**RECONSIDERING TAYLOR’S DESIGN ARGUMENT**

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**Abstract**

Contemporary philosophers have largely neglected Richard Taylor’s design argument. Given that the initial responses to the argument were largely negative, one might be tempted to conclude that the argument is simply philosophically inadequate. This paper rejects that conclusion by showing how Taylor’s argument has been misunderstood by his critics. In defending Taylor, it is shown that the two types of objections levied against him fail to even blemish his design argument, let alone refute it. Consideration is also given to the argument’s historical lineage, along with a proposal for future considerations of the connection between epistemological realism and design.

**Key Words:** Richard Taylor, design argument, epistemological realism, philosophy of religion

**INTRODUCTION**

Richard Taylor’s *Metaphysics* provides its reader with what appear to be two arguments for the existence of God. This appearance is misleading, however, because the second of these arguments is not so much an argument seeking to demonstrate the existence of God as it is an epistemological argument about what is reasonable to believe given other epistemic commitments that one might have.

For present purposes, only Taylor’s second argument, commonly referred to as his “design argument,” is considered.1 Section one presents and clarifies Taylor’s argument; section two considers objections that have been raised against Taylor’s argument, which are divided into two general lines of critique; section three responds to these two different strands of disagreement with Taylor, arguing that both rest upon significant misinterpretations of the structure and aim of Taylor’s argument; section four examines the historical lineage of Taylor’s argument and other arguments that resemble it; and finally, section five offers a concluding reflection on the argument’s strength and appeal, before ultimately endorsing Taylor’s argument and motivating the need for it to receive further attention.

**1. TAYLOR’S ‘DESIGN’ ARGUMENT**

Taylor’s introduction to his second argument provides his reader with the initial impression that he will be providing a rather standard version of the design argument. He describes how many people have thought that the order and harmony of the natural world provides them with evidence of the ‘guiding hand’ of some ‘purposefulbeing’ who assembled it with a plan in mind (Taylor, 1992, 109).2 Taylor claims that much of this order and harmony goes unnoticed by us because it is such a common feature of the world and its contents; utilizing the example of the self-regulation of the human body, he notes that “most people live out their lives without even noticing this seeming miracle that is perpetually before them” (109). Such orderliness seems to indicate that there is reason to doubt that the world we find ourselves in is merely the ‘accidental and unintended’ chance byproduct of natural forces (109). Of course, as Taylor notes, the modern biologist will be quick to point out that the apparent teleological structure of biological organisms is only *apparent* (i.e., not really teleological), as our current understanding of Darwinian evolution via natural selection purports to show. Indeed, classic design arguments are typically dismissed by appeals to the theory of evolution.3

Taylor himself does not wish to step into this debate between intelligent design and evolution though. He does point out that it is *not* clear why we should accept that every creature being perfectly suited to its environment or mode of life is as such only *because* they are equipped for those goals rather than their being equipped as such *in order to* pursue such goals, but immediately backs away from this line of inquiry.4 Rather than rehashing the common design debate, Taylor points out that he would like to express the argument from design in a new way – one that has “a peculiarly rational twist” (110). It is this twist that Taylor thinks is particularly novel, having “been hardly more than dimly perceived by most of those who have considered this subject” (110).

**1.1 Attuning Ourselves to the Argument**

Rather than presenting his ‘rational twist’ on the design argument right away, Taylor begins by attempting to soften up his reader to his way of thinking – something accomplished via illustration. The phrase ‘softening up’ is used because Taylor is adamant that he is *not* providing an argument from analogy. He introduces his illustration by claiming, “The idea that we want to develop here is not easy to grasp without misunderstanding, so it will be best to approach it stepwise by considering first an example or two that should make it quite obvious” (110), before later making it explicit that “none of the foregoing is an argument from analogy” (115). We ought to take Taylor at his word on this matter, for reasons that will be explained below in section three. For now, it is simply noted that the illustrations are best read as attempts by Taylor to get his reader accustomed to a certain way of thinking about the rationality of our trusting what is indicated to us by natural phenomena.

Taylor provides two preliminary illustrations before getting to the core of his argument, but only the first will be recounted here.5 He asks his readers to imagine that they are taking a train ride. While staring out the window of the train, you notice a great many stones on a hillside. These stones appear to present the following message: ‘THE BRITISH RAILWAYS WELCOMES YOU TO WALES’. Upon seeing the arrangement of these stones, it would be quite natural to assume that the stones had been intentionally arranged to display the aforementioned message. It is of course not a logical impossibility for the stones to have been merely arranged at random by natural forces and, as a passenger on the train, you are unable to demonstrably *prove* that these stones were purposively arranged. As Taylor puts it, “the mere fact that something has an interesting or striking shape or pattern and thus *seems* purposively arranged is no proof that it is” (110). Indeed, many intelligent people make a living by attempting to show how seemingly purposive structures (e.g., biological organisms) could have arisen through chance mutation and natural selection.

While Taylor grants that the appearance of purpose and design is not necessarily *proof* of actual purpose and design, he thinks that our responses to such appearances can be quite informative. He notes that if you were to accept the apparent message of the stones, that is, if upon seeing them you were to conclude that you were in fact entering Wales (and you concluded this solely because of the arrangement of the stones), then you would not be rationally justified in claiming that the arrangement of the stones was brought about by mere chance. In emphasizing this key point, Taylor remarks, “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” (111). The reasoning behind this claim is quite straightforward – accidental things do not convey messages. It would be nonsensical to believe *both* that the stones were arranged by some chance events (e.g., that they were slowly moved by various high winds over thousands of years), *and* that they were evidence that you are entering Wales. To accept the message as true is to accept that the stones were purposively assembled to convey the message ‘THE BRITISH RAILWAYS WELCOMES YOU TO WALES’.

**1.2 Taylor on Our Faculties of Sense and Cognition**

Having seen how Taylor attempts to soften his reader’s mind to a certain type of reasoning about the relationship between our acceptance that something conveys true information and our holding the thing in question to be purposively designed, we can now turn to Taylor’s ‘design’ argument. Once again, his initial remarks strongly resemble earlier design arguments (e.g., that of William Paley), as he comments on the ‘bewildering complexity and delicacy’ of the human senses, especially that of the eye (112). Such language has the unfortunate potential side effect of distracting from his actual argument though. Taylor is not preparing his reader for an argument that seeks to argue from the complexity of something in the natural world to the existence of God, but rather something quite different. In fact, Taylor seemingly grants the evolutionary biologist their objection to the classic argument from design, writing:

The mere complexity, refinement and seemingly purposeful arrangement of our sense organs do not, accordingly, constitute any conclusive reason for supposing that they are the outcome of any purposeful activity. A natural, nonpurposeful explanation of them is possible, and has been attempted – successfully, in the opinion of many. (113)

Instead of focusing on the marvel that is human sensation and its origin story, Taylor wants to turn our attention to the way in which we *rely* on these senses, and it is here that the ‘peculiarly rational twist’ of his ‘design’ argument becomes apparent.

Regardless of whether or not we are justified in doing so, Taylor notes that, as a matter of fact, we rely upon our senses. We do not *merely* take ourselves to have sensory experiences, but rather treat our sensory experiences as conveyors of truths about the world, and, importantly, as conveyors of truths about the world as independent of both us and our sensory apparatuses. We tend to act as though our senses *reveal* things to us by conveying information, much like we treat the message of the stones in the aforementioned illustration. Taylor is clear, however, that he is not claiming that our senses are infallible, but rather that we do in fact rely upon them and consider them to reveal things to us about an independent world; as he puts it, “We assume, rightly or wrongly, that they are *trustworthy* guides with respect to what is true, and what exists independently of our senses and their origins; and we still assume this, even when they are our only guides” (114).

Now, in the case of the stones on the hillside, Taylor argued that it would be irrational to simultaneously hold that the stones were arranged to read ‘THE BRITISH RAILWAYS WELCOMES YOU TO WALES’ and that they revealed some truth about anything besides themselves. Likewise, in the case of our sensory and cognitive faculties, Taylor argues that it would be irrational to take these faculties to be both truth-revealing and non-purposeful in their origin. The thrust of his position can be found in the following passage:

Iftheir origin can be entirely accounted for in terms of chance variations, natural selection, and so on, without supposing that they somehow embody and express the purposes of some creative being, then the most 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. (114)

As Taylor notes, we *do* think of our senses as revealing true information about an independently existing world. It is this point that lies at the heart of Taylor’s argument. Put simply, he is claiming the following: *if we believe that our faculties of sense and cognition reveal truths about an independently existing world, then it would be irrational to simultaneously hold that they originated by mere accident and without purpose*.

The initial concern with portraying Taylor’s argument as a design argument should be clear now. Taylor is not arguing that some feature of our world is too complex to have arisen by chance, nor is he even arguing that God exists. Rather, he is claiming that *if* we take our faculties of sense and cognition to reveal truths about an independent world (i.e., if we wish to be epistemological realists), then we must regard these faculties as having been purposively designed to do as such. Reason would then dictate that our commitment to epistemological realism (ER) commits us to a belief in the purposive design of our faculties; if we abandoned the former commitment, then the latter need not be held according to Taylor’s argument.

One area where Taylor is quite clear is in his modest portrayal of what his argument is meant to show. He admits that it would be ‘extravagant’ to think that his reflections indicate a confirmation of any religion at all, referring to his work as “purely metaphysical and philosophical considerations having implications of only a purely speculative kind …. They imply almost nothing with respect to any divine attributes … and one could insist with some justification that even the word *God* … is out of place in them” (115). Despite this, and his insistence that his argument is not an argument from analogy, his work has been met with rather confused objections, which now demand careful consideration and scrutiny.

**2. TWO STRANDS OF COMMON OBJECTIONS**

Several objections have been offered against Taylor’s design argument, many of which overlap in the scope of their points of contention. Subsections (2.1) and (2.2) divide these objections into two groups, which are then responded to in section three.

**2.1 Group One**

Walter H. O’Briant claims that Taylor’s argument is defective because it fails to acknowledge a key difference between the case of the stones on the hill signaling that one has entered Wales and the sign that our senses provide us of something being the case (O’Briant, 1967). The problem, as O’Bryant sees it, is that the former is a symbol that performs its function “only in terms of certain conventions,” while the latter is not conventional at all (1967, 32-3). This supposed difference is perhaps most clearly portrayed by an illustration. Imagine that upon boarding a train, you witness a tragic occurrence – Mr. T is beating up a meager philosophy professor.6 Now, the sight of the professor being beaten is not merely conventional, but rather quite natural. That is, if Mr. T is beating the philosopher as you board the train, then, assuming that your cognitive and visual faculties are in working order, you will see the spectacle that is occurring independently of you.7 Such a sight is said not to be merely conventional, but rather reveals evidence for the ‘knowledge-claim’ that the beating is occurring. It is an index, not a symbol, which leads O’Briant to the crux of his objection: “From the fact that something is a symbol we can infer that purpose is involved; else it would not be a symbol …. But from the fact that something is an index we can **not** infer that purpose is involved” (1967, 33). He thus concludes that the illustration of the stones on the hillside utilized by Taylor in no way supports his argument.

A second detractor, E.D. Klemke, raises a similar objection. He grants that the interpretation of the sign in the stone example is plausible (i.e., that interpreting the stones as a sign implies there being a sign-maker), because we have previously observed a strong correlation between the two (Klemke, 1969, 104). In Humean fashion however, Klemke points out that we do not have previous experience of a regular conjunction between our faculties of sense and cognition and a creator or designer of them. He posits that “The mere fact that we rely on them (the aforementioned faculties) to tell us of things other than themselves does not lead to the conclusion that they were designed by some being” (1969, 105). To think otherwise without proper reasoning is, claims Klemke, ‘sheer dogmatism’ (1969, 106). This criticism is echoed by Ronald J. Glass (1973, 96) and John Hick (1970, 24-6), who both similarly read Taylor as having offered an argument from analogy before continuing on to critique the analogy for having analogates of differing kinds.

Let us call the objections described above ‘Group One’. Although they vary in their criticisms, they are united in their dissatisfaction with the leap from the case of the stones to that of our faculties of sense and cognition.8 A second class of objections, call them ‘Group Two’, raise a different objection altogether.

**2.2 Group Two**

This second class of objections can be found in the work of Pieranna Garavaso and Lory Lemke. Recognizing the core of the argument, namely, that Taylor is offering a conditional about what is *rational* to *believe* given other potential epistemic commitments about the world, Garavaso and Lemke push back on the claim that “the nonpurposeful origin and reliability of our sensory and cognitive faculties are rationally inconsistent” by offering an evolutionary account of the reliability of our faculties of sense and cognition (1990, 36). In short, they think that evolutionary biology can allow us to not only marvel at the complexity of these faculties, but also account for their reliability in conveying information about things other than their own structure.

The main point of contention that Garavaso and Lemke raise pertains to the term ‘accidental’ as a description of the forces of evolution. Such a term is misleading, they contend, because it implies that evolution is a completely random or chance process. While there are certainly ‘random’ or, better, ‘chance’ mutations, there is much more to the biological picture of the development of species over time. Indeed, part of the appeal of evolution via natural selection is its ability to explain *why* natural organisms exhibit the *appearance* of design. Of course, evolutionary biologists are not ascribing the complexity of biological organisms and their degree of fitness for their environments to *intelligent* design – that is, to an intelligent *mind* – but they are not labeling these as mere chance accidents either. Indeed, the evolutionary picture is one of *selection*. Natural selection ‘favors’ features that promote survival until reproduction can occur. As Garavaso and Lemke note, “this selection did not occur at random or casually: those survived whose sensory and cognitive faculties were reliable in enabling them to defend themselves and exploit their resources better, in summary to adapt to their environment better” (1990, 37). This characterization better portrays the state of evolutionary biology, where natural selection can be described as a ‘blind watchmaker’ (Dawkins, 2015). Thus, our faculties of sense and cognition *could* have arisen via chance mutation before being favored by natural selection due to their survival value (Garavaso and Lemke, 1990, 37). Furthermore, Garavaso and Lemke deem it plausible that these faculties reveal truths about our environment and the world around us. They grant that the aforementioned evolutionary history of our faculties of sense and cognition is little more than speculation, but argue that this does not dilute their objection in the least – Taylor argued that it would be *irrational* to believe both that our senses reveal truths about the reality of the world and that they were not purposively designed, which is all that Garavaso and Lemke have sought to refute. As a result, they deem Taylor’s design argument to be “no more successful than its traditional versions” (1990, 39).

**3. TWO OBJECTIONS, ONE FLAW – FAILING TO SEE THE ARGUMENT**

Now that the objections are on the table, attention can be given to seeing how they fare. The two classes of objections are addressed separately and in the order that they were presented above. Ultimately, they both succumb to similar faults – namely, a misinterpretation of Taylor’s claims in *Metaphysics.*

**3.1 Group One Reconsidered**

Beginning with group one, recall that O’Briant and Klemke were each primarily concerned with the strength of the initial illustrations that Taylor provided, arguing that there were significant differences between our reliance on the conventions of signs and symbols on the one hand and our reliance upon our faculties of sense and cognition on the other. It was argued that the case of the stones on the hillside did not provide any support for the case of our faculties of sense and cognition. What these authors fail to realize, however, is that Taylor’s argument is not an argument from analogy, nor is it *reliant* upon the initial case of the stones arranged to read ‘THE BRITISH RAILWAYS WELCOMES YOU TO WALES’. Taylor says as much, writing that ‘none of the foregoing is an argument from analogy” (115), but one needn’t merely take his word for it. Taylor’s illustrations are best read as attempts to ‘soften up’ his reader to a certain way of thinking. He is not claiming that one case follows the other or is similar in every relevant way to the other, but rather offering different cases in which believing one thing requires believing another. His argument can be offered *without* appealing to the illustrations, which serve only to prevent “misunderstanding” by “considering first an example or two that should make it (his argument) quite obvious” (110).

In order to see that Taylor’s argument can be evaluated independently of the examples that he provides, one need only to remind themselves of the argument as it was presented above. He claims only that *if* you believe that your faculties of sense and cognition are reliable guides to truths other than their own structure, then, shouldyou wish to be rational, you must likewise *believe* that they were purposively designed. That is, affirming the antecedent presupposes the consequent. None of this, however, *directly* relies upon the foregoing examples. At most, then, the objection of group one establishes only that the examples are not particularly helpful or useful, but they do not touch the argument itself. Klemke, recall, claimed that “The mere fact that we rely on (our faculties of sense and cognition) to tell us of things other than themselves does not lead to the conclusion that they were designed by some being,” before deeming Taylor’s position to be ‘sheer dogmatism’ (Klemke, 1969, 105-6). Setting aside the issue of Taylor’s justification for his claim, even if it were only ‘sheer dogmatism’, Klemke’s assertion appears to be none the better. Indeed, if this is so, he merely trades one dogma for another when he writes that “our sensory and cognitive faculties arose through natural non-purposeful forces and … are by themselves, reliable guides to truths about things other than themselves” (Klemke, 1969, 106). The reliability of these faculties as it pertains to revealing truth, should they be non-purposeful in their origin, brings us to the objection of group two.

**3.2 Group Two Reconsidered**

Group two essentially builds upon Klemke’s objection by providing a natural and non-purposeful explanation for the reliability of our faculties of sense and cognition. Now, in the account put forth by Garavaso and Lemke, they are certainly correct in their claim that evolution is *not* a matter of pure chance. To describe the evolutionary history of our aforementioned faculties *solely* in terms of random chance would indeed be quite misleading. However, they too miss the mark because they aim at the wrong target. The claim that they seek to debunk is one that says that “the nonpurposeful origin and reliability of our sensory and cognitive faculties are rationally inconsistent” (Lemke and Garavaso, 1990, 36). They then go on to provide an account of how the non-purposeful forces of natural selection could chisel away over time at these faculties, eventually rendering them reliable as tools for defending ourselves and exploiting the resources of our environments (1990, 37).

That their attempt misses the mark is evident by their response to the question of *what* these faculties are reliable *for*. Nowhere does Taylor claim that we cannot hold our faculties to be *useful* in the sense of being advantageous for survival without attributing a purposeful design to them. By reliable, Taylor rather means *reliable guides to truth* (114), specifically as guides to truths about the external world. He is concerned with *truth*, not pragmatic considerations about survival.

Let us consider this distinction between being reliable as survival tools and being reliable guides to truth. In the first place, it is not clear from the perspective of the evolutionary biologist why we should take our sensory experiences to track with reality. Indeed, from an evolutionary standpoint, there are several examples of how believing falsehoods is actually an evolutionary benefit. To consider just one example, evolutionary psychologist Justin Barrett has detailed what he calls ‘hyperactive agency detection’ (HAAD), which describes the human tendency to attribute agency when there often is not any, or when we lack sufficient reasons to believe that there is agency involved in something (Barrett, 2004, 22).9 When it comes to detecting agency, we are prone to many false positives. For example, when walking through the woods, we are prone to initially attribute the sound of rustling leaves behind us to an animal or another person, leading us to tense up. In many cases, however, it is simply the wind moving the leaves around. There is little risk involved in defaulting to attributing agency to sounds in our environment; indeed, the opposite would be much more costly from an evolutionary perspective. It could be very *costly* to fail to attribute agency to a stimulus in the environment when there is in fact an agent responsible. If one defaulted to this interpretation, then he or she would potentially be at a greater risk of predation or ambush. Cases such as these indicate that natural selection does not necessarily have a bias towards producing truth-bearing sensory and cognitive faculties – in many cases, a useful fiction or false belief is more *advantageous* as a reliable guide to survival.

So, contrary to Garavaso and Lemke’s claim that natural selection gives us good reason to think that “these abilities enable us to know various truths about our environment” (1990, 37), it would be more accurate to say that natural selection shows that these faculties are advantageous in promoting the survival of the species, even if they incline us to instinctually believe falsehoods. There is then at least *some* reason to think that being advantageous is notthe same as being reliable guides to truth and, more to Taylor’s point, holding these faculties to be advantageous for survival does not address the main concern about what believing in ER entails – namely, the purposive design of our faculties of cognition and sense.

One benefit of the above defense of Taylor’s argument is that it does not lead to the potentially unfortunate position of having to argue against the claims of the theory of evolution via natural selection and chance mutation. Indeed, Taylor’s argument neither relies upon the theory of evolution nor contradicts it – his concern is not one that seeks to explain the origin of the marvels that are our faculties of sense and cognition, but rather one that seeks to clarify what exactly it means to treat them as things that reveal independent *truths* about the world; and, as we have already seen, to treat them as such is to presuppose that they were purposively designed to reveal these truths. Furthermore, and as an extension of the aforementioned benefit of this avenue of defense for Taylor, he is not forced to recognize the commonly advanced false dichotomy between *either* providing a teleological explanation of these faculties or a naturalistic one. Creel highlights this point, one held by many theologians, writing in a footnote of his essay, “A Realistic Argument for Belief,” that “there is no logical incompatibility between a lawlike explanation of a phenomenon and a teleological explanation of it. Something can be intentionally brought to pass in a lawlike manner. God could have purposely created our sense organs by a lawful process” (1979, 237). Indeed, some authors have gone so far as to argue that purposive creation through natural laws is something that would be more impressive and beautiful than creation in the form of a great magic act.10

**4. SITUATING TAYLOR’S ARGUMENT**

Now that Taylor’s argument has been presented and defended from its detractors, attention can be given to its lineage. This section begins with a consideration of the connection between Taylor’s design argument and Descartes’s project in the *Meditations*, before considering two arguments that share some common motivations with Taylor.

**4.1 The Influence of Descartes**

Creel has previously noted that Taylor’s argument can be read as an offshoot of the Cartesian project. This connection is examined below through a consideration, critique, and correction of Creel’s analysis of the similarities between Descartes and Taylor.

Creel does a commendable job defending Taylor from the spurious criticisms of Hick (1971) and Narveson (1965) in “A Realistic Argument for Belief” (1979).11 Nevertheless, there are a few important differences between Creel’s interpretation and the one offered in the present paper, which are germane to his examination of the relationship between Descartes and Taylor. The first pertains to Creel’s interpretation of Taylor, which yields a stronger theistic conclusion than the argument warrants. Creel writes, “Taylor claims only that the affirmation of the truth of epistemological realism together with the denial of theism is not rational” (1979, 238), and later adds, “A PERSON’S ASSERTION OF EPISTEMOLOGICAL REALISM IS RATIONAL IF AND ONLY IF THAT PERSON ALSO ASSERTS THAT THERE IS A GOD WHO DESIGNED OUR FACULTIES OF SENSE AND COGNITION” (1979, 246). Taylor’s argument does not *require* such a strong theistic conclusion as this. It doesn’t entail that a traditional conception of God must be believed to be the creator of our faculties – the condition for believing in ER would be met if we believed that some cosmic consciousness or imperfect deity designed our faculties too. Furthermore, recall that Taylor was explicitly non-committal about the theological implications of his arguments, noting that “They imply almost nothing with respect to any divine attributes … and one could insist with some justification that even the word *God* … is out of place in them” (115).

The above also marks a core point of departure between Taylor and Descartes. In the *Meditations*, Descartes thinks that *knowledge* of the truth of ER requires *knowledge* of the existence of a *perfect Being*. Taylor’s argument, by contrast, only seeks to show that *belief* in ER requires *belief* in a purposive origin of our faculties of sense and cognition. This leads to a twofold problem with Creel’s commentary on Descartes and Taylor: (1) the differences between them are not emphasized; and (2) there is an error in the presentation of Descartes methodology.

Beginning with the first, Creel is correct that Taylor’s argument resembles Descartes’s project. Descartes is motivated by a simple question, namely, how can we evaluate or trust our beliefs about the nature of reality without first understanding the design and nature of those faculties that are used to observe and ponder it? This question motivates the *Meditations*, which seek to vanquish skepticism by providing a firm foundation for the sciences, a foundation that makes “it impossible for us to doubt any further those things that we later discover to be true” (Descartes, 1993, 54). Descartes, in pursuit of this goal, attempts to show that all knowledge of the world requires prior knowledge of God, who has designed our faculties in such a way that they are capable of revealing truths about an external world. Thus, Descartes, like Taylor, argues for a logical connection between ER and the purposive design of our faculties.

Nevertheless, the more modest claim of Taylor’s argument confers a significant advantage over Descartes’s. Taylor never claims to show that our faculties of sense and cognition *have been* purposively designed or that ER is true. Rather, he claims only that believing ER and denying the purposive design of our faculties is irrational. Descartes, by contrast, sought to demonstrate that ER is in fact true because the existence of God can be demonstrated. This confers a tremendous advantage to Taylor’s argument, because it avoids the problems of Descartes’s third and fifth meditations (which include his two arguments for God’s existence), both of which have been widely criticized.12

Creel’s commentary on Descartes also misrepresents the steps that Descartes takes to rationally justify ER. Creel claims that “Descartes’s main objective, viz., the rational justification of ER, having been achieved in meditations one through four, the remaining meditations are primarily elaborations on the earlier meditations” (1979, 244-5). This is admittedly quite peculiar, because it is only in meditation six that ER is explicitly reestablished after Descartes questions whether there are physical things ‘out there’ in the world that correspond to and cause his ideas and experiences. The affirmation of the previous claim certainly seems intuitive, but it isn’t as though one can investigate whether or not the external world – the world of physical things and bodies – is really ‘there’. This impossibility of verification is then used as evidence by Descartes for the existence of an external world with material things. He writes:

For since God has given me no faculty whatsoever for making this determination, but instead has given me a great inclination to believe that these ideas issue from corporeal things, I fail to see how God could be understood not to be a deceiver, if these ideas were to issue from a source other than corporeal things. And consequently corporeal things exist. (Descartes, 1993, 97)

Thus, ER is only established in meditation six, where Descartes argues that the pervasive and natural tendency to think that the world outside of us matches up with the world of our ideas, combined with the fact that there is no way of verifying the veracity of this inclination, leads to the claim that the external world *must* be real, because if it wasn’t God would have trapped us inside of a false belief, which a perfect Being would not do.

**4.2 Tracing Similar Intuitions in Lewis and Plantinga**

Two other notable arguments resemble aspects of Taylor’s as well. The first is found in C.S. Lewis’s *Miracles*. Chapter three of *Miracles* offers Lewis’s argument from reason, which argues that the naturalistic worldview provides an insufficient description of reality.13 In making his case against naturalism, Lewis notes that its truth entails that “every finite thing or event must be (in principle) explicable in terms of the Total System” (2001, 17). This means that if there is anything that cannot be fully accounted for in terms of that system, then “naturalism would be in ruins” (2001, 18).14 Lewis’s task then becomes quite clear, namely, to see if there is anything that does not admit of a purely natural explanation. Lewis thinks that valid inferences provide a case of exactly this kind of ‘thing’. In taking the human capacity for reason as his point of departure, Lewis hopes to do to naturalism what he thinks Haldane did to materialism. Lewis, quoting from Haldane (1927, 209), writes:

Thus a strict materialism refutes itself for the reason given long ago by Professor Haldane: “If my mental processes are determined wholly by the motions of atoms in my brain, I have no reason to suppose that my beliefs are true … and hence I have no reason for supposing my brain to be composed of atoms.” (22)

Naturalism, in Lewis’s view, faces the same difficulty as materialism, because it reduces our reasoning processes to such a degree as to prevent them from being able to support naturalism itself. To support this, he begins by considering what a natural history of human reasoning would look like, and it is here that the similarities between himself and Taylor come into view.

Lewis notes that if nature is the only sphere of reality, then our capacity for reason arose via a natural historical process (27). Now, nature is not something that ‘intends’ or ‘designs’ – it is non-teleological. This means that the naturalist must believe that the origin of our capacity to reason does not include it being “designed to produce a mental behavior that can find truth …. The type of mental behavior we now call rational thinking or inference must have ‘evolved’ by natural selection,” which gradually weeds out that which is unfit for survival (27-8). If what we call rational thinking has evolved over time, then a problem arises. Lewis traces this problem (28-9), noting that accepting the evolutionary origin means accepting that our thoughts were at one point *not rational apprehensions of objective truth*. Given this, how are we to account for the status that we now ascribe them?

Lewis imagines that the naturalist might admit that we cannot currently grasp how evolutionary processes brought about this transition but hold that it must have happened because natural selection perpetuates useful behaviors, and our habits of inference are useful, which means they must reach truth (32-3). Such a defense is deemed grossly inadequate because valid inference is the very thing being called into question, and this question cannot be answered by yet another inference – the inference of “if useful, then true.”15 The problem of the possibility of valid reasoning cannot be solved through inferences, because once we adopt the naturalistic and evolutionary positions, *all* of our inferences have been called into question. Lewis posits that we must take reason as our starting point, because “if by treating it as a mere phenomenon you put yourself outside it, there is then no way, except by begging the question, of getting inside again” (33). So, the naturalist is said to be left without a way of accounting for the validity of inferences.

Both Lewis and Taylor attempt to show that a non-purposive origin of our faculties prevents us from being able to draw certain inferences from them. For Taylor, the conclusion was conditional – if you believe in ER, reason demands you believe in the purposive design of your faculties – which doesn’t require one to believe in God, as one could simply abandon ER (e.g., by endorsing idealism). Lewis, however, is much more ambitious, as he goes on to argue that God’s creation of nature is “so probable that no one who approached the question with an open mind would very seriously entertain any other hypothesis” (50).16

Victor Reppert aptly summarizes Lewis in the language of skyhooks and cranes, where a skyhook is a purposive mind-first ultimate explanation, and a crane is mindless scientific explanation. For Lewis, the attempt to account for everything through cranes misses something important: “the world thus analyzed has to have scientists in it. And scientists draw their conclusions from evidence” (Reppert, 2003, 7-8). However, this project requires engaging in rational inference, which cannot be fully explained in terms of cranes, because to account for reasoning in a nonpurposive system is to “end up describing something that cannot genuinely be called reasoning” (Reppert, 2003, 8). This leaves us with what Reppert calls a dualism of fundamental explanations where “we cannot expunge purposes from the basic level of explanation without radically undermining the very scientific enterprise that provides the primary foundation for philosophical naturalism” (2003, 101).

Alvin Plantinga’s evolutionary argument against naturalism from *Warrant and Proper Function* (1993) and *Warranted Christian Belief* (2000) partially resembles Lewis and Taylor as well.17 Plantinga challenges the coupling of naturalism (N) and evolution (E), arguing that if N&E are true, then the probability that our cognitive faculties are reliable guides to truth (R) is low or inscrutable, because evolutionary mechanisms are concerned with adaptive *behavior*, not adaptive *beliefs* (1993, 220; 2000, 229).

Like Lewis, Plantinga notes that evolutionary mechanisms can only be used to explain our *behavior* (1993, 218). They operate by perpetuating adaptive behaviors and traits that promote survival through the age of reproduction, which is entirely different than promoting mostly true or verisimilitudinous beliefs. Plantinga illustrates this through the imagined case of Paul, a prehistoric hominid (1993, 225). To survive and reproduce, Paul must exhibit tiger-avoiding behavior. Now, Paul successfully engages in tiger-avoiding behavior, and it seems that a logical explanation for this is as follows: Paul is reasonable, so he must be averse to being eaten and believe that his tiger-avoiding behavior is an effective way to avoid it. However, his behavior could be caused by other combinations of beliefs and desires. Plantinga considers numerous other combinations that result in the tiger-avoiding behavior. To consider just one, Paul might think that tigers are friendly and deserve to be petted but believe that this can only be accomplished by running from them. The only thing that matters evolutionarily, however, is that he avoids the tiger. The beliefs involved in that avoidance need not be true, but rather only need to ensure that his body is not eaten before he can reproduce. So, the naturalist who accepts evolution might have a strong explanation for why humans behave in certain ways (i.e., because such behaviors are advantageous for survival), but this person lacks reason for thinking their beliefs tend towards the truth since advantageous behaviors can be brought about through a multitude of desire-belief combinations. Since N&E cannot account for R, Plantinga concludes that the person who deems R highly probable has “a reason for rejecting naturalism” (1993, 228).

At this point, Plantinga’s argument resembles Taylor’s position. Plantinga has argued that trusting in the ability of your faculties to reach truth undermines naturalism. He doesn’t stop here though, as he continues to argue that one cannot save N&E by remaining agnostic about R either, for such agnosticism provides one a defeater for any other belief that one considers, including a defeater for the belief that one has a defeater – skepticism of R thus leads to skepticism “all the way down” and “destroys knowledge” (Plantinga, 2000, 225-7). Worse still, the very “conjuncture of naturalism with evolutionary theory is self-defeating” in Plantinga’s view (1993, 235). In short, he argues that any argument put forward in support of R by a naturalist who endorses evolution will be circular or question-begging (1993, 234).18 In providing an argument for R, one provides reasons for accepting it. And yet, the very act of this argument “subtly assumes the very proposition he proposes to argue for” (Plantinga, 1993, 234). The problem, then, is that when the reliability of your cognitive faculties is questioned, you cannot support R by appealing to an argument, since producing an argument relies on the assumption of R itself. Thus, Plantinga’s naturalist finds herself in the same position as Lewis’s naturalist, who, by placing herself outside of reason, cannot find her way back in through argumentation.19

As we have seen, Taylor, Descartes, Lewis, and Plantinga all seem motivated by similar intuitions. While Descartes speaks of grounding scientific inquiry, Lewis and Plantinga speak to the deficiency or irrationality of the naturalistic worldview, and Taylor speaks to the rational requirement of the coupling of ER and purposive design, they are each united by a shared interest in what our metaphysical and epistemic views entail about the reliability of our faculties of cognition. Taylor’s argument, as has been argued throughout, is more modest in its goal, which tends to shield it from many of the objections that have been levied against the others. Rather than arguing for a dualism of fundamental explanations (Lewis and Reppert) or probabilistic refutations of N&E (Plantinga), Taylor simply shows that believing in ER rationally requires believing in a purposive origin of our faculties.

**5. CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS**

To recap, it has been argued that the standard objections to Taylor’s design argument are unsuccessful. The question of course remains as to the merits of Taylor’s argument, for, claiming that the objections to an argument are unsuccessful does not entail the argument itself being a sound one. Nevertheless, this paper has sought to demonstrate that Taylor’s argument cannot be dismissed as easily as previous detractors have thought and that it is deserving of thoughtful consideration. Such considerations, however, must first understand what exactly it is that Taylor has claimed. To reiterate, his argument is not a ‘design argument’ in the standard sense. He does not point to the complexity of something in the world before claiming that it could not have arisen without the guiding hand of God. Indeed, he does not even conclude that God exists. Rather, his argument is merely conditional, maintaining that we cannot be rationally justified in being epistemological realists unless we *believe* that our faculties of sense and cognition were purposively designed, *perhaps* by something we would call ‘God’. Nowhere, however, do we get an argument about *why* we should cling to ER (even if it is a very basic intuition of ours) or an argument for the *existence* of God; the argument is limited to what reason dictates we believe ifwe are to be epistemological realists.

Moving forward, future considerations of Taylor’s argument would benefit from more thoughtful considerations of his argument’s structure and conclusion, which will prompt discussions about whether the connection between ER and design can be severed or not. As a preliminary step in this direction, it seems that if Taylor truly aimed to show that God exists or that God’s existence is highly probable, then he has failed, since there isn’t an argument for ER being correct and, even if there were, this wouldn’t entail the existence of any traditional theological conception of God, but rather only that we must believe in some purposive origin of our faculties. However, as an argument holding that belief in ER – the default ‘commonsensical’ view of most ordinary people – rationally requires belief in the purposive design of our faculties, the argument is incredibly persuasive. It takes an insight of Descartes and removes the baggage that is associated with Descartes’s attempts to actually prove the existence of God in meditations three and five, which are notoriously problematic. Thus, when Taylor’s more modest argument is properly discerned, we are left with a forceful case for the rational requirement of belief in purposive design, given a preexisting belief in the veracity of ER.20

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NOTES

1. The first argument is neglected in the present paper, because it is a rather standard presentation of the classic cosmological argument. Also, the characterization of his second argument as an argument from design is bound to be misleading for reasons that will be discussed below. Taylor himself describes his argument as “the argument from design” with “a peculiarly rational twist” (1992, 110), but even this self-characterization has the unfortunate effect of obscuring the true force of his argument.
2. Further references to this work will be cited in the text. All references to Taylor stem from *Metaphysics* (1992).
3. See Dawkins (2015) for an account of natural selection as the “blind watchmaker” of apparent design.
4. That is, the question can be raised whether, for example, a hawk catches fish *because* it is equipped with keen eyesight and sharp talons or whether the hawk has been endowed with these features *in order to* catch fish.
5. See Taylor (1992, 110-11) for a complete account of the illustration. The second illustration is ignored in this essay, as it largely repeats the work done in the first and serves merely to further ‘soften’ the reader to a way of thinking.
6. Mr. T refers to Laurence Tureaud, the famous wrestler and actor known for his role as Clubber Lang in the film *Rocky III*.

This example is a modification of the illustration that O’Briant himself provides. In lieu of Mr. T and the meager philosopher, O’Briant speaks of seeing one’s office burn, writing: “if my office is on fire and I am in the right place at the right time with my organs of vision an associated apparatus in normal condition, then I shall see the burning office” (1967, 33).

Jan Narveson (1965) has offered a critique of Taylor’s argument that fits roughly in group one as well (with certain peculiarities). It is not engaged here though, as Richard Creel (1979) has already given it a great deal of attention.

Interestingly, Barrett’s discussion of HAAD arises in the context of trying to explain away the human proclivity for theistic belief.

See Kenneth R. Miller (1999) for an example of such a view.

One problem with Creel’s approach that is not considered below is his dismissal of evolutionary considerations in relation to Taylor’s argument (1979, 247). He is correct that evolutionary arguments – as non-purposive arguments – cannot ground ER in light of Taylor’s argument, but Creel discounts the role that evolution can play in *supporting* Taylor. As previously indicated, certain facets of evolution can actually be fruitful in relation to Taylor’s argument, for example, through considerations of HAAD.

For example, Bernard Williams writes, “The trouble (with Descartes’s system) is that the proofs of God are invalid and do not convince even when they are supposedly being intuited” (1990, 210).

Lewis rewrote and retitled this chapterin response to criticisms arising from his encounter with G.E.M. Anscombe during a 1948 meeting of the Oxford Socratic Club. For brevity’s sake, neither the debate nor the revisions are considered here, and all references to Lewis are from the revised edition of *Miracles*. For considerations of the content of Anscombe’s criticisms and Lewis’s responses, see Reppert (1989) and Stockton and Lipscomb (2021).

Further references to this work will be cited in the text.

As was shown in relation to Taylor’s argument earlier, it is not always true that ‘useful’ for survival means ‘true’.

Victor Reppert has attempted to defend and extend Lewis’s argument, offering several new formulations of the argument from reason (2003; 2007).

Plantinga acknowledges the similarities that his argument has to Taylor and Lewis in chapter twelve of *Warrant and Proper Function* (1993, fn. 28).

Plantinga notes that such an argument won’t be formally circular, but *pragmatically circular*, insofar as that argument will gives reasons for trusting R when it is reason itself that is on trial (1993, 234).

Plantinga’s evolutionary argument has been widely criticized. See Fitelson and Sober (1998), who allege that his assigning of initial probabilities predetermines the outcome in favor of theism. An especially helpful survey of objections, which includes Plantinga’s responses, has also been published in a volume edited by James Beilby (2002).

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