

Hume's criticism of the design argument

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Hume's criticism of the attempt to ground religion in the design argument is framed as a dialogue. *Cleanthes* represents the defender of the attempt to establish religious principles on the basis of observed fact about the natural world (natural religion); *Demea* represents the defender of religious belief who does not attempt to ground this belief in evidence about the world; and *Philo* comes the closest to representing Hume's own perspective. He is a philosophical skeptic about the attempt to ground religion in an inference from observed phenomena to the existence of an intelligent designer.

The sections from the *Dialogues* we will be looking at are a series of three arguments presented by Philo against the kind of use of the design argument we saw in Paley. Below is an outline of the three arguments, organized by the selections in the coursepack.

1 The objection from the lack of evidential basis (pp. 15-21)

Hume suggests that in cases where we justifiably infer from the existence of some phenomenon that a certain kind of cause must have existed, we do so on the basis of an observed pattern of correlations:

“That a stone will fall, that fire will burn, that the earth has solidity, we have observed a thousand and a thousand times; and when any new instance of this nature is presented, we draw without hesitation the accustomed inference.”

The problem: we have no pattern of observed correlations between universes and their designers:

“But how this argument can have place where the objects, as in the present case, are single, individual, without parallel or specific resemblance, may be difficult to explain.”

This amounts to a lack of evidence for the ‘best explanation’ claim made by the design argument.

A reply: what arguments of this sort require is not sameness, but just sufficient similarity. This leads to a different formulation of the objection. Hume points out that when we infer from the fact that one phenomenon has a cause that some other phenomenon has a cause of the same time, we must be very cautious in making sure that the two phenomena are indeed similar:

“That all inferences, Cleanthes, concerning fact are founded on the supposition that similar causes prove similar effects, and similar effects, similar causes, I shall not at present much dispute with you. But observe, I entreat you, with what extreme caution all just reasoners proceed in the transferring of experiments to similar cases. Unless the cases be exactly similar, they repose no perfect confidence in applying their past observation to any particular phenomenon. . . .”

But if this is right, then the dissimilarity of artefacts to the universe must be taken as a flaw in the case for natural religion:

“If we see a house, Cleanthes, we conclude, with the greatest certainty, that it had an architect or builder because this is precisely the species of effect which we have experienced to proceed from that species of cause. But surely you will not affirm that the universe bears such a resemblance to a house that we can with the same certainty infer a similar cause, or that the analogy here is entire and perfect. The dissimilitude is so striking that the utmost you can here pretend to is a guess . . .”

The idea that claims about what best explains some phenomenon must be grounded in evidence about the explanations of similar phenomena. If this is true, would it undercut the design argument? Is it true? Can you think of any sort of phenomenon where an inference to an explanation is justified even though we lack any evidence about the explanation of similar phenomena?

2 The objection from a regress of explanation (pp. 30-33)

At this point, Hume switches tacks. Rather than arguing that we do not have sufficient evidence to think that an intelligent designer is the best explanation of the design of the universe, he now argues that, whatever its evidential merits, there is a sense in which the appeal to an intelligent designer is unstable.

The core of Hume’s objection here is that the existence of an intelligent designer would require explanation every bit as much as the existence of the world does; so the design argument does not offer any real explanatory gain. Hume puts it like this:

“How, therefore, shall we satisfy ourselves concerning the cause of that Being whom you suppose the Author of Nature, or, according to your system of anthropomorphism, the Ideal World into which you trace the material? Have we not the same reason to trace that ideal world into another ideal world or new intelligent principle? 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 *ad infinitum*?”

And states his conclusion as follows:

“If *reason* . . . be not mute with regard to all questions concerning cause and effect, this sentence at least will it venture to pronounce: that a mental world or universe of ideas requires a cause as much as does a material world or universe of objects . . .”

He then imagines his opponent replying that the ideas of God can be explained by God’s rationality, and replies as follows:

“It was usual . . . when the cause of any phenomenon was demanded, to have recourse to their *faculties* . . . and to say, for instance, that bread nourished by the nutritive faculty, and senna purged by its purgative. But it has been discovered that this subterfuge was nothing but the disguise of ignorance, and that these philosophers, though less ingenuous, really said the same things with the skeptics or the vulgar who fairly confessed that they knew not the cause of these phenomena. In like manner, when it is asked, what cause produces order in the ideas of the Supreme Being, can any other reason be assigned by you, anthropomorphites, than that it is a rational faculty . . .? But why a similar answer will not be equally satisfactory in accounting for the order of the world . . . may be difficult to determine.”

The idea is that this explanation is just a concealed restatement of the facts. The example of the *virtus dormativa*.

What premise of the design argument is Hume attacking here? One way to read the argument is as similar to Gaunilo’s reply to Anselm: he is not showing us which premise of the design argument is wrong, but simply showing us that something about it must be wrong, since it leads to a false conclusion.

Is there any principle of best explanation on which an intelligent designer would be the best explanation of the design of the universe *and* which does not lead to the conclusion that we have to posit an intelligent designer of the intelligent designer?

3 The objection from the limitations of the design argument (pp. 34-38)

Hume thinks that a scientific view of the universe makes it seem quite different from any human artefact; he thinks that this should lead us to think that its origin should be different in virtually every way than that of artefacts like a watch:

“All the new discoveries in astronomy which prove the immense grandeur and magnificence of the works of nature are so many additional arguments for a Deity, according to the true system of theism; but, according to your hypothesis of experimental theism, they become so many objections, by removing the effect still farther from all resemblance to the effects of human art and contrivance. . . . The farther we push our researches of this kind, we are still led to infer the universal cause of all to be vastly different from mankind, or from any object of human experience and observation.”

Hume’s final objection is that even if we can use an argument like this to establish that the universe had an intelligent creator of some kind, the argument gives us no grounds for thinking that this creator has any of the attributes which we traditionally ascribe to God (infinity, perfection, goodness, etc.).

“In a word, Cleanthes, a man who follows your hypothesis is able, perhaps, to assert or conjecture that the universe sometime arose from something like design: But beyond that position he cannot ascertain one single circumstance, and is left afterwards to fix every point of his theology by the utmost license of fancy and hypothesis. The world, for aught he knows, is very faulty and imperfect, compared to a superior standard; and was only the first rude essay of some infant deity who afterwards abandoned it, ashamed of his lame performance: It is the work only of some dependent, inferior deity, and is the object of derision to his superiors: It is the production of old age and dotage in some superannuated deity; and ever since his death has run on at adventures, from the first impulse and active force which it received from him . . .”

How a proponent of the design argument should reply: scaling back the ambitions of the design argument.

A different way of reading Hume’s argument: the design of the universe not only does not ground claims about the traditional attributes of God, but in fact lends support to the claim that, if the universe had a designer, it is a quite different sort of being than we ordinarily take God to be.

4 Two versions of the design argument

Versions of the design argument based on analogy, and versions based on more abstract formulations of inference to the best explanation.

The argument from analogy.

1. The universe is analogous to human artefacts, but greater.
 2. Like things have like causes.
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- C. The universe must have a maker which is analogous to the makers of human artefacts, but greater.

The argument from inference to the best explanation.

1. The universe is well-ordered for the production of some phenomenon (e.g., intelligent life).
 2. The best explanation of this fact is that the universe was created by an intelligent designer.
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- C. The universe was created by an intelligent designer.

It seems that strains of each can be found in Paley's discussion.

The question of whether Hume's arguments count against each equally.