

**Review of B. C. Johnson**  
***The Atheist Debater's Handbook***  
**Prometheus Books, 1981**

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*The following is a shortened version of this essay. To receive the full version, please contact Jeff at [jstueber@globaldialog.com](mailto:jstueber@globaldialog.com)*

Several years ago I purchased Peter Kreeft and Ronald Tacelli's *Handbook of Christian Apologetics*, a massive defense of Christianity. Some arguments, I think, are invalid; some are hard to fathom, but no less than, I guess, any text from a metaphysics book. Not surprisingly, atheists and humanists have amassed a dizzying array of books advocating their critiques of theism. It was perhaps four years ago I ran across Johnson's book which I suspected would launch the death of theistic beliefs. It turned out to be nothing of the kind. [In this essay I refer to Johnson by male gender although I do not know if he/she is male.]

One of Johnson's criticisms of the theistic argument to/for design criticizes the theistic habit of arguing for design using such human organs as the eye (because it has an accurate adjustment of parts to serve a function). Johnson mentions a watch because of William Paley's famous "watchmaker" argument for God's existence which concerned itself with finding a very improbable, but designed, watch on a beach.

This argument arrives at its conclusion - that the eye is designed - by starting with a claim about the way we identify watches as designed objects. It argues that we must identify products of God's design by the same method we use to identify watches as designed. The only examples the theist can use are instances - such as watches - which are not thought to be designed by God. The theist's argument must begin this way because any non-hypothetical argument must proceed from what is presumed to be true. Arguments supporting Divine design will be based upon examples where design is presumed. Without assuming God's existence, the only things presumed to be designed are objects not designed by God. Hence, to start with presumed examples of God's design would be to assume just what we are attempting to prove - namely, that there are such examples. Therefore, the only reliable method available for detecting design is the one we have successfully used to detect products not designed by God.

Johnson rhetorically asks why criteria for concluding something is designed include an accurate adjustment of parts to achieve a desired result since animals and watches both have those features (watches are designed by man and animals, supposedly, are designed by God). He wonders how we know that animals are designed by God when watches and other sophisticated machinery are designed by humans, and the only things we can find designed are those not designed by God. Perhaps, he wonders, if we saw animals on other planets, they might be

designed by aliens and not God. Apparently if an accurate adjustment of parts can be produced by more than one agent, it is not good evidence for a certain agent's actions.

Johnson suggests we cannot discover design by God using objects that are not designed by God for our criteria. Put differently, he proposes that to find out if *A* created (*a1*, *b1*, and *c1*), we can never, for our criteria, use examples not created by *A*. This reasoning seems to be faulty as far as the search for design is done in science. In searching for evidence of outer-space alien intelligence, we presume to know what signs of intelligent design we would look for if we posited design by aliens. In fact, we can tell differences between background noise and alien signals and erected machines to detect these signals, such as those described in the movie *Contact*, which was written by Carl Sagan who spent a great deal of his life speculating about life on other planets. Sagan, who is deceased now, believed there could be a million other stars in our own galaxy alone with planets which have advanced civilizations at this moment, and was at one time director of planetary studies at Cornell and one of the foremost spokesmen of exobiology - a new field of study that deals with the possibility of extraterrestrial life and the means of detecting it.<sup>(1)</sup> He believed there was life on other planets despite the calculations which dictate that the odds of life evolving by chance on other planets is extremely small.<sup>(2)</sup> An accurate adjustment of parts is a criterion scientists use when testing for alien intelligence, as in the search for alien artifacts which would give evidence of life there or the use of radio emissions to test for alien contact, such as in programs like SETI. Such principles come into use in the search for human artifacts in cultures we may just now be exploring - artifacts which give us evidence that a culture was there to create them. Per Johnson, if the artifact is novel enough, we wouldn't be able to discover or postulate whether it is designed because all we could use is items not designed by members of that culture. Archaeologists use such principles for detecting design all the time when they search for human drawings on cave walls and monuments created by humans (like Stonehenge). We are brought again to an accurate adjustment of parts that serves a function or displays a message as criteria for design.

Christian philosopher J. P. Moreland has also pointed out flaws in Johnson's reasoning. He notes Johnson's methodology of insisting that we can only infer design by using criteria from objects we know are designed begs the question by ruling out creatures as designed even though they are what's at issue. Johnson also reasons in a circle as just stated - he argues that we can only identify items that are designed which we know are designed. These criteria are too strong and make it impossible for God to be known by man. This also, as I stated, makes it impossible to recognize as designed any object created by alien beings. Lastly, Moreland says Johnson and others who argue similarly do not understand the nature of a criterion. Our criteria for recognizing design in human artifacts may serve in many purposes but do not constitute the totality of the criteria of design in other cases.<sup>(3)</sup>

Here I think Moreland may have a point that needs developing further. It is true that aliens may create animals on other planets and we might think they were created by God when in fact they were created by "little green men." But the criteria by which we recognize design in a cave drawing or statue hardly constitute the totality of all design criteria, especially when considering cosmic design by a divine creator. There would have to be additional criteria by which we distinguish between alien-created and divine-created things.

Johnson criticizes the design argument by misstating theist arguments. He tells about a rock formation that spells out a phrase that says George Washington was the first president. Johnson starts out by telling how this message would not convey useful information if we believed that the sentence is an accidental arrangement of rocks. Fine and good. He then extends that analogy to the eye, stating that “if we rely on our eyes to give us correct information, we must believe they are the result of intentional design.” Johnson believes that theists argue for the design of the eye because eyes give us useful information. This is not so. Theists argue for the design of the eye because it has an “accurate adjustment of parts” (that which Johnson has already supposedly banished from consideration) and that these parts must all be present and function together in order for the eye to exist at all. If many of these parts would not exist at the same time as the others, the eye would be as useful as a ladder without the steps to it and would be discarded by the animal possessing it because it would be of no value whatsoever.

Johnson continues his attack on theism by arguing many things in life can happen even though the odds against them are incredibly high. His example is meeting someone on a bus. Consider every chance occurrence that must have happened for you to meet that person on that bus. Surely the odds must be incredibly high against it happening; yet you did meet that person. Therefore, the odds must not be that high or must not mean anything. Johnson forgets that the only reason you met that person on the bus is because intelligent action was involved, the two of you choosing to take that bus. The meeting did not happen by random occurrence.

It’s understandable why Johnson would include in his arguments an attack on probability because many theists’ arguments rest on evolution being just too improbable, especially when it has to generate something as intricate as a cell. He mentions the eye and states the combination of atoms that make up an eye is “only one out of billions of possible combinations” and therefore the eye combination is just as probable as any other combination. Therefore he concludes that it is incorrect to say that the eye is improbable because its probability is the same as any other combination. Ergo, the eye is not that incredible after all.

I must remember that logic if I ever go to a gambling casino and decide to mess with the dice so it gives me constant rolls of seven (which, by the way, I have no knowledge of doing). When the head of the casino questions me if I rigged the dice, I will tell him that the combination of sevens he witnessed is not to be unexpected because it has the same probability as any other combination, and therefore merely an inevitable result of chance.

This interpretation which Johnson uses is not the correct interpretation of arguments regarding chance which a theist uses, and which a casino boss would use. The casino boss would not reason as Johnson, but instead would reason as so: “The long succession of sevens being rolled by Mr. Stueber is so improbable because there are so many successions of rolls that are *not* rolls of sevens. Therefore the probability is so much greater for rolls that are *not* sevens than for rolls that are successions of sevens. Therefore Mr. Stueber must be rigging the dice.” Thus a theist argues, “There may be one possible combination that makes an eye work and there are a tremendous amount of combinations that do not make an eye work. One combination may make an eye work, but perhaps a few million or billion may make it not work. Therefore the probability against the right combination of an eye is extremely large.”<sup>(4)</sup>

More can be said about Johnson's faulty analogy between a random act producing a meaningful result and a chance meeting on a bus. Duane Gish even mentions how this type of argument was used on him in a debate and his refutation of it.

In the exchange between Sluijser and Gish, Sluijser attacked Gish's probability argument by asserting that he had calculated the probability that Gish would be on that particular spot in the world at that particular time and, according to these calculations, it was impossible for him to be there. Gish was quick to point out that his being there was not due to random chance processes but that he was there because he had been invited and had used deliberate processes to get there. Response from the audience showed that they realized that Sluijser had strengthened Gish's probability argument by unwittingly demonstrating that random chance processes could never accomplish events that would require deliberate actions by an intelligent being.<sup>(5)</sup>

I think it best that atheists abandon these arguments due to their disastrous results to their beliefs.

To summarize, upon reading Johnson, I found no logical grounds for much of what he has said. Johnson's attempts actually strengthen faith and point out that perhaps the survivability of religion, or perhaps just the Christian faith, owes a lot to the lack of credibility in atheist arguments. They seem impressive to the unschooled, yet not so to the highly trained specialists able to master philosophy such as this.

#### Notes

1. Roy Stemman, *The Supernatural: Visitors From Outer Space*, 1976, Aldus Books Ltd.: London
2. John Weldon and Zola Levitt, *UFOs: What on Earth is Happening?*, Harvest House Publishers: Irvine, CA, appendix section
3. J. P. Moreland, *Scaling the Secular City*, 1987, Baker House Books: Grand Rapids, MI, p. 68-69
4. Moreland, in his *Scaling the Secular City*, also discusses this argument by Johnson. I believe that he arrives at the same conclusions I have, although he certainly takes the long way around instead of my direct approach.
5. Duane Gish, *Up With Creation*, 1978, Creation-Life Publishers: San Diego, CA, p. 45

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