

The Teleological argument identifies a design and purpose in the material universe and further, that the cause is God. Is it justified in making either of those claims?

The Teleological or Design Argument¹ claims to establish that the Universe shows evidence of order, purpose and regularity and so, it is argued, must have a designer, some form of divine agent. It is considered to be an a posteriori argument and is analogical in nature. When we consider the workings of the natural laws of the Universe, the formation of billions of galaxies and the evolution of intelligent life in its ever increasing perplexity on this planet in the vast immensity of space, it is argued by some philosophers that the Cosmos as a whole shows marks of intelligent design and purpose. However, even if that was established this is not proof of the existence of the God of Classical Theism or any other conceived of by particular orthodox religious believers.

The Design Argument stated

The term 'Argument *from* Design' long used by theologians and contemporary philosophers like Alvin Plantinga and Richard Swinburne has been challenged by J. L. Mackie, Antony Flew and others because they maintain that this term assumes what has yet to be proven: namely that design and purpose are evident in the Universe. Hence Mackie prefers the term 'Argument *to* or *for* Design' precisely because it is for those putting forward the argument to establish that there is evidence of design and purpose and that the cause is God.

A form of the Design Argument can be traced back to Plato in his *Laws* and *Timaeus* and Cicero in his *The Nature of the Gods* makes use of it. It was later affirmed by Thomas Aquinas in his *Summa Theologiae* as the fifth of his Five Ways to prove the existence of God. But it was in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries that the argument achieved particular prominence in its now familiar form. William Paley in his *Natural Theology*² (1802) advanced his watch-on-the-heath analogy. If in crossing a heath we discovered a stone we might suppose that it had been there for a long time. But were we to see a watch we would not make the same assumption. In looking at it we observe a mechanism; the inference would be that this artefact

¹ Teleological: the Greek *telos*, meaning 'end' or 'purpose'.

² William Paley, *Natural Theology: Evidences of the Existence and Attributes of the Deity* (London: 1802)

The Teleological argument identifies a design and purpose in the material universe and further, that the cause is God. Is it justified in making either of those claims?

must have a maker who designed it for a particular purpose, in this case to tell the time. Paley points out that it would not weaken our inference from the watch to the watchmaker if we had never seen a watch being made and knew nothing about its mechanisms. We would not assume that it was the result of the random operation of natural forces. The natural world, the Universe as a whole, Paley suggests, shows clear evidence of intelligent and purposeful design. Paley refers to the evidences of design in natural organisms, particularly organs of the human body and those of various species of animals. Like Isaac Newton, he focuses on the marvels of the human eye. 'Were there no example in the world of contrivance except the eye, it would be alone sufficient to support the conclusion which we draw from it, as to the necessity of an intelligent creator.'³

The Design Argument refuted by Hume

The most telling, and arguably the most devastating, reply to arguments of this kind had already been delivered in what Mackie calls 'a masterpiece of philosophical literature', namely David Hume's *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* (1779).⁴ Hume provides a fair presentation of the case for design through the mouth of Cleanthes, who refers to the 'curious adapting of means to ends throughout all nature', and this

'resembles exactly, though it much exceeds the productions of human contrivance; of human designs, thought, wisdom and intelligence. Since therefore the effects resemble each other we are led to infer, by all the rules of analogy, that the causes also resemble; and that the Author of Nature is similar to the mind of man; though possessed of much larger faculties, proportioned to the grandeur of the work...By this argument a posteriori, and

³ William Paley, *Natural Theology* quoted in Michael Palmer, *The Question of God: An Introduction and Sourcebook* (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), p.96.

⁴ J. L. Mackie, *The Miracle of Theism: Arguments for and against the Existence of God* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982), p.134.

The Teleological argument identifies a design and purpose in the material universe and further, that the cause is God. Is it justified in making either of those claims?

by this argument alone, do we prove at once the existence of a Deity, and his similarity to human mind and intelligence.⁵

This is essentially an argument from analogy and Mackie notes that while Philo, who voices Hume's own scepticism, concedes that there is some similarity between the cause of the world and human intelligence this cannot be proven and is therefore inconsequential.⁶ Let us examine several of Hume's criticisms.

The strength of the analogy between human-made artefacts and the orderly workings of Nature is not sufficiently strong to conclude, according to Hume, that there is a God who designed the Universe. Hume suggests that our world is not like a machine (he gives the examples of houses and watches) and that if an analogy is to be used reproduction through generation and vegetation may be a closer and more natural one for how the world operates than that of man-made machines. As Philo rightly says, Cleanthes' argument from analogy makes major assumptions without any evidence. We know that an architect builds a house because we can observe the result but there is no possibility of confirming through observation alone that a divine mind is the architect of the Universe itself. According to Philo, the use of analogy between divine and human designers is also problematic in as much as the more reliance is placed on that analogy the more God appears to share human limitations.

Philo argues that any effect should be proportional to the cause and in this case the effect is the material Universe, which is not perfect and infinite, and so why should we suppose the creator of the Universe to be infinite and perfect? Even if the Design Argument is accepted this establishes the existence of a deity who has produced an imperfect world and it does not prove that this being has the divine attributes of the

⁵ David Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, Part II, edited by R. H. Popkin (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1980), p.15.

⁶ J. L. Mackie, *The Miracle of Theism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982), p.135.

The Teleological argument identifies a design and purpose in the material universe and further, that the cause is God. Is it justified in making either of those claims?

God of Classical Theism: namely omnipotence, omniscience and omnibenevolence. Moreover, the reality of horrendous evils and suffering in the world weakens faith in such a God. For Hume, and indeed for others, this raises the possibility of what we might call a 'non-moral' deity who may be indifferent to human sufferings brought about by moral evils such as war and natural evils like earthquakes and cancer.

Hume claims that we cannot infer from the fact that objects and processes in the Universe have causes that the Universe as a whole has a cause unless we have experience of other Universes. According to Hume, there are other explanations that may weaken the theistic hypothesis that the world needs a designer. Other propositions advanced by Hume, some rather far-fetched, range from hypotheses such as that the Universe may have come about by chance and as a result of the random arrangement of particles to the fanciful notion that it was created by a group of supernatural beings or is the product of an 'infinite spider' which spun the world as a spider spins its web.

If we concede that a divine agent did design the Universe does this hypothesis itself need a prior explanation? If this material world has been prefigured and come into existence as the product of a divine mind of such wondrous complexity do we not need to account for the existence of such complexity and that mind itself? This is the regression difficulty that is Mackie's ultimate challenge to the Design Argument: even in Swinburne's restatement of it to overcome Darwinian challenges it relies on forms of the Cosmological Argument and has to fall back on the principle that God is self-explanatory, when proponents of the Design Argument argue that the existence of the Universe itself needs explanation in the form of God.

We can leave the 'spider' to its web and the multiplicity of divine beings to Occam's razor. More serious, however, is Cleanthes' admission that, as to the ultimate cause of the Universe, 'I cannot assign the cause to that cause'.⁷ Later when Demea challenges Philo to explain the delicate operations of vegetation and generation and

⁷ David Hume, *Dialogues on Natural Religion* edited by Popkin (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1980) p. 32-33.

The Teleological argument identifies a design and purpose in the material universe and further, that the cause is God. Is it justified in making either of those claims?

anatomise the structures on which they depend Philo turns Cleanthes' own words against him when he replies that we 'must stop somewhere...'⁸ Yet Philo concedes that 'we have no data to establish any system of cosmology. Our experience so imperfect in itself and so limited, both in extent and duration, can afford us no probable conjecture on the whole of things'.⁹ Even though Philo argues that vegetation and generation have the edge over reason in explaining the design and purpose he claims is evident in the world, Demea rightly observes that 'if this world had a vegetative quality and could sow the seeds of new worlds into the infinite chaos, this power would still be an additional argument for design...'¹⁰. Cleanthes closes Part VII by teasing Philo that he does not have '...the solution so ready as the objection': thus driving home the point that Philo has failed to deliver a 'knock-out' blow to the Argument to Design.¹¹

The impact of Darwin

Is such a blow possible? Mackie suggests that it is, that it was delivered by Darwin's theory of evolution and that anyone who now wishes to argue for design needs to explain how that fits with the facts of evolution, essentially the struggle for survival and a natural adaptation to the physical environment. Mackie, like Richard Dawkins, believes this rather than reliance on a designer is sufficient explanation for order in the Universe and what Cleanthes calls 'the curious adapting of means to ends throughout all nature'.¹² No serious thinkers today would deny the basic facts of evolution, though they might reasonably challenge Dawkins's assumption that the process of evolution was unguided and that the human eye and brain were the products of random adaptation.¹³ Alvin Plantinga considers this argument for 'unguided' evolution a weak one, not least because there is disagreement about

⁸ David Hume, *Dialogues on Natural Religion* edited by Popkin (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1980) p. 47.

⁹ Ibid, p.45.

¹⁰ Ibid p. 46.

¹¹ Ibid, p. 48.

¹² Ibid, p. 15.

¹³ Richard Dawkins, *River Out of Eden: A Darwinian View of Life* (New York: Basic Books, 1995), chapter 4, reprinted in Eleonore Stump and Michael J Murray (editors) *Philosophy of Religion: The Big Questions* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), p 109-113.

The Teleological argument identifies a design and purpose in the material universe and further, that the cause is God. Is it justified in making either of those claims?

whether there is a Darwinian series for the eye and other organs. There is also disagreement about whether irreducibly complex forms of life could occur without intelligent causation. Plantinga concedes that, while such irreducible complexity has not been proven to exist, all that Dawkins can establish is that there *may* be a Darwinian explanation for the course of evolution as a mechanism but there is no proof this is incompatible with a belief that the total process may have been, and is, divinely guided. Mackie himself acknowledges that sceptics opposed to the Design Argument have to deal with the theists' questions about who 'designed' the scientific laws of the Universe, who set off the Big Bang so that galaxies would appear in such an ordered way and how life originated and has been sustained.

One such theist and proponent of 'Cosmic Teleology' for whom Darwin's theory and the Teleological Argument were not incompatible was F. R. Tennant, who argued:

The forcibleness of Nature's suggestion that [it] is the outcome of intelligent design lies not in particular cases of adaptedness in the world, nor even in the multiplicity of them....[Its] appeal consists ...in the conspiracy of innumerable causes to produce, by their united and reciprocal action, and to maintain, a general order of Nature.¹⁴

Tennant argues that the world is intelligible and a Cosmos rather than a 'self-subsistent and determinate chaos'. Rather than be afraid of the facts of evolution we should embrace its full implications and not lose sight of organic evolution in the larger Cosmic picture. He maintains that

The sting of Darwinism was the suggestion that proximate and mechanical causes were sufficient to produce adaptedness from which the teleology of the Eighteenth Century had argued to God. Assignable proximate causes, whether mechanical or not, were sufficient to dispose of the particular kind of

¹⁴ F. R. Tennant, *Philosophical Theology*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1930), quoted in John Hick *The Existence of God: Readings* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1964), p. 121.

The Teleological argument identifies a design and purpose in the material universe and further, that the cause is God. Is it justified in making either of those claims?

proof supplied by Paley. But ...organic evolution...is not incompatible with evolution on a grander scale.¹⁵

Consistent with the principles of Tennant's argument that the 'survival of the fittest presupposes the arrival of the fit, and throws no light thereupon' is the 'anthropic' or 'fine tuning' principle', versions of which have been defended by Swinburne and other philosophers. Proponents argue that the complex nature of the world suggests that the Earth has been 'fine-tuned' in such a way as to support life. The theoretical physicist Paul Davies explains that had the gravitational and weak nuclear force been even very slightly different the Universe as it is would not exist.¹⁶ Like the argument from analogy the Anthropic argument works better in an inductive form. Even if the odds against the Universe as we know it appearing by accident are very high, it provides, as Plantinga himself concedes, only a limited basis for concluding the cause to be the God of religious believers like him and Swinburne, to whose arguments I now turn.¹⁷

Swinburne's restatement of the argument

Swinburne's restatement of the Design Argument relies on spatial order (regularities of co-presence) and temporal order (regularities of succession): the notion that there are patterns of order in the world (libraries, roads, beauty) and behaviour patterns driven by the laws of Nature. Swinburne acknowledges the weakness inherent in the idea that Nature behaves like a 'machine-making machine' (regularities of co-presence) but believes the principle of regularities of succession provides a reasonable argument in inductive form because the 'universe might so naturally have been chaotic'. The amount of uniformity with which objects in the Universe behave over time and space makes it more likely that it has an intelligent designer.¹⁸

¹⁵ F. R. Tennant, *Philosophical Theology*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1930), quoted in John Hick *The Existence of God: Readings* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1964), p. 125.

¹⁶ Michael Palmer, *The Question of God: An Introduction and Sourcebook* (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), p. 134.

¹⁷ Alvin Plantinga, *Where the Conflict Really Lies: Science, Religion and Naturalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011) p. 224.

¹⁸ Richard Swinburne *The Existence of God* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), revised edition, chapter 8

The Teleological argument identifies a design and purpose in the material universe and further, that the cause is God. Is it justified in making either of those claims?

Swinburne successfully responds to two challenges to his regularities of succession hypothesis. To the charge that order is imposed on the world by human beings he answers that scientific laws operate independent of us and that we perceive order rather than disorder because that is what is in evidence. Swinburne also claims that science can explain only laws and sub-laws but not what he calls 'highest-level' laws which explain everything else.

Conclusion

The world as we know it is not a formless chaos but a 'Cosmos', an ordered system. It is the totality of the process of evolution and the operation of orderly scientific laws throughout the Universe that demand a rational explanation. Some philosophers conclude that the Universe may be the product of a Cosmic Mind imposing order and showing evidence of purpose. Hume and Darwin did indeed deal a body blow to Paley's version of the Design Argument and the omnibenevolent God of Classical Theism but not surely a Panentheist God of Process philosophers? Theists cannot prove that there is a divine designer creating Cosmic order but nor can materialists disprove the hypothesis and explain how the Big Bang occurred and order and consciousness arose in the first place. For all his clever arguments Philo is silent on the source of our ethical values such as those of compassion and altruism towards fellow human beings and animals and the origins of beauty and the aesthetic sense manifest in the creative arts. He provides no conclusive answers to these ultimate questions in his quest to demolish the argument Kant called 'the oldest, the clearest, and the most accordant with the common reason of mankind'¹⁹.

¹⁹ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781). B651.

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