

## Outline one version of the design argument for the existence of God

For centuries the philosophical debate for and against the existence of god has raged. The Teleological argument (another name for the design argument) attempts to prove the existence of the God through the order and purpose exhibited within nature and the universe as a whole. The word Teleological comes from the Greek *teleos* meaning end or purpose, hence the Teleological argument uses the universe as a basis for arguing for the existence of god. This argument is a rich *a posteriori*, inductive, analogical argument using natural theology.

Different people's perceptions of god are very different. Those from other cultures and traditions will each have conflicting ideas about this "god". With the design argument are we trying to prove the existence of Plato's demiurge or perhaps the Roman polytheist "committee of gods"? No, we are providing proof (or not) for the existence of the god of classical theism, that is to say a monotheist, omnipresent, omnipotent, omniscient, omnibenevolent, immutable, eternal god who created the universe *ex nihilo*, out of nothing. It is important to remember that this is theistic idea the Teleological argument is looking at.

The design argument is the third of the five classical theistic proofs, but is probably the most easily understood. The basic principles of the design argument have been taken-up, adapted and regurgitated by many philosophers throughout the ages, each of who developed their own individual versions. Perhaps one of the earliest being Cicero with *de Natura Deorum* in which the character Lucilius looks up to the sky and asks,

*"What could be more clear or obvious when we look up to the sky and contemplate the heavens, that there is some divinity of superior intelligence?"* Others have included Plato and St Thomas Aquinas on whom much modern catholic theology is based. The version that I will investigate is that of William Paley.

Paley (1743-1805) was an Anglican churchman who had a strong interest in the apologetics. Apologetics were those who used natural theology to defend the existence of the god of classical theism. To quote Colin Crowder in his essay on the Design Argument,

*"The apologist need not rule out a subsequent appeal to revelation, provided that he or she gives good reasons for believing that any purported divine revelation (such as the bible) is, in fact, what it is said to be."* It is not surprising therefore that Paley uses natural theology, arguing for the existence of god using unaided human reason rather than revelation i.e. scripture. William Paley published his book *"Natural Theology: or Evidences of the Existence and Attributes of the Deity, Collected from the Appearances of Nature"* in 1802.

Paley's Theological method raises the question of what exactly the nature and purpose of proof is. First, we must consider what is meant by the term "*proof*". There are many different applications and meanings to the word proof, it could be the proof a lawyer has to accuse a guilty person, the scientist trying to prove a theory or even the athlete trying to prove that he is better than any of his competitors. However, basically we can take to understand that proof is when someone attempts to show that something is true and that they are correct, to use the common legalistic phrase "*beyond reasonable doubt*". Paley's argument is an attempt at a proof. It uses human reason to argue for god and in doing so Paley is putting himself on par with a scientist or a lawyer.

Before looking at the argument itself we should perhaps consider the reason why Paley wrote his book. Does the argument use natural theology in order to convert the atheist or is it instead to affirm the faith of the theist. If we consider Paley's position as a member of the church then the question as to whether Paley is trying to convert the atheist or if instead "*Natural Theology*" is a celebration of his faith becomes an even more fundamental question. I shall use this idea later in my essay when I investigate ways in which the argument, in spite of the criticisms against it, might remain strong today.

The argument that "*Natural Theology*" puts forward runs as follows:

*"In crossing a heath suppose I pitched my foot against a stone, and were asked how that stone came to be there, I might possibly answer, that, for anything I knew to the contrary, it had lain there forever; nor would it perhaps be very easy to show the absurdity of this answer. But suppose I found a watch upon the ground, and it should be inquired how that watch happened to be in that place, I should hardly think of the answer I had before given, that, for anything I knew the watch had always been there. Yet why should not this answer serve for the watch, as well as for the stone?"*

Paley's response to this question is that if you examine the watch you see it is, "*Composed of finely adjusted parts manifesting orderly behaviour, and the interaction of these parts serves a specific purpose.*" In other words the watch (unlike the stone) is mechanical, it exhibits properties of order and purpose.

William Paley goes on to say how the watch is not alone in having qualities or orderly complexity and purposeful arrangement; these features we recognise in the watch are also present within many other structures within nature. We know the watch has a designer quite simply because it was manmade, it exhibits evidence of order and purpose because it has a designer who intended that this should be so. Using the principle that similar effects have similar causes, Paley infers that as the watch has an intelligent designer then is it not unreasonable to state that nature too has an intelligent designer. The only difference between the order and purpose within the world and the watch is the scale. Likewise the only difference between the intelligent watchmaker and worldmaker is that of scale. Having completed the statement of the argument, Paley provides countless examples for his hapless reader to plough through. He uses every example he can think of to illustrate his argument, from fish to the human eye, perhaps the purpose of this strategy

being to bore the reader into submitting that he has effectively proved his argument to them.

There are four key features to the Teleological Argument. Firstly, it is mechanical. The words of David Hume, who rather ironically was more concerned with criticising the argument, best describe this feature. In his book of 1779, *“Dialogues concerning Natural Religion”*, he states that nature is,

*“One great machine subdivided into an infinite number of lesser machines.”.*

Secondly the design argument concerns itself with order and purpose. Order and purpose are the key features of both nature and the watch (and the numerous other examples which Paley so zealously states). Following on from the second feature comes the third, the principle that similar effects have similar causes. We have confirmed that both the watch and nature show order and purpose. We also know that the watch has a watchmaker, this point is indisputable. In fact if it were possible to travel around three centuries back in time, it would even be possible to meet the intelligent designer of the watch. Applying the principle of similar effects have similar causes then we can point to there being an intelligent designer for the world just as there is for the watch. The fourth and final feature of this argument is that the difference between the two parts of the analogy is scale. There is a tremendous difference between the size of the watch and that of the universe, and so likewise there must be a huge difference between the scale of the watch designer and the world designer. An analogy is a correspondence or partial similarity between two things. The watch and world are analogous because they are both “mechanical” and both exhibit features of order and purpose. The watch has an intelligent designer and so by the rules of analogy we can say the world has a designer. The watch and the world are similar but not identical, just as the watchmaker and world maker at similar but not identical.

The Teleological design argument is a very simple argument to understand, when compared with the other four classical theist proofs it seems very “user-friendly” and accessible. Unlike the Cosmological and Ontological arguments, the Teleological argument can be understood with relatively little explanation. If I were, for instance, to outline the basic ideas of the design argument to a primary school child they would probably be able to understand without too much difficulty. One of the reasons it is so easy to understand is that it makes use of everyday objects, we can identify with the design argument more easily because we all know what a pocket watch looks like, what it does and have a vague idea of how it works. The use of analogy makes it vivid within our minds.

Another informal characteristic of the Teleological design argument is that it captures our imagination whether we are looking at it from a scientific or religious perspective. In his essay *“Design Argument”* Colin Crowder says,

*“It can capitalise on moods as distinct as scientific curiosity and religious awe.”*

If we are scientists we do not dismiss it for being overtly religious and faith-based in its outlook. Although the argument claims to use natural theology, that is, arguing for the existence of god through unaided human reason, it appeals to our religious awe because the argument celebrates the achievements of god (but only if we are theists).

Immanuel Kant, one of the greatest philosophers of recent times had a soft spot for the way the argument was presented, even though he didn't believe the proof worked. In his "Critique of Pure Reason" Kant writes,

*"This proof always deserves to be mentioned with respect. It is always the oldest, the clearest and the most accordant with the common reason of mankind"*. The fact that Kant, a far more prestigious man than Paley, speaks in such a way about Paley's work means we cannot deny that the argument has many strong points in the way it is put across as I have outlined above.

This argument for the existence of the god of classical theism is an *a posteriori*, inductive and analogical proof. These three are the formal characteristics which I have previously alluded to, and will now examine in more depth.

The first of these I shall look at is the way in which this argument is inductive. There are two Classical types of proof, induction and deduction. Induction is scientific method, from repeated testing in particular instances we move to general conclusions in the same class or category of thing. For example, take the statement "some sheep are green". From out everyday knowledge of sheep we know that they are not green and so we assume until proven otherwise that no sheep are green. This is not necessarily conclusive proof, as it does not rule out the possibility that one day we may come across a vivid green sheep standing in a field. However, from our vast experience of sheep we know that finding a green sheep is unlikely and so we believe until proven otherwise (i.e. we find a green sheep) that the statement "some sheep are green" is false.

The other possibility would be to state the argument deductively. Every philosophical argument would love to belong to the "deductive club", if the premises are good then deduction makes a most compelling argument that is very hard to disprove. Deduction involves mathematical or logical proof; a conclusion is drawn from a set of premises. However, for our argument to be strong we must first have strong premises. If the premises are weak or contentious then our final statement is also weakened. To illustrate the idea I shall use the following example:

Premise 1: Socrates is a man  
Premise 2: All men are mortal  
Conclusion: Socrates is mortal.

This statement is convincing because both premises are strong and watertight. We know Socrates to be a man and by definition all men are mortal, therefore we can only conclude that Socrates must be mortal. Both these statements do not need to be tested from experience; we can deduce their falsity or truth from the language that they use.

Let us see what would happen if we tried to argue the existence of God using deductive proof:

Premise 1: Nature is full of orderly structures  
Premise 2: Orderly structures are attributable to intelligent designers  
Conclusion: Therefore nature is the product of intelligent design.

The problem with attempting to state the argument in this way is that it simply is not convincing. Any deductive argument is only as strong as its premises, and that is the weakness of this example. Premise one is disputable; it is only a point of view. Some people may look around the world and say that nature is disorderly, citing examples such as the problem of war and suffering. Both of these show disorder after all, and so perhaps nature is just random. We cannot prove that structures within nature are orderly and purposeful. The second problem is that there is a fallistic error, a mistake in the reasoning. We cannot move from talking about structures within nature to talking about nature as a whole.

Therefore the design argument must be inductive quite simply because the deductive argument does not work in this instance. We have to state it in the following way:

There are numerous examples of order and purpose within nature. A watch, showing order and purpose has been designed by an intelligent designer. Therefore, it is assumed true until proven otherwise that the order and purpose within nature is attributable to an intelligent designer.

Secondly the design argument is *a posteriori*, or from what comes after. I have covered this whilst discussing the argument's inductive nature but did not refer to it as being specifically *a posteriori* as opposed to *a priori*. An *a posteriori* argument relies for its truth or falsity on the actual state of affairs. We must test it with reference to our experience, unlike an *a priori* argument the truth or falsity of a statement is not present within the meaning of the language it uses. The examples I used previously,

Premise 1: Socrates is a man  
Premise 2: All men are mortal  
Conclusion: Socrates is mortal

is an *a priori*, by the meaning of the word man we know that all men are mortal because if men weren't mortal they wouldn't be men. It would be contradictory to say that men are divine. However, with the Teleological Argument we must refer to our own experience of the world. The meaning of the words in the statement,

“There are orderly and purposeful structures in nature” gives us no clue as to the truth or falsity of the statement; it cannot be *a priori*, as we must look to our experience of the world of the senses to test the statement. The Design Argument is a very rich *a posteriori* argument because it refers to everyday things unlike the Cosmological Argument that relies on the sheer existence of the universe as its proof for the existence of the God of classical theism.

The sheer singularity of the universe means that thirdly and finally, the Design Argument must be analogical. Our knowledge of the universe is incomplete, therefore the use of an analogy such as that of a watch and the world allows us to ascribe order and purpose and ultimately intelligent design to it. Let us first visualise a possible non-analogical Design Argument. The example Colin Crowder uses in his essay “*Design Argument*” runs as follows,

- a) Most (or all) other universes are known to be the product of intelligent design.
- b) Therefore, this particular universe is probably the product of intelligent design.

As is obvious, this simply doesn't work. We cannot jump from most other universes to ours quite simply because we do not have knowledge of other universes. Secondly, and more fundamentally the definition of the word universe is "*all*" it meanings literally everything. It is logically impossible for there to be more that one universe because the universe is everything, if there were a multitude of universes then each could not be "*all*". We must state the Design Argument analogically then, if it is to make sense. To talk about the universe as a whole, the only solution is to find something similar which we have knowledge of. Paley chooses the example of a watch. The watch and universe are analogous because both exhibit elements of order and purpose. Using the principle that similar effects have similar causes, we know that the watch was designed by an intelligent designer and so from this statement we can move to another stating that the order and purpose within the universe are the products of intelligent design also. There is one fundamental difference, that of scale. However, the rules of analogy state that the two objects do not have to be identical only similar, the analogy is drawing out the similarities between the two. To quote Colin Crowder again, this

"analogical reasoning is weaker than straightforward inductive reasoning: it forces us to deal with two classes of things rather than one". Yet as I have shown, this is the only way of stating the argument because we do not have complete knowledge of the universe as a whole.

To conclude, Paley's version of the Teleological Argument is an inductive, analogical, rich *a posteriori* argument. It uses Natural Theology, i.e. using unaided human reason, to argue for the existence of the god of classical theism.