

# The “who designed the designer?” objection to design arguments

## 1. Introduction

In its long and checkered career, the teleological proof, or argument from design, has been the subject of numerous objections. Some of these objections are directed at one specific version of the proof, while others are sufficiently broad as to apply to pretty much any form that the design argument has taken. One such is what is popularly referred to as the “who designed the designer?” objection (hereafter: WDTD objection).<sup>1</sup> It is oft-made,<sup>2</sup> and likely to be familiar beyond the ivory tower of academe on account of its discussion in the so-called “new atheist” literature (e.g. Dawkins 2006, 109, 120-121, 143; Hitchens 2007, 71), and in the similarly popular works written in response to that literature (e.g. Roth 2006, 105). The classic presentation of the objection occurs in Hume’s *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion*, through the character of Philo, who delivers the objection in two distinct parts. First, the point is made that postulating a designer of the universe raises the question of explaining how “a plan of the world” formed in the mind of the designer:

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<sup>1</sup> It should be noted that this objection is not the same as that which is often levelled against forms of the cosmological argument, and which may be termed the “who created the creator?” objection. The design argument purports to establish the existence of a *designer*, whereas the cosmological argument purports to establish the existence of a *creator*, or first cause, or sufficient reason (explanatory ground) of the universe. It is not unusual to find conflation of the two objections, especially in the popular literature. See, for example, Alexis, 2008, 78ff. The conflation is no doubt due to the traditional belief—more often assumed than argued for—that the cosmological argument and design argument point to one and the same being, namely the God of classical theism, who is considered to be both creator *and* designer of the world.

<sup>2</sup> Amongst those who consider the objection effective are Bulwer 1895, 105; McDonald 1980, 89-90; Oppy 2006, 231-232.

If *reason* (I mean abstract reason, derived from enquiries *a priori*) be not alike mute with regard to all questions concerning cause and effect; this sentence at least it will venture to pronounce, that a mental world or universe of ideas requires a cause as much as does a material world or universe of objects; and if similar in its arrangement must require a similar cause. (Hume 2007, 37)

A little later, Philo makes the further point that any cause put forward to account for the mental world of the designer will itself need to be explained, and so on, with each *explanans* also in turn serving as an *explanandum*, raising the prospect of a vicious regress:

Have we not the same reason to trace that ideal world into another ideal world, or new intelligent principle? But if we stop, and go no farther; why go so far? Why not stop at the material world? How can we satisfy ourselves without going on *in infinitum*? (Hume 2007, 38)

In the writings of contemporary opponents of the design argument, the WDTD objection is invariably framed in terms of *complexity*. The broad thrust of the objection as it is made today is that any designer invoked to explain complexity in the universe will itself exhibit complexity, and this in turn calls for explanation in terms of design. One can find two distinct versions of this objection in the contemporary literature. Specifically, the objection has been couched in terms of:<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Some expressions of the objection do not fall into either of these categories. For example, George Smith (1980, 57) writes “If the universe is wonderfully designed, surely God is even more wonderfully designed. He must, therefore, have had a designer even more wonderful than He is. If *God* did not require a designer, then there is no reason why such a relatively less wonderful thing as the universe needed one.” However, so stated, the

- Complexity of designer: a designer exhibits complexity, which calls for explanation in terms of design
- Complexity of ideas: a designer's ideas exhibit complexity, which calls for explanation in terms of design

Needless to say, to each of these versions of the objection there corresponds various responses from proponents of design. As we shall see, these proponents typically adopt a very particular strategy when crafting their responses: they argue that the objection can be neutralized simply by appealing to one or more of God's attributes. In what follows, I shall argue that this strategy is inapt, and unable to yield a successful response to either version of the WDTD objection. I shall also argue that a more promising way of tackling the objections is to identify their own particular weaknesses, for once these are exposed the objections cease to be a credible threat to the design hypothesis. Consequently, then, the paper has two aims: first, to show that previous efforts to combat the various version of the WDTD objection are unacceptable; second, to identify more promising responses open to the proponent of design. To achieve these aims I shall consider the two versions of the objection in turn.

## **2. Complexity of designer**

The first version of the objection charges that a designer of the universe would exhibit complexity, which would call for explanation in terms of design. Ideally, one pressing this objection would proceed to develop it by identifying the alleged complexity exhibited by the designer, and then showing why it should be explained in terms of design. More often than

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objection is dreadfully vague: it is not clear exactly what the problem is because no explanation is given for the contention that God must be "wonderfully designed" if the universe is.

not, however, these key points of detail are omitted, with the result that the objection is often couched in very vague terms. For example, Colin McGinn (1999, 86-87) writes:

The divine creator must himself exhibit design; he is the complex being *par excellence*. He certainly cannot have arisen by chance. But then, since design requires a designer, we need a being who can create God! Very well, let us postulate such a being, a super-God. But wait, this super-God himself exhibits design, and hence requires a super-super-God to create *him*. And so it goes on, *ad infinitum*. The hypothesis of God simply pushes the question back, either because he himself has complex design or because he is himself a conscious being. The proposed explanation simply presupposes what it was intended to explain.<sup>4</sup>

McGinn here ties design to complexity—as if to say that complexity implies design—but does not explain why God should be considered as complex (or indeed, as the “complex being *par excellence*”). A similar vagueness is found in Richard Dawkins’ presentation of the objection in *The God Delusion* (2006, 109), in which he claims that “A designer God cannot be used to explain organized complexity because any God capable of designing anything would have to be complex enough to demand the same kind of explanation in his own right.” Although Dawkins is adamant *that* a designer would be complex, he is notoriously unclear about what exactly he means by this. He does, however, drop some useful hints, such as his remark that to describe God as (physically) indivisible, yet internally complex, “gets it right” (2006, 150).<sup>5</sup> In another of his works he claims: “Any Designer capable of constructing the

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<sup>4</sup> For a similar formulation, see Smart 1985, 275-276.

<sup>5</sup> This seems to make it rather difficult to construe Dawkins as claiming that God would exemplify the same kind of complexity as does the universe, i.e. physical complexity, as does Nagel 2010, 22. Such a claim is easily

dazzling array of living things would have to be intelligent and complicated beyond all imagining. And complicated is just another word for improbable—and therefore demanding of explanation.” (1996, 77) There is some ambiguity in the claim here that the designer would have to be “intelligent and complicated beyond all imagining”; it could mean that the designer would have to be intelligent *and therefore* complicated beyond all imagining, or it could be that in order to engage in the work of design the designer would need to possess two different attributes, that of being intelligent, and that of being complicated beyond all imagining. Although the latter is the more natural reading, there are reasons to favor the former, and thus construe Dawkins as claiming that the feature of the designer that calls for explanation is its vast intelligence. For example, this fits with Dawkins’ remarks about God’s “giant consciousness” (2006, 149), i.e. his omniscience, which enables him to monitor and control the state of every particle while simultaneously watching every human being and listening to prayers etc. The fact that God can do all these things, and can do them at once, indicates his complexity, according to Dawkins:

God may not have a brain made of neurones, or a CPU made of silicon, but if he has the powers attributed to him he must have something far more elaborately and non-randomly constructed than the largest brain or the largest computer we know. (2006, 154)

To clinch the point, in *The Blind Watchmaker* (1988, 141, cf. 316f) Dawkins argues as follows:

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countered in any case. For example, William Dembski (2004, 93) argues that, God, as a non-physical being, does not exemplify the kind of complexity that is exhibited in physical structures (which he terms “complex specified information”), and consequently cannot be said to be designed.

any God capable of intelligently designing something as complex as the DNA/protein replicating machine must have been at least as complex and organized as that machine itself.<sup>6</sup> Far more so if we suppose him *additionally* capable of such advanced functions as listening to prayers and forgiving sins.

We might summarize the first version of the WDTD objection as charging that any designer of the universe would have to be internally complex, on account of having a complex mental structure consisting of sophisticated and multifarious mental functions, and this needs an explanation in terms of design.

There are a number of, by now, well-rehearsed responses to this version of the objection. For example, Gregory Ganssle (2009, 150) claims that while God is internally complex, this does not stand in need of any external explanation because God is a necessary being. An external explanation would certainly be appropriate for that which is contingent, and thus could have been otherwise, because the existence of a contingent being will depend on that which is external to it. But a necessary being could not have been otherwise, and its existence does not depend on anything external to it. Consequently it is self-explanatory, and so stands in need of no external explanation, whether in terms of design or anything else. An alternative way of responding to the objection is simply to deny that God has any complexity at all, which is most commonly done by appealing to the traditional doctrine of divine simplicity. This holds, at a minimum, that there is no distinction between any of God's attributes, and that God is metaphysically simple, i.e. has no internal complexity whatsoever,

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<sup>6</sup> Commenting on this passage, Michael Ruse (2001, 114) complains that Dawkins here slips in "a strange premise, that complexity needs greater complexity to explain it." While this would indeed be a strange claim to make, Dawkins does not make it as far as I can see.

and hence nothing to be explained in terms of design.<sup>7</sup> On the surface at least, then, both responses look to be sufficient to sidestep the first version of the WDTD objection:<sup>8</sup> to its charge that the designer exhibits internal complexity, which calls for explanation in terms of design, the first response denies that God (qua necessary being) can be subject to any external explanation, and the second denies that God (qua simple being) has any complexity which would need to be explained.

There is, however, reason to question whether the proponent of the design argument is entitled to invoke the attributes of the God of classical theism to answer objections to the design argument in this way. Arguably, it would be legitimate to do this *only if* one has grounds to identify the designer alluded to by the design argument with the God of classical theism. But while many have made such an identification, attempts to justify it are rare,<sup>9</sup> and instead it is often merely *assumed* that the designer found in the conclusion of the design argument is the God of classical theism, i.e. a being which is omnipotent, omniscient, perfectly good, free, eternal, simple, necessary, etc. This assumption is clearly problematic. As Hume noted throughout the *Dialogues* (2007, 42ff), the design argument's premises do not license the inference to the God of classical theism.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, one can read the *Dialogues* as a sustained attempt to clip the wings of those natural theologians who incautiously infer the existence of the God of classical theism from the evidence of design in the universe, when

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<sup>7</sup> See Collins 2009, 46. Elsewhere, however, Collins distances himself from this response. See Collins 2012, 274.

<sup>8</sup> Though note Wielenberg's caution to appealing to divine simplicity as a response to the WDTD objection on the grounds that it leaves the notion of God obscure, and thus lacking in explanatory power (2009, 125f).

<sup>9</sup> One who attempts to do so is Richard Swinburne (1991, 141).

<sup>10</sup> Hume's point was later echoed by Kant (1996, 354), who noted that natural theologians follow their proof up to the point where it yields them a designer of the universe, and then "by a leap" they suppose this designer to be the God of classical theism (the *ens realissimum*).

a more sober inference would be more appropriate, e.g. to a designer (or designers) whose attributes and motives are unknown. Although it is quite common nowadays to find natural theologians modestly inferring the existence of an “intelligent designer” from their design arguments rather than immodestly inferring the existence of God,<sup>11</sup> this is by no means universal, and those who proceed to defend the hypothesis of design against the WDTD objection invariably favor the immodest inference over the modest one.<sup>12</sup> Hume’s lessons have not, it seems, been heeded as well as they might have been. Needless to say, if the proponents of design arguments are not justified in supposing the designer of the universe to be God, they cannot be justified in helping themselves to God’s attributes when responding to objections to design arguments.

How else, then, might one respond to the first version of the WDTD objection?

William Lane Craig (2003, 174, cf. 2008, 171-172) offers the following argument:

A mind’s *ideas* may be complex, but a mind itself is a remarkably simple thing, being an immaterial entity not composed of parts... Detractors of design have evidently confused a mind’s thoughts (which may be complex) with the mind itself (which is pretty simple).

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<sup>11</sup> See for example Michael Behe (2003, 276), who insists that “while I argue for design, the question of the identity of the designer is left open. Possible candidates for the role of designer include: the God of Christianity; an angel—fallen or not; Plato’s demiurge; some mystical new-age force; space aliens from Alpha Centauri; time travelers; or some utterly unknown intelligent being. Of course, some of these possibilities may seem more plausible than others based on information from fields other than science. Nonetheless, as regards the identity of the designer, modern ID [sc. Intelligent Design] theory happily echoes Isaac Newton’s phrase, *hypothesis non fingo*.” Similar views can be found in Alston 1967, 85-86; van Inwagen 2009, 188.

<sup>12</sup> This may explain why many of those who press the objection likewise frame it in terms of God rather than a designer.



This is not, it should be noted, an appeal to the traditional doctrine of divine simplicity, but rather an appeal to the simplicity of *minds*.<sup>13</sup> This is a key difference: while it would be unwarranted to assume (as we have just seen) that the designer of the universe is the God of classical theism, it does at least seem reasonable to suppose that the designer is a mind, since the execution of design is strongly suggestive of intelligence, which is a property of a mind. Craig then insists that the designer must be simple because the mind itself is by nature a simple thing. His argument looks to be this: minds are immaterial entities, immaterial entities are not composed of parts, i.e. are simple, therefore minds are simple. Consequently, if the designer is indeed a mind, then it is simple, and as such does not itself have any complexity that would need to be explained. Is this an effective response to the first version of the WDTD objection? Unfortunately I cannot see that it is. One obvious problem is that the major premise of the argument—that minds are immaterial entities—is highly controversial, and Craig merely assumes its truth rather than argues for it. But even if that fault were overlooked, or rectified, Craig’s response would still be unsatisfactory on the grounds that it does not directly address the first version of the WDTD objection at all. For while the objection concerns the apparent *metaphysical* complexity of the designer, Craig’s response seeks to show that a designer would be free from *physical* complexity.<sup>14</sup> This would be apposite only if it could also be shown that what is free from physical complexity (i.e. is

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<sup>13</sup> The claim that minds are simple by their very nature is one that has often been made in the history of philosophy. To give just one example, Descartes (1984, II: 9) remarks in the synopsis to the *Meditations* that “we cannot understand a mind except as being indivisible. For we cannot conceive of half a mind.”

<sup>14</sup> Why it does this is unclear, as Craig does not identify anyone who has framed the first version of the WDTD objection in terms of the designer’s physical complexity. As we have seen, even Dawkins—with whom this version of the objection is now virtually synonymous—allows that any designer would be (physically) indivisible, and therefore not physically complex.

physically simple) is also free from metaphysical complexity (i.e. is metaphysically simple), but Craig does not attempt to show this. Consequently, Craig's response to the first version of the WDTD objection is no more successful than those considered earlier, which illegitimately invoked the attributes of the God of classical theism.

In truth, all of this effort to craft an effective response to the first version of the WDTD objection has been unnecessary, because the objection itself is too weak to require one. As we have seen, the objection charges that any designer of the universe must itself be internally complex because its mental faculties are complex. Such thinking, for all its superficial appeal, in fact confuses two entirely distinct senses of "complex," for it boils down to the claim that the designer must be complex (in the sense of metaphysically complex) on account of the fact that its mental faculties are complex (in the sense of highly advanced, or sophisticated).<sup>15</sup> The first version of the WDTD objection thus rests rather precariously on the fallacy of equivocation. Once this has been recognized, and one realizes that metaphysical complexity is not determined by the degree of intelligence that a mind happens to have, nor by its ability to multi-task, the objection should cease to trouble the supporter of design, who need only point out that the objection is ill-formed, because it fails to ground its charge that the designer is metaphysically complex, and as a result it does not stand in need of a response.

### **3. Complexity of ideas**

But the supporter of design is not out of the woods yet, for although there may be no good reason to suppose unexplained complexity in the designer, or designer's mind, this does not

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<sup>15</sup> One could, perhaps, refashion the WDTD objection to charge that it is in fact the designer's advanced mental faculties that cry out for explanation in terms of design. But this looks unpromising, for while complexity might suggest design, the mere possession of a high degree of some quality or other does not.

mean that there is no unexplained complexity in the *contents* of the designer's mind. As we have already seen, Craig grants that ideas are complex, and this admission suggests, indeed *invites*, a second formulation of the WDTD objection, this time focused not on the complexity of the *designer*, but on the complexity of the designer's *ideas*. If the designer's ideas are complex, as Craig maintains, then *they* would seem to stand in need of explanation, even if the designer itself does not. The second version of the WDTD objection is therefore this: the designer's ideas are complex, which calls for explanation in terms of design.

Before this can be assessed, we need to be clear about what exactly is meant by saying that the designer's "ideas are complex," for this is an ambiguous expression that may refer either to (a) the complexity of the ideas themselves, or (b) the complexity of the content of the ideas. At the risk of reviving medieval philosophical terms, albeit in modified form, it may be helpful to refer to the former as the idea's *formal complexity* (that is, the complexity of the form of the idea, or of the idea qua idea), and the latter as the idea's *objective complexity* (that is, the complexity of the object of the idea). Now to the best of my knowledge it has never been suggested that the designer's ideas exhibit what I have called formal complexity. This should come as no surprise. An idea, after all, is simply the container for mental content. As such, it does not seem to be complex at all; it is certainly not composed of idea-fragments. Moreover, this looks to be true for all ideas, no matter what they are of, or whose mind they are in. For every idea is, in itself, merely a container for content. Ideas, then, are simple by their very nature, such that they can be said to have either no formal complexity at all, or, if it has to be a positive value, then the least possible degree of it. Either way, no explanation in terms of design is called for.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Perhaps, one might venture, the degree of an idea's formal complexity would correspond to its degree of objective complexity, such that ideas having a high degree of objective complexity would have a high degree of formal complexity also. Such a suggestion—which is considered merely for the sake of completeness—is of

But while no ideas exhibit formal complexity, some ideas do of course exhibit objective complexity, including (it is said) the plan for the universe in the designer's mind, and the complexity of this plan invites explanation in terms of design. This is very close in spirit to the form of the objection raised by Cleanthes in Hume's *Dialogues*, but is seldom stated by contemporary opponents of the design argument. However it has been raised by J. J. C. Smart (2003, 22-23), who writes:

One trouble with the design argument is that there would have to be a 'cosmic blueprint' in the mind of God... [T]he designer's mind would have to have within it a structure at least as complex as the conjunction of fundamental laws and initial conditions. So the question surely arises: what designed the designer? The design hypothesis thus seems to raise more questions (and so is less explanatory) than the atheist one.

Smart's version of the WDTD objection rests on a principle which holds that "all mental blueprints are at least as complex as what they are blueprints of."<sup>17</sup> Although Smart does not state this principle explicitly, he does look to elucidate it with the observation that "[a]n

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course nonsensical; it makes little sense to say that an idea qua idea, could be complex, even if it is an idea of something which, if actualised, would itself be complex. After all, the idea of a green rectangle is itself neither green nor rectangular, and likewise the idea of a complex three-dimensional object is itself neither complex nor three-dimensional. Ideas do not themselves take on the properties of their content, so an idea of a complex thing is itself no more complex than the idea of a simple thing (that is, an idea's degree of formal complexity is not affected by its degree of objective complexity). In other words, ideas—whether those of the designer or any other mind—just do not exhibit formal complexity.

<sup>17</sup> This presumably underwrites a claim made by Smart in an earlier paper (1985, 275-276), that "The designer of an artefact must be at least as complex as the designed artefact."

engineer designing an apparatus may produce a blueprint. Any complexity in the apparatus will then appear in the blueprint” (2003, 23). Smart allows that in the case of the universe, the “complexity in the apparatus” may simply be the complexity exhibited in its fundamental laws and initial conditions, since these are capable of generating the rest of the complexity in the universe (assuming that the universe is fully deterministic). This, then, is why Smart insists that there would have to be in the designer’s mind a structure (i.e. plan) that is equal in complexity to the laws and initial conditions of the universe. And in Smart’s view, any such structure would itself qualify as a product of design on account of its complexity, which thus gives rise to the question of who (or what) designed the designer.

A number of responses have been crafted to this version of the WDTD objection. Some concede that the plan in the designer’s mind is complex, but argue that this complexity can be adequately explained without supposing that it is a work of design. Robin Collins, for example, has argued that a mental blueprint for a world is in fact just another term for a possible world. On the theistic hypothesis, possible worlds are taken to be the objects of God’s omniscience: he thinks all possible worlds. Collins then notes that, although possible worlds can be considered to be complex, their existence is held by theists and atheists alike to be self-explanatory (2005, 193ff). So according to Collins, although it is true that there are blueprints (possible worlds) in God’s mind, and that these are complex, it is also the case that they are self-explanatory, and so (pace Smart) do not require explanation in terms of design.

In a not dissimilar vein, Patrick Richmond (2007, 114) also allows that God’s mind contains complex ideas, such as the plan of this world, but he reminds us that God’s mind “is conscious of *limitless* possibilities,” and hence contains *all* possible ideas, complex and non-complex alike. This is a direct result of God’s “unlimited intentional power,” i.e. his omniscience and omnipotence, the former revealing to him the full extent of the latter. Consequently, Richmond argues, no special explanation is required for the presence of the

complex ideas in God's mind, such as the plan for this universe, because all are adequately explained by the doctrine of God's unlimited intentional power.

A further response to the second form of the WDTD objection comes from Stephen M. Barr, who departs from Collins and Richmond at the outset, by denying the complexity of God's thoughts. He suggests (2010, 7) that God should be conceived not as a mind containing various thoughts but rather *as* "an infinite Idea or Thought." According to Barr (2010, 7), this infinite thought would in turn have to be conceived as something simple, because "It is the nature of understanding to hold many things together in a single insight. The more powerful the insight, the more it holds in its grasp, the more it unifies, the more it simplifies." I shall make no further comment on the responses advanced by Collins, Richmond, and Barr, since all three quite clearly help themselves to the attributes of the God of classical theism: Collins appeals to God's omniscience, Richmond to God's omnipotence and omniscience, while Barr's description of God as an infinite Idea or Thought certainly hints at omniscience, and/or perhaps even the doctrine of divine simplicity. These appeals are problematic, for the reason already given: they all rest on the assumption that the designer of the universe is the God of classical theism, an assumption which we have eschewed, for want of justification.

So if we cannot respond to Smart's version of the WDTD objection by appealing to the attributes of God, how can we counter it? As before, a more promising strategy is to investigate the objection itself, with the aim of identifying its weaknesses. In this case, such an investigation will reveal that the objection rests on a number of unwarranted assumptions. I shall mention three of these.

First of all, Smart assumes that the designer would have followed a mental blueprint in the design of the world. But there is no good reason to concede this point. True, many of the cases of design with which we are familiar would ordinarily be explained in terms of the designer following a mental blueprint. But this is surely not true of all. Consider, for

example, a spider's web: this is clearly fashioned for a purpose, and is arguably a work of design,<sup>18</sup> yet no one, I take it, would argue that it was produced according to a mental blueprint. There is no absurdity in the thought that a designer could design the universe in the same way a spider designs its web, that is, through instinct. No doubt it could be objected that such a suggestion is problematic inasmuch as it implies that the designer of the universe is unintelligent, but such an objection would be misguided. To suppose that the designer may have crafted the world out of instinct implies only that the designer acted without intelligence *in the crafting of the world*. And this is perfectly consistent with the designer being intelligent, and even displaying this intelligence in other areas of its existence. But if one insists on a different example of designers not acting according to a mental blueprint in order to clinch the point that design does not invariably follow from such a blueprint, one is easily produced. For one need only consider the activity of children, who build without plans and explore without maps, their actions stemming from curiosity and, indeed, the sheer creative joy of play. The corresponding thought that this example licenses, that a putative designer of the universe may have operated out of similar motives, is liable to evoke Hume's mischievous suggestion in the *Dialogues* (2007, 45) that the universe may be "the first rude essay of some infant deity." But I submit that the idea of the designer of the universe designing without a prior blueprint is better captured by the Vedantic notion of Lila (or Leela), which sees the world as the spontaneous product of God's creative play. In this scenario, talk of blueprints or plans is entirely inappropriate, inasmuch as one was not consulted (no doubt it would be true to say that the design of the world could also have come

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<sup>18</sup> In the context of the design argument, only two kinds of explanation seem to be considered, namely chance or design. I am not sure whether this exhausts the kinds of explanation that there are, but certainly if we had to explain the origin of a spider's web the hypothesis of design is much more apt than that of chance. For the spider hardly acts randomly.

about through the following of such a blueprint, but equally true to say that no blueprint was in fact followed). We may say, then, that both instinct and play are capable of bringing about design without the use of a blueprint, or complex mental plan, in which case the assumption implicit in Smart's version of the WDTD objection, namely that all instances of design follow from a mental blueprint, is false.

A second assumption on which Smart's version of the WDTD objection rests is that any blueprint in the mind of the designer "would have to have a complexity equal to that of a complete specification of laws and boundary conditions" (Smart 2003, 24). In making this assumption, Smart overlooks the possibility that the laws and boundary conditions may themselves be the result of a much simpler algorithm. There are, after all, numerous examples of simple algorithms generating complexity, such as the so-called rule 30,<sup>19</sup> and in these cases there is complexity in the effect which was not present in the cause. So it does not follow that any blueprint in the designer's mind would have to be as complex as the laws and boundary conditions of the universe.

A third assumption made by Smart's version of the objection is that any complex plan present in a mind should be considered the work of another mind. This is an odd thought indeed. We would scarcely insist on this in mundane cases (e.g. we would not assume that a blueprint in an architect's mind must have been devised by another architect), so there seems to be no reason to insist on it with ultramundane ones. (Unless, that is, there are grounds to suppose that designers are, as a breed, entirely incapable of concocting plans by themselves. But why would anyone suppose *that?*)

Here, then, are three assumptions that lie at the heart of the second version of the WDTD objection, all of which are, in addition to being unwarranted, either false or

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<sup>19</sup> See Wolfram 1983, 601-644.



implausible. Once these assumptions are identified and exposed, they show in the clearest possible way just how insubstantial the objection actually is.

#### **4. Conclusion**

We are therefore led to conclude that there are good grounds to reject both forms in which the WDTD objection is couched in the recent literature. The usual strategy of those seeking to combat the objection is to appeal to one or more of God's attributes (and we have seen appeals made to God's omnipotence, omniscience, simplicity, and necessity), but this has the potential to succeed only on the assumption that the designer of the universe is God, an assumption which there is good reason to challenge, as we have seen. But even without the resources of the God of classical theism, it is still possible to pull the fangs from the different versions of the WDTD objection by highlighting the weaknesses inherent in the objections themselves.

But, it might be thought, the observations of logical fallacies and unwarranted assumptions made over the course of this paper were altogether unnecessary, for there is a simpler way of disarming the various versions of the WDTD objection, and it was discovered by none other than Hume himself. In the *Dialogues*, after laying out his version of the objection through Philo, Hume has the character Cleanthes answer it thus:

Even in common life, if I assign a cause for any event; is it any objection, *Philo*, that I cannot assign the cause of that cause, and answer every new question, which may incessantly be started? And what philosophers could possibly submit to so rigid a rule?  
(2007, 39-40)

Cleanthes' response, or something very much like it, has been enthusiastically endorsed by numerous authors since,<sup>20</sup> many of whom take it to be the final word on the matter. For example, William Lane Craig (2003, 174; cf. 2008, 171) insists that the WDTD objection

is based on a misconception of the nature of explanation. It is widely recognized that in order for an explanation to be the best, one need not have an explanation of the explanation (indeed, such a requirement would generate an infinite regress, so that everything becomes inexplicable).

Craig's remarks here do not strike me as compelling. First, it is certainly possible to take issue with the suggestion that an infinite regress would be the inevitable upshot of insisting on explaining one's explanations. For example, a position endorsed by some atheists is that universe just is a brute fact. As Bertrand Russell once said (1957, 134), "I should say that the universe is just there, and that's all." On such a hypothesis, it may be possible to explain some of one's explanations, but eventually those explanations would come to a stop. Hence the requirement to explain one's explanations need not generate an infinite regress at all. The second, and more serious concern with Craig's endorsement of Cleanthes' response to the WDTD objection, is that it fails to distinguish between what we might term the absolute and comparative shortcomings of a hypothesis. It is surely correct to say that it is not an absolute shortcoming of the design hypothesis that it is itself unable to explain the being(s) it postulates to explain the apparent design of the universe, or even that it may ultimately harbor an infinite regress of such beings, for such loose ends do not disconfirm the design

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<sup>20</sup> See, for example, Pearl 1970, 279; Swinburne 1991, 74; S. T. Davis 1997, 101; Ratzsch 2001, 135; B. Davies 2004, 81. Dixon 2008, 51; Dembski and McDowell 2008, 87-88. Cleanthes' response is even to be found in newspaper articles on the subject; see Came 2011.

hypothesis. But equally, it is surely correct to say that if there is a plausible rival hypothesis, which is not affected by the aforementioned issues, then it may be considered a comparative shortcoming of the design hypothesis that it *is* affected by them. And of course there is such a plausible rival hypothesis, e.g. Russell's atheistic naturalism (to mention just one). The very fact that hypotheses do not exist in some theoretical vacuum, but instead compete with other hypotheses, means that it is a hollow victory indeed for a proponent of one hypothesis to insist that particular features of it do not constitute an absolute shortcoming if in fact they constitute a comparative shortcoming. The moral is that proponents of design need to consider the absolute *and* comparative merits of their theory, not just the former. In practice, what this means is that, when faced with the WDTD objection, proponents of design will need to do more than simply rehearse Cleanthes' response and leave it at that. To put the design hypothesis on the firmest possible footing, its proponents will need a more forceful response to the WDTD objection; in short, they will need to show that the objection does not inconvenience the design hypothesis either absolutely *or* comparatively. And this is most readily achieved through the sorts of responses developed over the course of this paper, which aim to reveal the weaknesses of the objection, and consequently allow the design argument to fight another day.<sup>21</sup>

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