

The design argument: Is the designer God?¹

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, or again the regularity we find expressed in the laws of nature, suggests that living things, or the universe itself, have been *designed*. If they are designed, then we can infer that there is a designer.

If such an argument succeeds, can we also infer that the designer of the universe is God? This is the question we discuss in this handout.

HUME'S OBJECTIONS

Suppose the argument for the existence of a designer appeals to the similarity between human inventions and the universe (or even human actions and the operation of the laws of nature). For example, the argument might go like this: We know that the organisation of parts for a purpose, when encountered in artefacts made by human beings, is the result of their design. Therefore, the organisation of parts for a purpose in natural things is similarly the result of design.

In his *Dialogues on Natural Religion*, Hume argues that such a line of thought ought to lead us to the conclusion that the designer is more similar to human beings than God is traditionally said to be. He presents six objections to inferring the existence of God from the design argument, based on this idea.

¹ 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. 73-4, 91-4

1. The scale and quality of the design reflect the power and ability of the designer. The universe isn't infinite. So we can't infer that the designer is infinite. As God is thought to be infinite, we can't infer that the designer is God.
2. The universe gives us no reason to say that the designer is perfect. Illnesses and natural disasters could be evidence of mistakes in design. If so, we should say that the designer isn't fully skilled, but made mistakes. At best, we can't tell. By contrast, God is said to be omnipotent, omniscient and supremely good. So we can't infer that the designer is God.
3. Designers are not always creators. Someone who designs a car may not also build it. So we can't infer that the designer of the universe also created the universe. The creator could just be following someone else's designs. But God is said to be the creator of the universe; so we can't infer that the designer is God.
4. The design may have resulted from many small improvements made by many people. So we cannot infer that 'the designer' is just one person. More generally, we can't infer that the powers to design and create a universe are all united in one being, rather than being shared out between lots of different beings. But God is said to be one. We have no reason to believe in one God than lots of designers that are not divine.
5. We find mind always connected to body. There is no reason to think that the designer has no body. But God is thought to be just a mind, so we can't infer that the designer is God.
6. Designers can die even as their creations continue. So the designer may have designed the universe and then died. God is said to exist eternally, so again, we can't say the designer is God.

In summary, the argument from design doesn't show that the designer is omnipotent, omniscient, the creator of the universe, just one being, non-corporeal, or even still in existence. So it doesn't show that God - as a single omnipotent, omniscient, eternal creator spirit - exists.

SWINBURNE'S RESPONSE

In 'The argument from design', Richard Swinburne argues that argues that the activity of a designer is the best explanation of the operation of the laws of nature. The design evident in nature, then, is in the laws of nature themselves, rather than in the complex organisation manifest in living things. The natural process of evolution may be able to explain the latter, but it cannot explain the laws of nature themselves. Science must assume the fundamental laws of nature in order to provide any explanations at all. It can't explain why one things succeeds another in accordance with these laws, because all scientific explanations presuppose laws. Therefore, scientific laws have no explanation unless we can find some other kind of explanation for them. We have another explanation of regularities in succession that are caused by the activity of a person: things coming about because someone intentionally brings them about. The laws of nature are the results of God's direct action on the universe as a whole.

Swinburne accepts Hume's objections (1) and (2) - if the designer is God, many of God's traditional qualities will need to be established by some other argument.

In reply to (3) and (4), Swinburne invokes Ockham's razor. Simplicity requires that we shouldn't suppose that two possible causes exist when only one will do. If we can explain the design and creation of the universe by supposing that there is just one being capable of this, then we shouldn't suppose that there is more than one being unless we have positive evidence that there is. If, for instance, different parts of the universe operated according to different laws, then that could be evidence for more than one designer being involved. But the uniformity of nature gives us good reason to suppose that there is just one designer, who is also creator.

In reply to (5), the explanation requires that the designer doesn't have a body. Having a body means that one has a particular location in space and can only act on a certain area of space. If God's effects are the operations of the laws of nature, and these hold throughout the universe, then God can act everywhere in space simultaneously. So it is better to say that God has no body.

In reply to (6), Swinburne asserts that the objection only works if we are thinking about things in spatial order, such as inventions. But temporal order - regularities in 'what happens next' - requires that the agent is acting at that time. To bring about order in what happens next, I must act. If I don't act, then the operation of the laws of nature take over. But these operations of the laws of nature are exactly what we are explaining in terms of God's activity. So God acts wherever the laws of nature hold. So God must continue to exist.