

## The Teleological Argument (“Argument from Design”)

Handout  
16 Sep 2002

### 1. A priori versus a posteriori arguments

A priori arguments purport to provide justification for believing conclusion that is *independent of experience*.

### 2. Paley’s watch

You, a clever savage who has never before encountered a watch or any other piece of advanced technology, come across a watch lying upon a heath. Investigating it, you find that

[its parts] are so formed and adjusted as to produce motion, and that motion so regulated as to point out the hour of the day; ... if the different parts had been differently shaped from what they are, of a different size from what they are, or placed after any other manner or in any other order than that in which they are placed, either no motion at all would have been carried on in the machine, or none which would have answered the use that is now served by it. (Paley, p. 30)

Under such circumstances, Paley asserts, the only reasonable conclusion for you to draw is that the watch was made by an *intelligent designer*.

Note 1: No-one is claiming that the inference

This object is organised in this, that and the other way.  
Therefore, this object was produced by intelligent design

is a *valid* one. Everyone agrees that it is *possible* for such an object to come into existence in some other way, e.g. by the random agglomeration of atoms. The claim is only that the premise of this argument *supports* or *gives reason to believe* or *is evidence* for its conclusion.

Note 2: we don’t *directly see* that the object was designed: this is an *inference* from what we do see. So we must make sure to describe the *evidence* in ways that are neutral between the hypothesis of intelligent design and other possible hypotheses, e.g. the “random agglomeration of atoms” hypothesis. We can say ‘the watch appears to have been designed’, but that just means that it has features which would make it natural to conclude that it had been designed. That’s why the name ‘Argument from Design’ is misleading: ‘Argument *to* Design’ would be better.

### 3. The analogy

When we investigate the internal structure of an animal or plant—for example, when we dissect a vertebrate’s eye—we find something similar to what we find when we open up the watch. Hume is eloquent on this point:

All these various machines, and even their most minute parts, are adjusted to each other with an accuracy which ravishes into admiration all men who have ever contemplated them. (Hume, p. 15)

Paley suggests that the cases are analogous: the only reasonable conclusion to draw from these amazing facts about, e.g., the eye, is the conclusion that plants and animals were produced by an intelligent designer.

Of course there are various obvious dissimilarities between the cases. But Paley argues that the dissimilarities don't matter by considering variants of the watch example.

#### 4. The conclusion of the teleological argument

In the version we're concerned with, the conclusion is that plants and animals were produced by an intelligent designer.

Doesn't entail that there's a *unique* designer

Doesn't entail that the designer is omnipotent, omniscient, or in any way good.

Doesn't entail that the designer still exists. (Hume, p. 37)

#### 5. What makes the inference to intelligent design justified, when it is justified?

Hume's answer: *past experience of similar cases*. (a.k.a. induction)

[O]rder, arrangement, or the adjustment of final causes, is not of itself any proof of design, but only so far as it has been experienced to proceed from that principle. (Hume, p. 17)

But wouldn't we have reason to believe that Paley's watch was the product of intelligent design even if we had never seen a watch before? Hume: we have experience of *order* (organisation, intricacy...) being produced by intelligence.

If this is the right epistemology, the teleological argument is on shaky ground. For obviously there are enormous dissimilarities between the world of plants and animals and anything that we already know to have been produced by intelligent design.

But Hume's epistemological assumption is problematic, and nowadays few believe it.

Can it account for the rationality of our beliefs about physics and astronomy?

Can it account for the rationality of detectives' and jurors' beliefs about murders?

Another answer: *inference to the best explanation* (IBE).

The claim: suppose we have some surprising **evidence**, and a range of **hypotheses** which purport to explain this evidence. And suppose that one hypothesis gives a *much better* explanation of the evidence than all the others. Then, other things being equal, we should believe that that hypothesis is the true one.

Note: 'explanation' here is being used rather differently to the way we were using it when we talked about the cosmological argument.

What is it for one explanation to be 'better' than another?

Considering various courtroom examples, we see that an important part of "goodness" consists of *avoiding coincidences*: other things being equal, the less *surprising* it would be for a hypothesis to be true, the better it is.

Note that 'surprising' doesn't mean 'improbable'!

## 6. Competitors to the design hypothesis

If the inference to an intelligent designer is a case of IBE, the question whether it is a good inference boils down to the question whether the design hypothesis is significantly better than all its competitors. Here are some:

- Plants and animals have existed and reproduced forever in more or less their current forms
- Plants and animals just popped into existence one day, without a cause
- Plants and animals came into existence through random collisions of atoms
- Cosmic spider, etc. (Hume, part 7)
- World-seeds (Hume, part 7)
- Matter contains an "internal principle of organisation" (Hume, part 4.)
- The world exists for ever; all possible arrangements of matter are actualised at one time or another. (Hume, part 8)
- Multiple universes of one sort or another
- Evolution by natural selection

## 7. The regress problem

What would an intelligent designer have to be like? Arguably, it would have to be an intricately organised system in which each part conduces to the overall functioning of the whole.

If so, then isn't there just as much reason to posit another intelligent designer to explain the first one as there was to posit an intelligent designer in the first place?

But if we stop and go no farther, why go so far? Why not stop at the material world? How can we satisfy ourselves without going on *in infinitum*? And, after all, what satisfaction is there in that infinite progression? (Hume, p. 31)

The argument: the hypothesis of a second intelligent designer is obviously no good at all as an explanation of the existence of the first intelligent designer. But if this inference is no good, neither is the inference from the facts about plants and animals to the existence of the first intelligent designer.

Reply: there's a lot *more* intricacy, organisation, etc. in the world of plants and animals than there would have to be in a single intelligent designer. So the design hypothesis does *reduce* the number of "surprising" facts that we have to take as unexplained.

## 8. Evolution by natural selection

Darwin's idea.

Why this explanation is so satisfying.

## 9. 'God of the gaps'

These days, defenders of the teleological argument mostly focus on (i) the *initial* emergence of life on Earth (or in the universe), and (ii) the fact ("cosmic fine-tuning") that the laws of nature are compatible with the existence of life, when slightly different values of the fundamental constants would have led to a universe that collapsed after a few seconds, or was filled with homogeneous hydrogen gas, or...

But... Even if we didn't yet have any explanations of these facts that were better than the design hypothesis, given Darwin's example and other examples from the history of science, it would be quite reasonable to think that there are possible, excellent explanations of these facts that we just haven't thought of yet.