capable of other explanations, more or less plausible, than the one the teleological argument endeavors to establish. It is logically possible that all apparently purposeful arrangements are in fact the result of nonpurposeful forces. And this, of course, includes the stone-message. But there is an important point in all this that Taylor says it is easy to overlook.

> ... *if*, upon seeing from the train window a group of stones arranged as described, you were to conclude that you were entering Wales, and *if* your sole reason for thinking this, whether it was in fact good evidence or not, was that the stones were so arranged, *then* you could not, consistently with that, suppose that the arrangement of the stones was accidental. You would, in fact, be presupposing that they were arranged that way by an intelligent and purposeful being or beings, for the purpose of conveying a certain message having nothing to do with the stones themselves.[4]

Your reliance upon the message implies your belief that the stones were used by intelligence as a means to convey information. Or, as Taylor prefers to express it: It "would be *irrational* for you to regard the arrangement of the stones as evidence that you were entering Wales, and at the same time to suppose that they might have come to have that arrangement accidentally, that is, as the result of the ordinary interactions of natural or physical forces." And Taylor, coming now to his main point, suggests that what is true respecting the stone-message is also true respecting the messages of our sensory and cognitive faculties; namely, that "it would be irrational for one to say *both* that his sensory and cognitive faculties had a natural, nonpurposeful origin and *also* that they reveal some truth with respect to something other than themselves, something that is not merely inferred from them."[5] Before considering his main point about our sensory and cognitive faculties, let us see what is involved in his pronouncements about the stone-message.

The first point that may be noted is that Taylor excludes all considerations of probability. He seems to be interested only in a logical demand, apparently in necessary proof. But such is foreign to the traditional form of the design argument. The conclusion this argument endeavors to establish, by a direct appeal to evidence, or what is taken to such, is that God's existence is probable. Taylor, however, occupies himself not with a

proof of God's existence but with something else: the logic of belief or, more properly perhaps, the psychology of belief. His comments, however valuable, bear only indirectly upon the design argument. Hence it is questionable whether Taylor really gives us a version, or as he says, an expression of, the argument from design.

Secondly, Taylor says that if our "sole reason" for believing we were entering Wales was the arrangement of the particular group of stones in question, then we could not consistently also suppose the arrangement was the result of accident only. True, one could not consistently so suppose— experience being what it is. But how could our sole reason for belief be confined to this one stone-message? Had we no past experience of signs and sign-makers to bring to bear upon this particular instance, the pattern of stones on the hillside would be little more than a curiosity to us. Experience would first have to provide a general context of meaning for signs of this sort before the question of believing its message would be significant.

It would indeed be irrational to believe the stone-message and also believe its maker as dumb as, say, the law of gravity. Suppose (to vary Taylor's example a bit) I am lost in the desert, and I come upon a stone which appears to have an arrow etched upon it. My hopes arise because this might mean an oasis is ahead. But, upon looking closer, I see clearly that what I first thought was an artifact is really only what might be called a "natural fact"; that is, a number of cracks in the stone caused by natural, nonpurposeful forces—in which case I would conclude that I am as lost as ever. But I would tend to think of this conclusion as an inductive inference from past experience, the very experience Taylor has little or no interest in.

Possibly, then, the real motivation for Taylor's argument is some kind of intuitive conviction which he believes the mind, upon the occasion of certain experiences, *gives to* experience. Maybe this conviction is some form of the old dictum that something cannot come from nothing. And, *in the last analysis*, it is in light of this intuition that it becomes irrational both to believe the stone-message and also believe all agencies responsible for its existence were totally without intelligence. Such a belief generates the absurdity that the purposeful proceeds from the purposeless. The formula, variously expressed, that the more cannot come from the less—"*Becoming* depends upon being," etc., has, of course, appealed to many minds. It is said, for instance, that all of Aquinas' five ways are really variations of one "general proof," one "principle of Principles": "The Greater Cannot Proceed from the Less."[6]

Yet Taylor expressly admits that *it is possible* that the stone-message could have come about by accident. It would be irrational both to trust

the sign and also to believe its origin accidental. But it would not be irrational both to trust the sign and to believe in the possibility of its having a completely fortuitous origin. The intuition I am imagining might be in the back of Taylor's mind must, then, yield probability only. It would be irrational to set aside what is known, by immediate intuition, to be highly probable as a matter of fact, in favor of a mere abstract possibility—however real this possibility, as such, might be conceived to be. Perhaps Taylor would be able to give us a probability argument, of sorts, after all. But this certainly need not detain us. What is clear is how radically problematical is Taylor's apparent supposition that a judgment respecting a matter of fact of the character described (the one involving the stone-message) can be made on the spot when this matter of fact functions as the sole reason for the judgment. I now turn to his final point.

Just as it would be irrational for someone to hold both that the pattern of stones on the hillside had a non-purposeful origin and that they reveal a truth about something other than themselves; so, according to Taylor, it would be irrational for anyone to hold both that his sense organs and cognitive faculties had a non-purposeful origin and that they reveal some truth about something other than themselves:

> *If* [Taylor writes] their origin can be entirely accounted for in terms of chance variations, natural selection, and so on, without supposing that they embody and express the purposes of some creative being, then the most that we can say of them is that they exist, that they are complex and wondrous in their construction, and are perhaps in other respects interesting and remarkable. We cannot say that they are, entirely by themselves, reliable guides to any truth whatever, save only what can be inferred from their own structure and arrangement. If, on the other hand, we do assume that they are guides to some truths having nothing to do with themselves, then it is difficult to see how we can, consistently with that supposition, believe them to have arisen by accident, or by the ordinary workings of purposeless forces, even over ages of time.[7]

We surely could not say our sensory and cognitive faculties are reliable guides to any truth, if we viewed them "entirely by themselves." But I don't know just what we have left that is of real importance to the question of reliability if we eliminate all past experiences of learning. Had one ever so much knowledge about the structure and arrangement of parts of guns, he would still have a most deficient knowledge of the ordinary meaning of "reliable gun" had he no experience of guns in action. The truth is that I have learned to trust my sensory and cognitive faculties to a greater or less degree—whatever origin they may have had. Hence I do not see how my trust in these faculties—this fact alone—bears *directly* upon the question of origins and the question of theism.

One philosopher, E. D. Klemke, has suspected, as I have, that an

intuition of some sort furnishes the underlying motivation for Taylor's argument. Klemke says that "perhaps" Taylor holds the following proposition to be "intuitively or self-evidently true:"

> If our sensory and cognitive faculties can be accounted for purely in terms of natural selection, etc., without supposing that they express the purpose of a god, then although we can marvel at their construction, we cannot say that they are, by themselves, reliable guides to any truth 'save only what can be inferred from their own structure and arrangement.'

Klemke says that if this is Taylor's feeling, he (Klemke) is ready with a contrary one: "On the contrary, I find it perfectly conceivable that our sensory and cognitive faculties arose through natural non-purposeful forces and that they are, by themselves, reliable guides to truths about things other than themselves; to assert otherwise without further *reasons* is sheer dogmatism."[8]

One of Taylor's first points was that the organic phenomena upon which the traditional form of the design argument concentrated was always capable of a contrary interpretation of comparable cogency, at least to certain minds. We now see that Taylor's intuition, if this be the real basis of his argument (otherwise he deals with second-level evidence), is countered by a contrary intuition or at least a contrary "conceivability." Hence Taylor may have left the design argument in the same predicament he found it. And doubtless this is the predicament it is destined to retain, as far as philosophy is concerned. And the same is true of all the other classical theistic proofs. To every one of them, a contrary interpretation, more or less plausible, can be set out. Even Hartshorne, after devoting almost a half-century of study to the ontological argument, admits that "an element of faith is perhaps needed" to dispel the possibility that the notion of god is meaningless.[9] But perhaps intuitions or conceivabilities (strictly, these two terms are, of course, quite different in meaning) are the final arbiters in the area of speculation we are discussing. What Klemke finds conceivable is not found to be so easily conceivable by other minds.[10]

Perhaps men like Mill have done the most that can be done for the design argument—in its usual form where direct appeal is made evidence.[11] As long as there are resemblances between artifacts (as a telescope) and "natural facts" (as a human eye), there must remain *some* probability for theism. It has a right to a place among the competing metaphysical theories. And it isn't clear how any metaphysical theory could be conclusively established in an altogether convincing manner. But if we admit [12] that the design argument, though certainly of some value, is nevertheless a weak argument, can it be of any use to religion? And even if the design argument were shown to be a strong argument, is a "probable God" any God at all for the man of religion? Hocking has said, and Taylor

62

might be inclined to agree with him, that "God can be of any worth to man only in so far as he is a *known* God."[13] If so, how could an argument of low probability be of any service to the man of religion?

Insofar as *an argument* functions at all in common religious consciousness (and I am far from saying arguments do not function here), the design argument could be of religious service in this way: the probability, even if relatively diminutive in itself, could serve as a firm foundation for faith and hope. And these latter could fill the gap, span the distance—doubtless a considerable distance—between a rational probability and religious emotive certainty. I think something like this really happens in religious experience. What is required, as it were, is a firm "launching pad" that can support and guide the rocket.

But, from the viewpoint of the design argument, it surely needs all the help it can get. And if Taylor's "expression" of it—which, as he says, has "a peculiarly rational twist" to it—can give aid, there are those who would applaud his efforts. I have indicated that, however valuable his observations may be in themselves, I can't see that he comes directly to grips with the problem of God's existence. Perhaps he will be able to widen and strengthen the argument he sketches so briefly in the concluding pages of his *Metaphysics.*

NOTES

[1] Richard Taylor, *Metaphysics* (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall), p. 96.

[2] David Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion,* Part II.

[3] Taylor, *op. cit.*, p. 100.

[4] *Ibid.*, p. 97.

[5] *Ibid.*, pp. 100-101.

[6] Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange, *God, His Existence and His Nature*, 2 vols., trans. D. B. Rose (St. Louis: B. Herder Book Co., 1934-36), 1.252.

[7] Taylor, *op. cit.*, p. 101.

[8] E. D. Klemke, "The Argument from Design," *Ratio* II (1969), p. 106.

[9] Charles Hartshorne, *Anselm's Discovery*, (LaSalle, Ill.: Open Court Publishing Co., 1965), p. 53.

[10] Cf. R. G. Swinburne, "The Argument from Design," *Philosophy* 43 (1968): p. 203. He favors the notion "that there can be no other possible explanation for the operation of natural laws than the activity of a god." And cf. Charles Hartshorne, *The Logic of Perfection* (LaSalle, Ill.: Open Court Publishing Co., 1962), p. xiv: "Our

63

knowledge of God is infinitesimal. Nevertheless it is, I am persuaded, the only adequate organizing principle of our life and thought."

[11] See J. S. Mill's *Theism*, ed. Richard Taylor (new York: Liberal Arts Press, 1957).

[12] As does Swinburne for instance. See p. 211 of his article cited in note ten above: The design argument, "though perhaps weak," yet "has some force."

[13] William Ernest Hocking, *The Meaning of God in Human Experience* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1963), p. 215. Hocking favors the ontological argument. Cf. p. 302: In "finding God as a necessary object of experience, have we not, in a way sufficient and decisive, proved his existence?" Evidently Hocking feels the ontological argument is the only proof that can give us a known God.

New Mexico State University