



What is Intelligent Design?

Intelligent Design is the study of patterns in nature that are best explained as the result of intelligence.

-- William A. Dembski

Design theory — also called *design* or *the design argument* — is the view that nature shows tangible signs of having been designed by a preexisting intelligence. It has been around, in one form or another, since the time of ancient Greece.

The most famous version of the design argument can be found in the work of theologian William Paley, who in 1802 proposed his "watchmaker" thesis. His reasoning went like this:

In crossing a heath, suppose I pitched my foot against a stone, and were asked how the stone came to be there; I might possibly answer, that, for anything I knew to the contrary, it had lain there for ever. ... But suppose I had found a watch upon the ground, and it should be inquired how the watch happened to be in that place; I should hardly think the answer which I had before given [would be sufficient].^[1]

To the contrary, the fine coordination of all its parts would force us to conclude that

... the watch must have had a maker: that there must have existed, at some time, and at some place or other, an artificer or artificers, who formed it for the purpose which we find it actually to answer; who comprehended its construction, and designed its use.^[2]

Paley argued that we can draw the same conclusion about many natural objects, such as the eye. Just as a watch's parts are all perfectly adapted for the purpose of telling time, the parts of an eye are all perfectly adapted for the purpose of seeing. In each case, Paley argued, we discern the marks of an intelligent designer.

Although Paley's basic notion was sound, and influenced thinkers for decades, Paley never provided a rigorous standard for detecting design in nature. Detecting design depended on such vague standards as being able to discern an object's "purpose." Moreover, Paley and other "natural theologians" tried to reason from the facts of nature to the existence of a wise and benevolent God.

All of these things made design an easy target for Charles Darwin when he proposed his theory of evolution. Whereas Paley saw a finely-balanced world attesting to a kind and just God, Darwin pointed to nature's imperfections and brutishness. Although Darwin had once been an admirer of Paley, Darwin's own observations and experiences — especially the cruel, lingering death of his 9-year-old daughter Annie in 1850 — destroyed whatever belief he had in a just and moral universe.

Following the triumph of Darwin's theory, design theory was all but banished from biology. Since the

1980s, however, advances in biology have convinced a new generation of scholars that Darwin's theory was inadequate to account for the sheer complexity of living things. These scholars—chemists, biologists, mathematicians and philosophers of science—began to reconsider design theory. They formulated a new view of design that avoids the pitfalls of previous versions.

Called *intelligent design* (ID), to distinguish it from earlier versions of design theory (as well as from the naturalistic use of the term *design*), this new approach is more modest than its predecessors. Rather than trying to infer God's existence or character from the natural world, it simply claims "that intelligent causes are necessary to explain the complex, information-rich structures of biology and that these causes are empirically detectable." [3]

ARN Recommends: For more information about the basic concept of intelligent design, see the following resources:

[Intelligent Design: The Bridge Between Science and Theology](#) William A. Dembski

[Mere Creation: Science, Faith, & Intelligent Design](#) edited by William A. Dembski

[Rhetoric & Public Affairs Special Issue on Intelligent Design](#) John Angus Campbell, ed.

For those who are interested in the problem of pain and the role it played in Darwin's life and work, see:

[Darwin's God: Evolution and the Problem of Evil](#) Cornelius G. Hunter

[1] William Paley, *Natural Theology; or, Evidences of the Existence and Attributes of the Deity, 12th ed.* (London: J. Faulder, 1809), p. 1.

[2] Paley, p. 3.

[3] William A. Dembski, *Intelligent Design* (Downer's Grove, Ill: InterVarsity, 1999), p. 106.