

## Hume on the design argument<sup>1</sup>

It is common to feel wonder and amazement at the complexity and intricacy of living creatures. The way in which living things work requires a huge coordination of lots of tiny bits, each doing their specific job. The eye provides a common example. The eye is for seeing, and its parts work together to make this possible. For example, the muscles attached to the lens change its thickness so that it can focus light from different distances onto the retina. Without the lens, the muscles, and the retina, the eye wouldn't work properly. The parts serve the purpose of the whole.

The whole of life has this structure, with parts of cells working together to serve the purposes of cells, and cells working together as tissues, and tissues working together as organs, and organs working together to support the life of the organism. What we find is order, 'regularity', throughout nature. But it could have been very different - the universe could have had no order, no regularity. So what explains the order that we find?

The coordination and intricacy of interrelations between parts in living things working together for a purpose suggests that living things have been *designed*. If they are designed, then we can infer that there is a designer. Teleological or design arguments infer from the order and regularity that we see in the universe, the existence of a God that designed the universe.

David Hume presents a version of the design argument that he goes on to criticise. In this handout, we'll look both at the argument as he presents it, and then his reasons for thinking that it fails.

### HUME'S DESIGN ARGUMENT FROM ANALOGY

In his *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion*, Hume expresses the argument like this:

The intricate fitting of means to ends throughout all nature is just like (though more wonderful than) the fitting of means to ends in things that have been produced by us - products of human designs, thought, wisdom, and intelligence. Since the effects resemble each other, we are led to infer by all the rules of analogy that the causes are also alike, and that the author of nature is somewhat similar to the mind of man, though he has much larger faculties to go with the grandeur of the work he has carried out.

By 'the fitting of means to ends', Hume is talking about the intricate coordination of parts to achieve some purpose that we commented on above. As Hume says, we

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<sup>1</sup> This handout is based on material from Lacewing, M. (2017) *Philosophy for A Level: Metaphysics of God and Metaphysics of Mind* (London: Routledge), Ch. 2, pp. 73-8

can draw an *analogy* with human design. So Hume's version of the argument is an argument from analogy.

- P1. In 'the fitting of means to ends', nature resembles the products of human design.
- P2. Similar effects have similar causes.
- P3. The cause of the products of human design is an intelligent mind that intended the design.
- C1. Therefore, the cause of nature is an intelligent mind that intended the design.

## HUME'S OBJECTIONS

### Objections to the analogy

Hume presents a series of objections attacking the analogy and its use. He begins by arguing that the analogy is not very strong. First, the products of human design, such as a house or a watch, are not much like nature or the universe as a whole. Second, the 'great disproportion' between a part of the universe and the whole universe also undermines the inference that something similar to human intelligence caused the universe. We cannot, therefore, reasonably infer that the cause of nature is anything like a human mind.

Even if we could infer from part to whole, there is no good reason to choose design by an intelligent mind as the explanation of the whole universe: 'why would we select as our basis such a tiny, weak, limited cause as the reason and design of animals on this planet seems to be?'. Thought moves the bodies of animals - why take it to be the original cause of everything?

### Whether a designer is the only or best explanation

Even if the analogy was stronger, the argument faces a further problem. In order to infer that there is a designer of nature, we have to rule out other possible explanations of the organisation of parts for a purpose. Suppose that matter is finite but that time is infinite. Given that there are only a finite number of possible arrangements of matter, over infinite time, all the arrangements of matter - including those we experience as design - would occur.

Is this a better explanation? There are problems with this proposal, such as why the arrangement of parts should *benefit* organisms. But this doesn't automatically make it a worse proposal, because there are problems with the proposal of a designer as well. For example, in all our experience, mind is joined to matter so that matter can affect mind (e.g. bodily processes can cause mental states, such as pain) just as much as mind can affect matter. Are we to suppose that the designer has a body? Or again, we have no clear concept of a mind that is eternal. The right conclusion, then, is that neither explanation is clearly better. So the design argument doesn't show that there is a designer. Instead, Hume concludes, we should suspend judgement.

### Arguing from a unique case

The argument makes an inference from an effect - the order and apparent purpose we find - to a possible cause - a designer. But we can't defend this inference, argues Hume, because it is at odds with our idea of causation.

The idea of causation is the idea of a relation between two objects or events - the cause and the effect: whenever you have the cause, you get the effect. Hume calls this 'constant conjunction'. Because causation involves *constant* conjunction, we cannot tell, from a *single* instance of some object or event, what its cause is. Think of one billiard ball hitting another and the second moving away. The second ball's movement could follow many, many events - your breathing, someone walking about the room, a light going on . . . How do you know which is the cause? We need *repeated* experience of the cause and effect occurring together in order to infer that one thing causes another. Our repeated experience shows us that the event followed by the second ball's movement is consistently the first ball hitting it. The second ball doesn't consistently move after a light goes on or someone breathes etc. In general, then, we can only infer the cause of some effect when we have many examples of the effect and cause.

Here's the objection: the origin of the universe is unique. To make *any* inference about the cause of the universe, we would need experience of the origins of many worlds. We don't have this kind of experience, so we simply cannot know what caused the universe.

We can develop the point about restrictions on our knowledge of causation to the specific example of design. As just argued, we can only know the cause of some effect when we have repeated experience of the effect following the cause. In the case of products of human design, we have repeated experience of a designer bringing about the arrangement of parts for a purpose. But we don't have any such experience in the case of nature. What causes the arrangement of parts for a purpose in nature? We don't know that it is a designer, since we have no experience of a designer bringing about this effect in natural things. The arrangement of parts for a purpose does not, *on its own*, show that the cause is a designer - because we can only know what causes what from experience. Without experiencing the cause as well as the effect, we don't know what brings about the effect. So we can't infer that the cause of order in nature is a designer.

In *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, Hume adds a further development of the objection. The inference of a designer is 'useless'. When we infer from a cause to an effect, we should only attribute properties to the cause that we need in order to explain the effect. Anything else is mere speculation. For example, if you find a squashed Coke can on the pavement, you can infer that it came under pressure from a force strong enough to squash it. But you can't infer whether that was a foot, a stone, or a car.

Now, in most cases, we learn more about a cause through other means. This allows us to make informative predictions about both the cause and its effects. With human inventions, we can find out lots about human beings, so we can make predictions about their inventions, including ones we haven't encountered. But with the designer of nature, *all* we have to go on is what we already know -

nature. We can't find out about other designers or other worlds to draw any useful conclusions about nature or the designer. So the hypothesis of a designer adds nothing to our knowledge.