FAQ:
Who designed the designer?

a.k.a. You can't claim intelligent design if you can't explain where the designer came from

The Short Answer: One need not fully understand the origin or identity of the designer to determine that an object was designed. Thus, this question is essentially irrelevant to intelligent design theory, which merely seeks to detect if an object was designed. If SETI detects a signal from intelligent extra-terrestrial life, we need not know how that life form arose to determine that there was indeed an intelligent being that sent the signal. Intelligent design theory cannot address the identity or origin of the designer--it is a philosophical / religious question that lies outside the domain of scientific inquiry. Christianity postulates the religious answer to this question that the designer is God who by definition is eternally existent and has no origin. There is no logical philosophical impossibility with this being the case (akin to Aristotle's 'unmoved mover') as a religious answer to the origin of the designer. See also a response to a sub-issue below, about whether or not the origin of the first designer means CSI comes from an unintelligent source.

The Long Answer:

The premise behind this objection is that for intelligent design theory to be valid, it must somehow account for the origin of the intelligent designer. Another flavor of this objection is to ask, " You can't claim intelligent design if you can't explain where the designer came from." This second flavor of the objection presumes that apart from intelligent design theory, there must be some kind of independent evidence for the origin of the designer. Both flavors of this objection reflect a misunderstanding about how intelligent design theory works.

Firstly, it should be noted that the scientific theory of intelligent design cannot address the nature or identity of the designer but merely detects the products of the action of an intelligent designer (see our Intelligent Design Theory, and the Relationship between Science and Religion for details). The identity of the designer is a question that lies outside the explanatory scope of the science of intelligent design theory. To understand why this lies outside the scope of intelligent design theory, it is necessary to understand how intelligent design theory works.

Here is how intelligent design theory works:

i. Observation: The ways that intelligent agents act can be observed in the natural world and described. When intelligent agents act, it is observed that they produce high levels of "complex-specified information" (CSI). CSI is basically a scenario which is unlikely to happen (making it complex), and conforms to a pattern (making it specified). Language and machines are good examples of things with much CSI. From our understanding of the world, high levels of CSI are always the product of intelligent design.

ii. Hypothesis: If an object in the natural world was designed, then we should be able to examine that object and find the same high levels of CSI in the natural world as we find in human-designed objects.

iii. Experiment: We can examine biological structures to test if high CSI exists. When we look at natural objects in biology, we find many machine-like structures which are specified, because they have a particular arrangement of parts which is necessary for them to function, and complex because they have an unlikely arrangement of many interacting parts. These biological machines are "irreducibly complex," for any change in the nature or arrangement of these parts would destroy their function. Irreducibly complex structures cannot be built up through an alternative theory, such as Darwinian evolution, because Darwinian evolution requires that a biological structure be functional

along every small-step of its evolution. "Reverse engineering" of these structures shows that they cease to function if changed even slightly.

iv. Conclusion: Because they exhibit high levels of CSI, a quality known to be produced only by intelligent design, and because there is no other known mechanism to explain the origin of these "irreducibly complex" biological structures, we conclude that they were intelligently designed.

Now let's say you are walking in a field and find a TV set. You don't necessarily know anything about who or what designed that TV set, but you can tell it is designed because, at some fundamental level, it exhibits specified complexity. But scientifically speaking, that's all you can infer--that it was designed! Now let's say that you work for SETI and detect a signal coming from outer space that looks like it was sent by an intelligent extraterrestrial source. You don't have to know where the extraterrestrial intelligent agent (EIA) which produced the signal came from to know that the signal was designed.

If you were to consider the origin of the extraterrestrial IA--a) EIA could have evolved, b) EIA could have been designed, or c) EIA could have existed without a cause from eternity. You can't determine which and it doesn't matter which is true for you to be able to infer that the signal has an intelligent source. You can justifiably infer intelligent design without having to explain or know how the designer arose.

The implication of this objection, however, is that somehow option (c) (i.e. that the designer existed eternally and has no cause) is not a viable option because many people cannot explain the origin of God, who many believe to be the Designer. This is a religious / theological objection to intelligent design because it deals with philosophical statements about the designer that have nothing to do with the empirical study of detecting design.

This objection delves into philosophy and asks if an uncaused designer would be philosophically acceptable assertion. (note that intelligent design theory doesn't necessarily say anything about how the designer arose, but let's just say for the sake of responding to the question that philosophically, we are employing option (c) and that the designer did exist eternally in the past, and has no "origin.")

Since this is a theological question, we can give a theological answer (which has nothing to do with the scientific theory of intelligent design, but is simply to show that philosophically speaking, option (c) is viable). Is it really true that, philosophically speaking, it isn't acceptable to invoke God as an explanation for the origin of the universe unless we can somehow account for the origin of God? For the Christian theist, there is no explanation for the origin of God, for God is by definition a Being existing outside of space and time eternally in the past, present, and future, from Whom all things which were created have come, who has no origin: Psalm 93:2: "Your throne was established long ago; you are from all eternity." Proverbs 8:23: "I was appointed from eternity, from the beginning, before the world began." John 1:3: "Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made."

Philosophically speaking, when it comes to worldviews, every worldview is left with some kind of an uncaused and assumed entity at the foundation of that world view. For theism, the uncaused cause is the origin of God. For atheism, the uncaused cause is the origin of the universe. In essence, every worldview necessarily has unknowns or uncaused causes at the very beginning. When asked where God came from, the theist may answer, "I don't know", but when asked where the universe came from, the non-theist must also then answer, "I don't know".

The question thus does not come down to, "Is it possible that God could have been uncaused and existed infinitely in the past?" (The answer to that question is, "yes--philosophically, it is possible that God is an uncaused cause, like Aristotle's 'unmoved mover.'") Because all worldviews have assumed

uncaused causes at their very beginning, this question comes down to, "Whose uncaused cause seems the most reasonable?" Is it more unreasonable that everything came from nothing, or that everything came from a mind which never "came" into existence in the first place (i.e. the mind always has existed)?

Some non-theists may try to avoid this unknown through a theory of cyclical universes, where our universe came from a previous universe, or theoretically exists inside some other universe, but all of these explanations still regress back to the question, "what started off the chain of events?". The non-theist must answer, "I don't know", but the theist has an explanation for one more thing than the non-theist: the origin of the universe. We may not be able to understand the "origin" of "God", but we know that space-time and energy-matter can come from a superpowerful Being. Using God as an explanation for the origin of the universe is thus an acceptable philosophical inference which actually has a larger explanatory power than a model which doesn't invoke God and leaves the origin of the universe unexplained. Theism thus provides a more philosophically acceptable uncaused cause: God. Since the universe appears to have been designed by an intelligence, postulating a super-Intelligence (whose origin is unknown or, the case of Christian theism, who has no origin) who created the universe, seems more reasonable than to postulate a designed universe that looks that way for no apparent reason.

SUB ISSUE: Must the first CSI come from an unintelligent source?

An infrequently asked question, but a interesting variant of this question, has been asked of us which goes approximately as follows:

> "Intelligent design proponents claim that CSI is always the result of intelligent action. If we presume that an intelligent designer itself must contain more CSI than its designs, doesn't this imply that the CSI inherent in the first designer must have come from a non-intelligent source? (i.e. Either the very first original intelligent designer had a natural origin, or itself was uncaused.) Doesn't this at least imply an exception to the rule that CSI is always the result of intelligent action?"

We would like to try to address it here:

Response:

1) Firstly, recall that we don't have to account for the origin of the designer to infer design. One point made above is:

> "Now let's say you are walking in a field and find a TV set. You don't necessarily know anything about who or what designed that TV set, but you can tell it is designed because, at some fundamental level, it exhibits specified complexity. But scientifically speaking, that's all you can infer--that it was designed! Now let's say that you work for SETI and detect a signal coming from outer space that looks like it was sent by an intelligent extraterrestrial source. You don't have to know where the extraterrestrial intelligent agent (EIA) which produced the signal came from to know that the signal was designed."

The scientific theory of intelligent design need not account for the origin of the designer for it to be able to infer design.

2) Secondly, this objection does make a deeper point which should be addressed. Namely, it

attempts to hit at a basic premise in the scientific theory of design itself by showing that it is required that there is a special case where the methods of ID theory don't work (i.e. this objection tries to show that there was a time when CSI came about apart from design).

Events like the origin of the first cause are so far in the past that they are not accessible to science. They can only really discuss them using philosophy and religion. Here, essentially, this question is about the "first cause"--and physicists have discussed that when we are dealing with things very early in the universe, or predating the universe, like the origin of the first cause, the normal laws of physics and reality can break down.

For example, take a hard-core materialist reductionist who believes there was never any intelligent design, and that all matter came from nothing. Such a person must believe that the universe (or the chain of universes from which ours came) just "popped into existence." Such a postulate violates the first law of thermodynamics, which states that matter and energy can never be created nor destroyed. Thus, the hard-core materialist reductionist, when exploring the first cause, requires a violation of one of the most fundamental laws of nature.

Does this mean that the first law of thermodynamics, a foundational concept in physics, is invalid or that it cannot be applied today? Of course not. What it does mean is that when we are dealing with events like the origin of the first cause, laws of nature as we observe them today tend to get a bit fuzzy! This is not unexpected.

So, if the origin of the first CSI came about apart from intelligent design, that doesn't necessarily bear upon the validity of ID theory at this stage of the universe today. Even if we make uniformitarian assumptions, scientific explanations can only apply back so far--once one goes back before the laws of nature today, modern discoveries of science might not necessarily apply anymore.

Because this is a theological / philosophical question, one can get into philosophy and theology in the response. If one takes a Judeo-Christian view that the designer is God, who was existent eternally in the past and that He Himself is uncaused, then the ultimate source of CSI, the first Designer, God, would be uncaused. So the origin of the first CSI would be uncaused, because it comes from God, who has no "origin."

It should also be noted that under this philosophical / theological explanation for the origin of the first designer, the need to account for CSI apart from a designer does nothing to help the materialist, as it does not imply that natural processes can create CSI.

If the first CSI was uncaused, this would imply a breakdown in the findings of science as we know them today (i.e. that CSI always comes from an intelligent agent). But as noted earlier regarding the first law of thermodynamics, most scientific theories get a bit fuzzy and may break down when we talk about origin of the first cause, or "events" which predate the origin of our physical universe. Whether you take a designed world-view, or a materialist world-view, you're going to have some fundamental laws getting fuzzy when you go back to the very beginning. So at best, this criticism applies equally to all worldviews, not just a designed worldview.