

CHANCE OR DANCE

CHANCE OR DANCE

An Evaluation of Design

Jimmy H. Davis and Harry L. Poe



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For our students,
past, present, and future,
who will continue the dialogue
about design

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PREFACE TO THE REVISED EDITION

AFTER THE RELEASE OF the first edition of this book, we noted with surprise how many reviewers stated that we believe that intelligent design is science. While we stated that we believe in design as an affirmation of faith, we also stated that we do not believe that the intelligent design movement has yet made the case that intelligent design is science. Our surprise comes in observing how many people active in the conversation about science and faith have a tendency to confuse all statements about design with the intelligent design movement. This observation coincides with another current tendency to confuse any affirmation of creation with scientific creationism. We believe these two trends represent a problem in the intellectual discussion of ideas, and we have issued this revised edition in part to address this situation.

Since the first edition of this book, several important developments have taken place around the idea of design. Intelligent design has been ruled not to be science by a U.S. District Court, and Antony Flew has accepted belief in theism because of the argument of complexity. These and other developments in the intelligent design debate warrant this revised edition. We appreciate the willingness of Templeton Foundation Press to make this revised edition possible.

PREFACE

IN JUNE 2000, two important conferences examined the idea that the universe bears evidence of design. The conference “Evidence for Design: Finding New Ground for Dialogue” took place June 23–27, 2000, under the auspices of the John Templeton Foundation’s Science and Religion Course Award program administered by the Center for Theology and the Natural Sciences at Berkeley. This conference was held in Chicago through the facilitation of the Zygon Center for Religion and Science, which is a partnership program of the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago and the Center for Advanced Study in Religion and Science. The conference “Design and Its Critics” took place June 22–24, 2000, at Concordia University in Mequon, Wisconsin. This conference sought to bring together both proponents and critics of “intelligent design” to make their best cases.

The two conferences approached the subject from different perspectives. The Concordia conference included critics of intelligent design, yet the conference provided a forum for advocates of intelligent design. Leading lights of the intelligent design movement took part, including Michael Behe, William Dembski, and Paul Nelson. The Chicago conference did not include any atheists on its program, but it did not advocate an intelligent design position either. Longtime participants in the science and religion dialogue took part, including Ian Barbour, Owen Gingerich, and Philip Hefner. Ironically, the Chicago meeting had no representatives of the intelligent design movement, nor did the Concordia meeting have representatives of the Christian scientific/theological community that criticize the movement. Despite the irony, both meetings were quite appropriate for their purpose. The Concordia meeting sought to deal with objections to design from the perspective of those who do not believe in a Designer. The Chicago meeting sought to explore other ways of conceiving design than the way suggested by the intelligent design movement.

Due to the limitations imposed on us by the laws of physics, we could attend only one of the meetings. We had explored the views of the leading figures in the intelligent design movement by bringing the mountain to us. Through the Staley lectureship, we were able to bring Michael Behe and William Dembski to Union University. Through a generous grant from the American Scientific Affiliation funded by the John Templeton Foundation, we were able to bring Paul Nelson and Jay Budziszewski to Union. These men graciously allowed us time alone to interview them on the question of design. As a result, we chose to attend the Chicago meeting to hear a different voice on design. We experienced the same courtesy in conversation with Barbour, Gingerich, and Hefner.

The two meetings seemed to be striving toward different objectives. The Concordia meeting seemed to strive toward offering compelling evidence that the universe can be explained only in terms of intelligent design and the existence of an intelligent Designer. The intelligent design movement is concerned that people believe in God as the cause of the universe and everything in it. They hope to demonstrate the relationship between God and nature through traditional scientific empiricism. Their argument is with naturalists who do not believe such a Being exists.

The Chicago meeting seemed to strive toward identifying alternative ways of reconciling modern scientific understandings of nature with the existence of a Creator. Besides a more traditional theism of Gingerich and an interest in process by Barbour, the Chicago group also heard a feminist perspective from Mary Hunt and an interfaith perspective from Ghulam-Haider Aasi. To a certain degree, the Chicago meeting reflected a concern for the implications of design for people of faith. Both Hunt and Hefner spoke in terms of how people will respond to the world in which they live. Hunt voiced a concern for balance in the cosmos, whereas Hefner argued for thinking of one's place in the "project" that makes up the cosmos. Another theme became apparent in the course of the four-day conference. Participants seemed reluctant to think of God as a designer because design suggested a finished product. A finished product suggested a limit to human freedom. The eighteenth-century versions of the design argument sought to explain the design of the universe in determinate terms that corresponded to Newtonian physics. We now see that at least one stream of theologians and scientists want any view of design to reflect a quantum view of indeterminacy. It is the old problem of tying theology too closely to a replaceable scientific interpretation that may slip out of fashion and take the theology with it.¹

The two conferences represent a snapshot of the diverse perspectives one encounters when thinking about the universe as a place that bears evidence of design. The two conferences do not even exhaust the major positions found within traditional Christianity, much less the major religions of the world. The Reformed tradition, which has played such a significant role in Western culture and American society in particular, has never regarded “proofs” for the existence of God favorably. The attempt to provide empirical evidence for God meets as much resistance from a good Calvinist as it does from a good naturalist. Karl Barth, the Swiss neo-orthodox theologian who had such an influence on American Protestant theology in the twentieth century, stood squarely in the Reformed tradition. The success of neo-orthodoxy explains in part the resistance to the brand of natural theology that the intelligent design movement explores.

This book does not propose to break new ground so much as it hopes to make some established pathways clear. We expect our audience will primarily be drawn from Christians who take an interest in the relationship of modern science to their biblical faith. Agnostics and atheists may read the book. People of other religious faiths or people with a nontraditional view of Christianity may read the book. By and large, however, we expect most of our readers will share a broad though common faith with different denominational and theological expressions. We write from the perspective of faith. Not only do we believe that the universe was designed, but we also know the Designer. How compelling is the evidence, however, for someone who does not know the Designer? Can someone come to know the Designer by observing the design? Does the evidence compel only one conclusion about the origin of the design?

This book explores why the notion of the design of the universe suddenly reappeared at the end of the twentieth century after its supposed demise at the hands of Darwinian naturalism. The first three chapters of the book explore the different ways in which people have considered design over the last three thousand years or so. While the brief study is not exhaustive, it does provide a condensed overview of many of the major positions that have influenced the course of thought in the West. We mention briefly how different religions and philosophies have thought about design. We then explore how philosophical views have influenced both the theology and the science of the West.

Chapters four through six explore three major realms of scientific study in which major breakthroughs have provided renewed speculation on design.

The chapters explore cosmology, math and physics, and chemistry and biology. In the course of this survey, we introduce the new terminology of the design discussions: anthropic principles, irreducible complexity, and specified complexity. The discussion suggests that science has been quite successful at describing processes, but has failed at explaining origins.

We have attempted to keep the technical discussions to a minimum. Unfortunately, it is impossible to discuss this subject without some basic knowledge of the scientific, philosophical, and theological issues at stake. By writing at a basic level, we have failed to give adequate depth to our subject for the well-informed professional. We hope we have succeeded in making the material accessible, however, to those who lack training in these fields. While the molecular biologist may consider our biology section thin, we hope he or she will benefit from an equally thin treatment of the philosophy.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

ONE OF THE GREAT pleasures of writing this book has been the many conversations about this subject that we have had with guests at Union University and at meetings elsewhere. In particular, we wish to express our appreciation to Arthur Holmes, Michael Behe, Ian Barbour, William Dembski, Owen Gingerich, Paul Nelson, Robert Russell, John Brooke, Jay Budziszewski, Gayle Woloschak, Alesia Maltz, Mark Noll, John Polkinghorne, Arthur Peacocke, John Albright, Richard Randolph, Harold McKone, and Mil Thompson. We have also relied upon the continuing conversation and insights of our colleagues with whom we teach and work at Union University, notably: Brad Greene, Greg Thornbury, Randall Bush, Wayne Wofford, Michael McMahan, James Huggins, and David Ward. It would be difficult to carry on a writing project of this nature without the support and encouragement of David Dockery, our president, Carla Sanderson, our provost, and Barbara McMillin, our dean. Finally, we express our gratitude to Pam Dennis, who also read the manuscript and offered many stylistic suggestions.

This revised edition of *Designer Universe* came about through the encouragement of Paul Wason of the John Templeton Foundation. We appreciate his interest in our work and the support of the John Templeton Foundation that we have received for our work over the years. It was a pleasure to work with Laura G. Barrett, associate publisher of Templeton Foundation Press, in the development of this revised edition. We also appreciate the help of Natalie Lyons Silver, managing editor at Templeton Foundation Press, for her help during the acquisition process. We wish to express our appreciation to Len Goss, our editor at Broadman & Holman, who first asked us to write the earlier edition of this book as a sequel to the first book we wrote together, *Science and Faith: An Evangelical Dialogue*. This topic is one we would have enjoyed pursuing at length in the earlier book, but space did

not permit; therefore, we appreciate the opportunity that Broadman & Holman gave us with the first edition of this book. The title of the first edition was the choice of the publisher, but the title of the revised edition derives its name from the 1994 C. S. Lewis Summer Institute, which had the theme “Cosmos and Creation: Chance or Dance?” It was a pleasure to work again with Jonathan Gillette, who illustrated the book, and Melissa Mann, who burned the CD of our illustrations. Our research could not have been completed without the conscientious aid of Paul Sorrell in the Emma Waters Summar Library of Union University, who secured many rare volumes for us through interlibrary loan. We also appreciate the cheerful work of our student research assistant, Tammy Meyers.

A project of this sort could never be completed in the course of normal business hours. We have taken our work home to our families, who have given us more than support and encouragement. Our wives, Christine Menzel and Mary Anne Poe, have read the manuscript thoroughly and made numerous suggestions for its improvement besides correcting earlier drafts. We could not have completed this project without their presence and interest in the project. We proudly acknowledge their contribution to the book.

Jimmy H. Davis
Harry L. Poe
Jackson, Tennessee
July 27, 2007

CHANCE OR DANCE

1. THE APPEARANCE OF DESIGN

Harry Lee Poe

DURING THE LAST DECADE of the twentieth century, scientists and theologians began to use the word “design” when speaking of the universe. People had used this word or at least this idea to speak of the universe for thousands of years in different parts of the world. Most scientists and theologians in the West, however, had discarded the idea of the design of the universe more than one hundred years earlier. Why, after all this time, has the idea of the design of the universe and everything in it once again come into the conversation of scientists and theologians?

The idea of design provides a way of coming to the idea of God from the back door. The idea of design suggests the existence of a designer. If the universe was actually designed, how did it come to be designed? More importantly for personal beings like people, if the universe was actually designed, who designed it?

It does not take a philosopher, scientist, or theologian to discuss the idea of design. People around the world do it every day. In fact, even when the academic community of scientists and theologians had discarded the idea of design, the overwhelming number of lay people in the West clung to it. The great philosophers of the last twenty-five hundred years, going back to Plato and Aristotle, developed elaborate logical arguments to prove the existence of God by appealing to the idea of design. The average person, however, discusses the same idea without the need for such a carefully thought-out argument.

Plato often used dialogues to present his philosophical arguments. He set the philosophical conversation in the context of a conversation between two people so that he could present both sides of a question and systematically answer the objections to his argument. When most people first encounter the design idea, they hear it in the form of a dialogue. I do not recall how

old I was when I first heard the idea of design explained to me, but I clearly recall the terms of the explanation.

“Momma,” I asked. “Where did the sky come from?”

“God made the sky,” my mother replied.

“Momma,” I continued. “Where did the sun come from?”

“God made the sun,” my mother replied.

“Momma,” I persisted. “Where did the trees come from?”

“God made the trees,” my mother patiently answered. “God made everything.”

In its simplest and most common form, the idea of design is not an argument to prove the existence of God—it is an explanation of who God is. It assumes the existence of God and proceeds to explain how God relates to everything else. But people talk about the idea in more sophisticated terms in the everyday as well.

Before taking the path that would eventually lead me to write books that deal with theological themes, I had intended to pursue a career in law. In the early 1970s I served for a year as law clerk to Fletcher Mann, a brilliant trial lawyer in South Carolina. He was involved in what was then the largest antitrust suit ever tried in the United States. It involved a large number of textile mills primarily in the South and in Europe. In the midst of the suit, which dragged on for years with hundreds of millions of dollars at stake, Mr. Mann turned to me and mused:

I remember the most peaceful, serene day I ever spent. It was an early fall day and I was with your parents at your grandmother’s mountain house. I was stretched out in that big Pawley Island rope hammock they had on the front porch. The sound of the river rushing over the rocks around three sides of the house was like music. From there I could look straight up the Jones Gap with those mountains in full color on both sides. The temperature was just perfect and the air smelled so sweet and fresh. I remember thinking, on a day like this, how can anyone doubt the existence of a great and good Supreme Being?

The discussion suggests that it is easy to believe in a great, good creator when everything looks beautiful. The discussion seems almost glib, because it ignores those days when the storms rage and everything lies in darkness. What happens to the discussion on those days? The problem of evil, pain, and suffering inevitably raises its head when scientists, theologians, and phi-

losophers discuss the question of design. Notice the context in which Mr. Mann raised the question of design. Everything was not beautiful and sweet smelling. He was living out of a suitcase in Rock Hill, South Carolina, eating a steady diet of motel food, enduring an endless contest of wits with a stable full of high-priced lawyers from New York. The litigation had gone on for years and would go on for years more. It was in the midst of the strife and the darkness that he remembered an experience that became as real as in the moment it occurred.

Since the last paragraph was published in the first edition of this book, Mr. Mann has died. Before he died, however, he took great pleasure in giving copies of this book to his friends. He won the court case, but by the time the book was written, twenty-five years had passed. Both of Fletcher Mann's legs had been amputated and he was waiting to die. Loss of limbs and the impending loss of his life had not diminished in the slightest his sense of awe in the face of the handiwork of God.

Mr. Mann did not raise the question of design to prove the existence of God to me. At that point, the question of design did not involve the theoretical idea of what kind of God exists. Instead, he was reliving the experience of having met the Designer on a balmy fall day in the mountains. It did not matter what might happen on any other day. The Designer penetrated his soul and gave him a peace that he could draw on for the rest of his life. He had experienced the personal implications of the existence of a Designer who relates personally to what he has designed. To that extent, what he had to say was not intended to persuade me or change me. On the other hand, on a lousy fall day in Rock Hill, it did persuade him and change him. The idea of design sometimes has a purely personal quality to it.

When scientists, philosophers, and theologians speak of design, they usually think in terms of a formal proof for the existence of God. They may digress and discuss the possibility of ever proving anything before settling on the idea that they mean the demonstration of a preponderance of evidence that would demonstrate the strongest possible probability that something may be so. The first time I ever heard such a formal proof for the existence of God, it did not come from a Christian theologian, philosopher, or scientist. In fact, it did not come from a Christian at all.

I first heard the design argument for the existence of God from Swami Chinmayananda. He had formerly had a successful law practice in India before his experience of enlightenment during a mountain retreat. The year was 1972; the place, the campus of the University of South Caro-

lina. I chaired the Lectures Series Committee of the University Union, and my committee had agreed to help the Indian students by providing travel expenses to allow the Hindu teacher to visit Carolina and give a lecture. As chair of the committee, I was invited to eat with Swami Chinmayananda and the Indian students. He was a charming and engaging man who spoke with me for several hours. He agreed to give one public lecture for the student body but devoted the rest of his time to the students from India.

He chose as his topic the theme “Why God?” The provocative title was intended to stir interest during that fall election campaign when Nixon and McGovern battled it out. The large lecture hall in Currell College was almost full to hear Swami Chinmayananda explain what he meant by “Why God?” He proceeded to give what I now know to be three of the classic proofs for the existence of God: the argument from first cause, the argument from necessary being, and the argument from design. We will explore these proofs later.

He presented the arguments quite clearly, with wit and contemporary illustrations, but I learned several years later that they were the same arguments Thomas Aquinas had elaborated seven hundred years earlier. These arguments of Thomas Aquinas were the same ones Aristotle had elaborated sixteen hundred years before that. Aristotle, Thomas Aquinas, and Swami Chinmayananda had radically different understandings of God. Aristotle and Swami Chinmayananda did not share the biblical concept of creation held by Thomas Aquinas. Yet, all three found the idea of design compelling. They lived, thought, worked, taught, and wrote in quite different cultures, times, and places. Nonetheless, design was inescapably obvious to them and helped them make sense of their world. In spite of many varied understandings of the nature of the universe and the nature of God, some understanding of design forms an aspect of most of the world’s great cultures, past and present.

A WORLD OF VIEWS

People do not always mean the same thing when they speak of design, just as they do not always mean the same thing when they use the word “God.” Before exploring why the design argument would reappear after so many thinkers assumed it had been stony cold dead for a hundred years, it may prove helpful to understand how other peoples in different times and places have viewed design.