Book review


In a sparkling, lucid introduction, Neil A. Manson immediately dissociates himself from the “Creation vs. Evolution Debate” as so often depicted in the popular media. In the pages of this volume, there is nothing about impassioned Texas school boards, the fanatical lunacy of religious fundamentalism, or the degenerate atrocities of secular humanism. Instead, Manson provides a sophisticated collection of 19 essays, written by highly qualified specialists, contemporary philosophers, scientists, and mathematicians. Unlike some collections, this is no mere compendium of uneven conference papers, thrown together for quick publication. Nor is it an instrument of propaganda, packed with proponents of a single position, marching to the unified beat of some common agenda. To the contrary, Manson has chosen authors to represent a full spectrum of perspectives. Some see fine-tuning in the early universe. Others do not. Some see the marks of intelligent design in the complexities of biology. Others do not. Some extract religious inspiration from the findings of science, while others take religious inspiration elsewhere. Still others feel no need for religion. There are theists, deists and atheists in this crowd. Remarkably, not only do they all seem to be on speaking terms, they understand each other and treat each others’ critiques with open, honest respect. Consequently, this volume provides a balanced, even sampling of the current debate over the plausibility of design arguments, arguments stimulated by recent developments in the sciences, particularly cosmology and biology.

Manson divides his collection into four sections. “Part I: General Considerations” includes six essays addressing a variety of concerns, including the differentiation of types of design arguments, the varying scopes of design arguments, the meaning of design and the possibility of directly perceiving, rather than inferring, design in nature. Here, Elliot Sober, John Leslie, Robert O’Connor, and Richard Swinburne
offer a welter of distinctions to the reader. There are contrasts in topic, breadth, and focus of attention. Some design arguments sprout from developments in Big Bang cosmology. These ponder some of the most general characteristics of the cosmos as a whole. Other arguments grow from biological considerations, concentrating on specific organs, even parts of organs. Some arguments look for fine-tuning in basic physical constants, while others seek to identify cases of irreducible complexity or complex specified information. Contemporary design arguments also vary in logical style. Some proponents claim to offer purely scientific arguments, while others openly introduce philosophical and theological elements. Many of the arguments feature probability assessments, including speculative prior probabilities. Others center about likelihoods, eschewing prior probabilities. In some cases, the arguments are inferences to the best explanation. One author, Del Ratzsch, suggests the possibility of directly perceiving design in nature, or at least the marks of design, thereby avoiding inferences altogether. This, of course, leads into questions about the marks of design, what it means for something to be designed, what the purpose of designing a universe might be, and whether alternative, extant universes have any bearing on the subject. For those who enjoy the probing insights and biting humor of a celebrity roast, Jan Narveson’s contribution incorporates a wonderfully acid critique of recent attempts to construct design arguments.

“Part II: Physical Cosmology” devotes four essays to the implications of anthropic fine-tuning, the idea that various features of the physical world and its early evolution seem peculiarly suited to the subsequent evolution of life, particularly intelligent life. The first three articles are constructive, ordered in terms of generality. In the first, Paul Davies offers little more than the outline of an argument. He claims that the laws of nature permit a variety of alternative histories for the evolution of the universe, but all within certain rather narrow bounds. Ultimately, each alternative would lead to life and consciousness somewhere in the cosmos. This, in itself, is reason to suspect purpose. In the next two essays, William Lane Craig and Robin Collins develop more detailed arguments, replete with astounding numbers and partially regimented probability assessments. The final article, written by Timothy McGrew, Lydia McGrew, and Eric Vestrup, is strongly critical, discerning little more than formalized ignorance beneath such calculations.

“Part III: Multiple Universes” provides four essays concerned with the ways that the existence of other universes, spatio-temporally