James Rachels and the Naturalism vs. Theism Debate
Bernie Joaquin Canteñs

James Rachels, in *Created from Animals: The Moral implications of Darwinism,*

has a very different objective than Dawkins. His purpose is to show that

Darwinism undermines traditional theism to the extent that the "image of God

thesis" must be abandoned. His primary target is not theism, as such, but the

doctrine of human dignity. Thus, unlike Dawkins, Rachel does not believe that

all versions of theism are incompatible with Darwinism. He says:

> I have argued in this chapter that Darwinism undermines theism.
> Some readers might go part of the way with the argument, but stop
> short of concluding that all forms of theism must be rejected. They
> might conclude instead that some suitably refined version of
> theism is tenable. The question that will remain, however, is
> whether that refined theism is sufficiently robust to support the
> image of God thesis.[1]

Rachels' true ambition is a loftier one than simply presenting one more argument

against theism. Instead, he wants to deconstruct the traditional moral framework

which Western civilization has operated for the past several millennia. He

believes that the pillars upon which this moral framework stands is the

religiously motivated "image of God thesis." The image of God thesis states that

human beings are special creations of God. Human beings were created by God

in His image. Of all the creatures in the world, only human beings have this

special status. All moral arguments must take into account this divinely derived

premise. Therefore, moral duties and behavior to oneself, to others of our species,

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[1] Rachels, *Created From Animals*, p. 127.

and to other animals of different species will be heavily influenced by this belief.

Rachels' objective, therefore, is to undermine the "image of God thesis," and

reconstruct a new moral framework, one that operates assuming that all animals

have the same origin. This moves away for the concerns of this paper. My

interest lies in how Rachels' arguments play out in the final analysis for the

naturalism and theism debate.

Naturalism vs. Theism.

Rachels' own assessment is that Darwinism and some versions of theism

are compatible. Thus, the truth of Darwinism does not falsify theism. He answers

the question: Must a Darwinian be skeptical about religion? as follows:

> If by this we mean "Is it logically possible to be both a Darwinian
> and a theist? Then the answer is that it is possible. There is nothing
> in Darwinism that proves that every form of theism must be false.
> But the question must have a somewhat broader meaning. Even if
> Darwinism does not prove theism is false it still might provide
> powerful reasons for doubting its truth.[2]

Rachels, therefore, doesn't commit the *simple argument fallacy*. He doesn't think

that Darwinism is incompatible with all forms of theism. He does think,

however, that it provides evidence for the falsity of theism. What is his argument

for this conclusion?

Argument against Theism

Rachel argues that the central disagreement between traditional theism

and Darwinism concerns teleology. One of the most essential characteristics of a

theistic world view is that notion of design. To better understand design, we

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[2] Ibid., 126-7.

need to distinguish it from creation. First, creation does not necessarily entail design. Second, design doesn't necessarily entail creation. Creation is the act of bringing the world into existence. Design is the act of providing the world with *specific order intended for a specific purpose.* Thus we can imagine a supernatural being that creates the world but does not design it. We can even conceive of a supernatural being that creates the world and gives it some order, but for *no* specific purpose. We can also imagine a supernatural being that designs a world, which he did not create. What is essential, to understand Rachels' argument, is to recognize the distinction between these two notions. Unlike Dawkins, Rachels is much more careful in his arguments. He neither attempts to show the falsity of creation nor the falsity of design. Instead, he simply attempts to show that it is unreasonable to believe in a world that was designed, given the truth of Darwinism. Notice that he does not argue that it is unreasonable to believe in a world that was created by a supernatural being.

The traditional theistic view of the world entails both creation and design; or, we could say it entails a form of creation that includes the notion of design. Can we simply relegate our traditional theistic view of God, to a supernatural being who created the world but did not design it? Would a traditional theist be satisfied with a deistic-theism? Rachel would not have much difficulty with this form of theism, since his central concern is not the thesis of creation, or the existence of a supernatural being, but rather the "created in the image of God thesis". There are two relevant questions: the first is *How* important is design for

traditional theism? And the second is Does the rejection of design from creation undermine the "created in the image of God thesis'?

These questions are interrelated. The idea of design is so important to theism that, if we reject that the world has a specific order for a specific purpose, then many, if not most, of the beliefs central to traditional theism must be rejected as well. Consider that if the world lacks specific order, then we cannot claim that the human species has the status of God's special creation. Moreover, if the world lacks purpose, we cannot continue to consistently belief that the existence of the human being was the culmination of some grandeur purpose, ultimately ending with our salvation and eternal life with God. What is important about the idea of design is that it assumes a creator with *intentions* and a world with *purpose*. To answer the first question (*How* important is design for traditional theism?) we need to return to its philosophical origin.

The philosophical origin of design and purpose can be found in Aristotle's concept of final cause. Aristotle argued that in addition to the formal, material, and efficient cause, one also had to understand a thing's final cause to completely understand its essence. Aristotle placed great importance in the notion of final cause; in many ways, the final cause revealed a thing's formal cause as well. Thus, it was the final cause that could most reveal to us what a thing's essence was. To explain the meaning of final cause Aristotle relies on examples of artifacts, because these were things whose teleology was evident and verifiable. For instance, consider what the essence of a knife? What is a

knife? To determine this, we could simply ask what the purpose of a knife is? Since knife are objects that are with the intention of cutting, then we can say that the final cause of the knife is to cut. One could even get more specific and ask: What is the purpose of a steak knife? Then we could answer: that it is to cut meat. Thus part of what it is to be a steak knife is to have the capability to cut meat. We should also keep in mind that the purpose of objects was related to Aristotle's concept of *virtue.*

This latter point is important for several reasons. First under a teleological view of the world things have a set and pre-established purpose determined objectively by a creator. Thus, there is an important sense in which things have a proper function. There is also an important sense in which things can malfunction and work improperly. On the one hand, the better a steak knife is at cutting meat, the more proper it functions, and according to Aristotle, the more virtuous the knife is. On the other hand, a steak knife that cannot cut meat does not function properly. (These ideas will be important when we discuss Plainting's notion of 'proper function'.) A theistic view of the world sees organic beings as having an objectively determined purpose, one that is established by the intentions of the creator. According to this view, we discover the intentions of the creator through revelations He has made to humans. The content of these revelations have placed the human species at the pinnacle of creation, as the creature created in the image of the creator Himself. The purpose of the human species is to reunite itself with its creator. All the rest of creation is subservient to

the human species' purpose. If we were to reject teleological view of the world, then all of these beliefs, which rest on design, would collapse. Thus design is essential to traditional theism and its rejection would constitute a rejection of "the image of God Thesis". Does Rachel successfully reject design?

The Argument against Design

Rachels argues that, given the truth of Darwinism, it is not reasonable to believe that the world was created with a specific design and for a specific purpose. The purpose of the argument, therefore, is not that the teleological view of the world is false but rather to undermine support for its truth. To understand his argument, we first have to consider why design was a favorable hypothesis about the world to begin with.

One of the most persuasive and well known arguments for the existence of God is Paley's teleological argument. The gist of the argument is that the world exemplifies creatures with complex design. These creatures or their body parts are composed of many sub-parts that perform different functions, all working together towards a common purpose. Paley's famous example is the human eye and its function of providing visual perception. The multifarious parts with diverse functions, and their interdependence and complexity, provides the paradigmatic schema of a conscious design. This schema has four distinct features: 1) the organic part has an evident and observable overall purpose; 2) there are many parts that have a specific function and serve a specific purpose; 3) the specific purpose of the parts function together to achieve the

overall purpose, thus they act as means to an end; 4) these parts and their respective functions exhibit a sensitive interdependence with respect to the overall end, so that the success of the overall end depends on a high degree of precision on the part of the each of the functions.

It is difficult to conceive that an organism (or some part of an organism), exhibiting these features that could come about without appealing to a conscious designer who intentionally created the parts to work together as they do to produce the overall effect.   The alternative proposal to explain this complex design phenomenon was chance. However, the idea that this kind of complexity developed by chance was (and still is) inconceivable. As a result, any rational person contemplating between the two possible alternatives would be led to believe that the world must have been created through intelligent design. Rachels believes that even before Darwin's theory of natural selection the design argument was not a good argument. He argues that Hume, in *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, provided a successful refutation of the argument. I will not treat this allegation here, what we can all agree on is that Paley's argument was tremendously persuasive throughout most of the scientific community. Rachels admits the force of the argument: "This [Peley's argument] is indeed impressive, apt to stir the heart as well as to persuade the mind, and as a young student Darwin had been completely convinced by it."[3] Furthermore, Rachels admits that Hume's refutation was not completely successful because it lacked one essential feature: an alternative and reasonable explanation for the

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[3] Rachels, p. 118.

existence of complex design. "More important was the fact that the hypothesis of divine creation provided a way of accounting for the eye, and other apparently purposive elements of nature. Why should people abandon a useful way of understanding when there is none better available?"[4]

The crux of the argument against design from evolutionary theory resides in the fact that natural selection provides a naturalistic explanation of how complex organisms could have come about. This is precisely the argumentative strength of natural selection. As Dawkins argued, even if there were no direct evidence for the truth of Darwinian evolution (and there is), it would still be the best hypothesis available to explain that existence of the variety of complex organisms. Rachels believes that Darwin's principle of natural selection is the key to refuting the design argument and thus a teleological view of the world. He says, "Darwin did what Hume could not do: he provided an alternative, giving people something else they could believe. Only then was the design hypothesis really dead."[5] I will not present empirical evidence here to show that natural selection is a process capable of developing complex organisms. This is precisely the task that Dawkins and Dennett undertook in their books. I am interested in the arguments and not in the empirical justification of the premises. Nevertheless, what is called for is the elucidation of the doctrine of natural selection. Thus below I include a section that explicates the meaning of the

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[4] Rachels, p. 118
[5] Rachels, p. 120.

doctrine and why Darwin thought that it can explain the evolution of complex organisms.

So how successful is Rachels argument against design? My assessment is his argument is successful and meets its intended expectations. He is successful insofar as Darwin's theory of natural selection considerably weakens the design argument and thus weakens the support for a teleological view of the world. This is, of course, assuming that natural selection is a theory that is well supported, something that still needs further discussion. Moreover, the compatibility rebuttal is irrelevant to Rachels' argument, since the fact that natural selection and design are logically compatible does not counter the claim that the truth of the latter is weakened by the introduction of the former.[6]

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[6] For an attempted rebuttal of Rachels' argument see John Lemos, "Rachels on Darwinism and Theism," *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 77 (2003): 399-416.