

The Optimal Design *Shellie Key*

*“Some call it evolution, and others call it God”
- William Herbert Carruth*

Either by divine creation or by natural selection, we must admit that there is something similar about each of us. Each of us, whether we be plant, animal, or insect have similar features about us. For example, the smallest frog and the largest elephant each have organs such as a beating heart that help them to survive here on Earth. With this we see that whether by a god or by evolutionary means, there is a noticeable design that resides in each living thing. Virtue theorists, such as Plantinga, take advantage of this presence of design and use it to explain how proper functioning of this design in the correct environment can lead to epistemic justification. The basis of Plantinga’s philosophy is that there is a way in which the processes of the overall design have ways in which they properly function. When a creature that is properly functioning and in an environment in which the design was made, by the creator of the design to function, true beliefs could be made without worry of being mistaken. But is it fair to say that the optimal way in which this design works promises the means for epistemic justification as virtue theorists have claimed? I do believe that there is a design that resides in the world, and this I will discuss further, but to say that the purpose of a living thing’s design is linked to optimally functioning cognitive processes or even if there is such a thing as a purely optimal functioning within this design is something that I question.

Whether one believes that the design within living things was created by a deity, or if one believes that it was natural selection that formed this design over time, we all must agree that there is a general design present within all creatures and that this design coincides with environments.

There are trees that survive due to the intake and output of their seeds by birds, there is balance between pray and
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predator, and cycles of life exist in the ocean due to the orbit of the moon. These are the designs that exist in the world that occur outside of our bodies. I could name one million more examples of design that exist inside of our bodies. Each living thing needs water in order to hydrate chemical reactions within their cells and organs, needs an organ or some kind of approach to pump blood or other precious fluids, and has some kind of vulnerability to extreme temperatures. It is obvious that there is some kind of plan, but what is its purpose?

If one believes that the findings of Charles Darwin are true, it is quite obvious what the purpose of this design is. It is the system of survival, the survival of the fittest through natural selection that has made a system of features in living things. When living things are given the task to survive in nature, the strong will prevail over the weak. When the strong survive they pass their good genes on to their offspring and their offspring are given that strong gene to pass on to their offspring. When the weak do not survive they have no chance to pass these weak genes on to offspring and that weak gene will sooner or later be extinct from all species.

Owing to this struggle for life, any variation, however slight and from whatever cause proceeding, if it be in any degree profitable to an individual of any species, in its infinitely complex relations to other organic beings and external to nature, will tend to the preservation of that individual, and will generally be inherited by its offspring. (Darwin 1968, p. 115)

As Darwin has explained here, those with strong tendencies towards the necessary modes of survival will have a better shot at survival. As the genes of the strong are passed on from one generation to the next, and as the genes of the weak diminish due their host's failure to produce offspring, offspring with many favorable traits that work very well to help them to live strong and healthy lives will be left to form more traits that will help them to survive. With this design comes living things that are very well tuned towards survival and mating. If there is an optimal way that living things are made to function, these areas would be the first to form optimally to an environment. These areas often do not include being clear-minded or thinking intellectually. As

Darwin explained above, intellect would only be counted as profitable to an extent towards survival and this is why it has evolved with the human kind. We have no way of knowing if our intellect has been fully developed yet, or if it has specific ways of optimally functioning. I can promise that intellect does not function optimally as Plantinga has described it. Plantinga describes optimal functioning as having strong enough links between the environment and the functioning of cognitive processes to produce epistemic justification.

When one is drowning and grabs onto another swimmer to save herself but instead ends up drowning both herself and the other swimmer, is that considered optimally functioning? When a hamster that is equally as hungry as it is thirsty is placed between water and food yet dies from both starvation and thirst because it could not decide which to have first, is this considered optimally functioning? In evolutionary terms it is. If living things act on impulse or instinct, then their design is acting optimally as their evolutionary instinct through their design was triggered to act towards survival. Though these acts were optimal as designed through evolution, it would not be true to say that the acts were directed through intellect or that the acts were clearly thought through.

These negative consequences do occur from time to time due to some survival instincts that could be thought of as underdeveloped.

With the question of whether something is underdeveloped comes the question of whether anything is really fully developed. If these instincts towards survival could be underdeveloped, what is saying that our cognition is not also underdeveloped? Cognition is a trait that was passed on through its profitability towards survival just as the hamster's trait for attending to the largest priority first was passed. Through a belief that evolution gave design to living things comes absolutely no promise that ones cognitive abilities can be fully trusted. There is no obvious way to know just how developed our intellect is, but it cannot be assured to be developed to a point where epistemic justification could be possible as clear cognitive functioning is not the top priority of an evolutionarily optimally functioning body.

Plantinga wrote in his article: "Something we have constructed—a heating system, a rope, a linear accelerator—is functioning properly when it is functioning in the way in which it was designed; they have been designed and created by God" (Plantinga 1986, p. 14).

Plantinga and I do agree that living things are functioning to their full potential when they are functioning in a way that they were designed to function. Where Plantinga and I disagree is on how we were designed to function. Plantinga draws his standpoint from a theistic point of view. This view holds that our design was created in God's image and reflects God's perfect intellect (Plantinga 1986, p. 15). But where does Plantinga get this view of a God with perfect intellect?

If intellect is the ability to reason, perceive and understand why would God even need intellect? Why would God need abilities like perceiving and understanding when he created what there is to perceive and understand? I would think that the feature that we know as intellect would be obsolete in God's case. This view of God seems fabricated by virtue theorists much as Descartes's view of God seemed fabricated for the use of drawing conclusions in his meditations. I believe that there is more evidence backing up evolution than there is Plantinga's view of God. I should add that while I do believe that evolution is the producer of design in living things it does not mean that I believe that there is no God or deity. I see no problem in believing that God is the maker of the evolutionary design.

I would also like to add that there is no single way that a design such as the evolutionary design can function. There are a number of different varieties of the functioning of this design, but each can be said to function somewhat optimally. For example, there is no way that my human design could function optimally in a geyser filled with thousand degree waters, but there are some species of bacteria that could. There is no way that my human design could function properly while beneath ten feet of dirt, presuming that I were not being aided by any mechanism, but there are a lot of species of worms and other insects that could. There are countless other ways that species and their ability to optimally function differ from each other. Though most all species have different ways in which they optimally

function, each of the species designs has been formed over time to reach the similar goal of surviving at least until they procreate. With this, we can see that there is evolving design towards one goal, but that one goal has many ways in which it can be optimally reached.

Again, the virtue theorists and I do agree that there is an overall design that exists in the world. This design exists on many levels and in many forms, but nevertheless there is a design. This design is not promised to create pure cognitive functioning or epistemic justification as the aim of the design does not focus on cognitive processes, but instead only somewhat values cognitive processes because of their merit towards the effort to survive. Even though a characteristic is valued does not mean that the characteristic is the main goal of the design, and should not be considered optimally functioning when the main component of the design is optimally functioning. Also, because the evolutionary design is a work in progress, the characteristic of intellect in human beings could itself be a work in progress. The virtue theorists are not wrong in believing that there is order built into the world and that the order is based on an optimally functioning organism presiding within the correct environment, but how the virtue theorists believe that this order was designed to optimally function is something that I strongly disagree with.

REFERENCES

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