

**THE CHALLENGE OF THE
UNIVERSE: A POPULAR
RESTATEMENT OF THE
ARGUMENT FROM DESIGN**

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The challenge of the universe: a popular restatement of the argument from design by Charles J. Shebbeare

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A POPULAR RESTATEMENT OF THE
ARGUMENT FROM DESIGN

BY THE

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<p>"If there were a God, no evil would be found in the world. But evil is found in the world. Therefore there is no God." This argument has seemed to some minds to gain new cogency from the events of the war. But is it really unanswerable? Perhaps not—if we reflect that the conquest of evil, through patience, courage, and other efforts of a rational will, is among the highest of rational acts; and thus that a Universe in which there was no evil to be conquered could not conceivably attain perfection.</p>	
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<p>If we once see that the existence of evil is not an obviously unanswerable objection to religious faith, then it is worth our while to inquire candidly whether "Naturalism" or Christianity best meets the intellectual challenge which the Universe presents to us. Mr. Bertrand Russell has written a noble description of a religion of freedom based upon Naturalism and an "unyielding despair." We must face the questions which his essay raises. Does the constitution of the Universe take any account of man as such, and of his moral and spiritual interests? Or is human life but the accidental outcome of purely mechanical forces? Is there, outside man and human efforts, any Power—personal or impersonal, conscious or unconscious—which "makes for righteousness" and spiritual progress?</p>	
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<p>The favourite popular argument, in defence of religious hope, is that which is known as the "Argument from Design," or sometimes as the "Teleological Proof." This argument points to the orderliness of Nature. There are in Nature many qualities which, if we found them in the work of man, we should regard as results of intelligence: the same sort of qualities as distinguish the work of an adult from that of a child, the work of a sane man from that of a lunatic, the work of an artist from that of a mere craftsman. Nature exhibits uniformity even where there is no direct</p>	

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mechanical contact to explain this. Each sheep is physically separate from the other members of the flock: yet all are going through similar processes of nutrition. In every ear of corn matter is being collected and arranged in a similar complex structure. This uniformity cannot be taken as a matter of course, of which the explanation is obvious. Nor can it be a mere accident. Thus—it is argued—the world looks so like a plan or design that it must surely be one. But if the world is the result of design, does not this imply that it is the work of a Designer?

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This popular argument seeks, in effect, to show that the world is governed (1) by general principles, and therefore (2) by a Conscious Mind in which those principles dwell. It is, however, an error to assume that government by principles necessarily implies government by a Mind. The example of Geometry would be enough by itself to disprove this assumption. Let us first ask, then—not "Is the world governed by a God?" nor "Is it governed by principles of wisdom?"—but "Is it governed by general principles at all?" The value of the popular argument lies in the fact that it points to certain phenomena which become highly significant if they are considered together: viz. (1) the pervading *regularity* of Nature; (2) the appearance of *co-operation* among the parts of plants and animals; (3) the delicate and complex schemes of *form* and *colour* which physical processes produce; and (4) certain facts which suggest that the Universe is a *single system*, a rationally ordered Whole. There are many cases in Nature where a large number of bodies or particles behave according to one single formula or rule of action. It is a common evasion to say that formulas, rules, laws, principles dwell in our minds only, and except in the case of human agency exercise no influence upon the outside world. Yet we all assume in our predictions—e.g. of eclipses, of the fall of a stone left without support, of the regular return of night and morning, winter and spring—that we are dealing in each case with a principle of regularity to which, in the future as in the past, events in the outside world must conform. Can we then deny that we regard the principles as really governing the phenomena? But granted that Nature is governed by principles, are the principles that govern Nature purely mechanical in character? Are the colour-schemes of the landscape beautiful by mere accident? Are they the mere by-product of mechanical uniformity? Or is Nature in some sense governed by specifically aesthetic principles? It is not unreasonable to ask questions of this sort, nor to maintain that to the unphilosophic mind—if to no other—the readiest explanation of the artistic appearance of the Universe is that the Universe is in truth the work of a divine architect.

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Before we attempt to restate this argument in the light of the criticisms directed against it in modern times, it is well to recall how it has been formulated by distinguished thinkers in the past, e.g. Socrates, Aristotle, Cicero, St. Thomas Aquinas.

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It is also well to recall the argument which Kant and others have sought to substitute for it, viz. the "Moral Proof" of God's Existence. This latter argument can be so stated as (1) to furnish in itself a direct refutation of "Naturalism"; (2) to form an important element in that very restatement of the Argument from Design of which we are in search. Naturalism denies that the laws of the Universe take account of the spiritual interests of man. We find, however, that there are laws relating directly to our most important spiritual interest of all, our knowledge of Right and Wrong. We find, first, that there are fundamental moral principles which we can all be made to see and accept if only they are put before us with sufficient clearness. Further, we find that the Moral Ideal is a connected Whole, and that our minds are so constituted that, if they are familiarized with certain of the leading principles of morality, they pass on from these by a natural sense of affinity to other elements in the Moral Ideal as occasion brings them to light. We trust the man of good feeling to act rightly in quite novel circumstances. The "Law" on which we rely is that familiarity with right moral principles breeds general sympathy with the true Moral Ideal. This is the law on which we base our educational methods: and this law cannot be successfully explained away by any naturalistic hypothesis. These hypotheses, if carried out consistently, have to treat our moral convictions as *illusion*, and we all know in our hearts that they are *not* illusion.

Again, an ideal for human conduct presupposes some ideal for the Universe at large. It is a law that the mind of man is so constituted as to recognize, in its main outlines, the true ideal for the Universe when this ideal is clearly set before us. To this truth the literature of all ages bears witness. The union of virtue and happiness in a setting of physical uniformity and aesthetic beauty, has called forth the praises of poets from the days of the Jewish Psalmists to our own.

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The fundamental thought which the popular argument embodies may now be reformulated as follows:

(I) The basis both of our everyday predictions of natural events, and of those made by systematic science, is to be found in the belief that the world is in some sense a rational Whole governed by a rational system of laws, i.e. in the

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belief that reality conforms to a rational standard or ideal. No sane man believes in a world which conflicts with the ideal which he himself seriously accepts. It is for this reason that we positively reject (though we can have no direct proof that they are untrue) the myths of Paganism and all similar absurdities. For what other grounds of rejection can we have? It is easy to refute the error that our rejection of the myths and our prediction of eclipses, etc., is due to the unaided influence of past experience. (See Mr. Russell's parable of the chicken, *Problems of Philosophy*, p. 98.)

But (II) we have seen already that one of the laws of Nature is that men's minds tend towards a reasonable conception of what the Universe ought to be. (See chapter vi.)

If this is so, then we may ask (III) whether we could possibly call a system of laws *rational*, which prescribed, on the one hand, that men should tend towards a true conception of what the Universe ought to be, and yet prescribed, on the other hand, that this conception should be quite left out of account in the actual ordering of the Universe itself? If a conscious Creator produced such a world—deliberately implanting in men high aspirations and yet dooming these aspirations to ultimate disappointment—we should conceive such a Creator, not as God, but as a mischievous fiend. Such a plan would exhibit the height of irrational perverseness. But if such a plan is irrational when consciously framed and carried out, this is because it is irrational in itself. If then we are right in attributing to the Universe a general rationality (in the sense in which rationality is an object of admiration) and in basing our predictions upon this belief (as we shall find that we do), then the world cannot be the perversely ordered scheme we have just imagined. The conclusion suggested is that the System of Laws which governs the Universe and which, among other things, implants a rational ideal as (in spite of much incidental difference of opinion) a fixed element in the human mind, also orders the Universe at large in accordance therewith. Thus the admission that there is in the human mind a tendency to form correct judgments about good and evil may be regarded—as unbelievers have themselves often regarded it—as the “thin end” of the Theistic or Optimistic “wedge.”

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But is this notion of a world so ordered as to fulfil rational ends, and to embody a rational ideal, consistent with the pursuit of Physical Science? Can the notion of physical “law” and moral and aesthetic “ends” be united in a single system? The answer is (1) that a world whose nature is to embody an ideal must in many respects resemble a work of art, (2) that the greatest works of art exhibit prominently the element of *regularity*, (3) that, if the Universe resembles these works of art in this respect, its regularity can be made the object of special study, its elements can be

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tabulated, its uniformities recorded even by those who are quite blind to the higher ends which it is achieving. Some of the best results in Nature have been attained through the struggle for existence; but this does not prove that their attainment was left to chance. Even the believer who regards Nature as we know it as but a subordinate part of God's creation—playing its part within a comprehensive teleological system or "Kingdom of Ends"—may yet quite consistently make Nature and its uniformities the object of his inquiries.

On the other hand, while the success of Natural Science is no argument against a teleological theory of the Universe, the discovery of one single teleological law is a complete refutation of "Naturalism."

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Can we, then, find any unquestionable teleological laws—i.e. laws which prescribe the realization in Nature of such "ends" as beauty, life, knowledge, or are all the laws of Nature purely mechanical? We have already recognized one non-mechanical law in chapter vi. But does this stand alone or are there others? Is there, e.g., in the particles of which a plant or animal is composed any tendency towards organic co-operation as such? Is it a law, in regard to these particles, that in certain given conditions just those relative movements take place which conduce to the life and health of the whole? It should be noticed (1) that actual co-ordination where there is no co-ordinating principle is accident pure and simple. If the parts of which plants and animals are formed have no tendency towards organic co-operation as such—just as a civilian crowd may have no tendency towards military co-operation—organic co-operation if it occurs will be either due to accident or to some external influence. It is no more likely that we should meet with a long succession of lucky accidents in botany than in warfare. Thus, in the case of the plant, we seem driven to choose between the conception of an external Creator or Artificer, on the one hand, or, on the other hand, of the influence of an unconscious inward * principle of life, co-ordinating the various processes of which the history of the plant consists. We may notice (2) that according to Darwin: "Science as yet throws no light on the essence or origin of life" (*Origin of Species*, chapter xv; cf. chapter viii). Darwin, therefore, does not profess to have explained, or explained away, the difference between inorganic existence and organic life.

* If some one objects, "You have not exhausted all the possibilities: Why not (A) an external unconscious, or (B) an internal conscious, principle?" The answer must be, "Not B, because the parts of the plant do not themselves think. Not A, because, in relation to the view maintained in this essay, the description of laws as external influences would be unmeaning." The common talk about divine "transcendence" and "immanence" has covered much loose thinking.