

## Swinburne's 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.

### SPATIAL ORDER AND TEMPORAL ORDER

However, the order that we have just described is a kind of 'spatial order'. Design arguments that appeal to this kind of order face two significant challenges. First, it seems that we can explain the organisation of parts for a purpose in terms of evolution. No appeal to a designer is necessary. Second, the universe contains a considerable degree of spatial 'disorder'. Why should we take the order to be more striking or important than the disorder when considering the cause of the universe?

In 'The argument from design', Richard Swinburne starts his design argument from the observation that the universe contains regularities of 'temporal order' - an orderliness in the way one thing follows another, e.g. how if you let go of something, it falls to Earth (or more precisely, how any two masses exert gravitational attraction on each other). These temporal regularities are described by the laws of nature.

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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. 86-91

Appealing to temporal regularities rather than spatial regularities as examples of design has two advantages. First, such laws are (nearly?) universal; there aren't parts of the universe that exhibit temporal 'disorder' even if they exhibit spatial disorder. Second, we haven't yet accounted for the order, the regularity, that enables matter to become organised into parts serving a purpose. Evolution works by the laws of nature, it doesn't explain them. The spatial order that evolution produces is a result of the temporal order that evolution relies upon. So what temporal order?

Swinburne 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.

### **SWINBURNE'S ARGUMENT**

Swinburne argues that there is no scientific explanation for the operation of the laws of nature. For example, science explains why water boils when you heat it by appealing to the operation of the laws of nature on the initial state of the water and the application of heat. The explanation will be in terms of laws governing the effect of heat on the properties of molecules. If we want more, then a scientific explanation of these effects on these properties can be given in terms of other laws and properties, atomic and subatomic ones. Some further explanation of these may be possible, but again, it will presuppose other laws and properties. Laws can be explained in terms of more general laws, but that's all. How do the most fundamental laws, whatever they are, work? Their operation can't be explained by science (if they could, they wouldn't be the most fundamental laws).

Put another way, science must assume the fundamental laws of nature in order to provide any explanations at all. It can't explain why one thing 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 use another type of explanation all the time, namely 'personal explanation'. We explain the products of human activity - this handout, these sentences - in terms of a person, a rational, free agent. I'm writing things I intend to write. This sort of explanation explains an object or an event in terms of a person and their purposes. So we know of regularities in succession - things coming about because someone intentionally brings them about - that are caused by the activity of a person.

Can we explain the temporal order we find in laws of nature in this way? Yes - we can explain this temporal order, and so the laws of nature that describe this order, by supposing that there is a person that can act on the universe just as we can act by moving our bodies. This provides a personal explanation for the operation of the laws of nature, and so for the order of the universe. The regularities of temporal succession that the laws of nature describe are the actions of a person. We will call this person 'the designer' for now, understanding that the 'design' this person brings about is temporal order.

So Swinburne argues:

- P1. There are some temporal regularities, e.g. related to human actions, that are explained in terms of persons.
- P2. There are other temporal regularities, e.g. related to the operation of the laws of nature, that are similar to those explained in terms of persons.
- C1. So we can, by analogy, explain the regularities relating to the operation of the laws of nature in terms of persons.
- P3. There is no scientific explanation of the operation of the laws of nature.
- P4. (As far as we know, there are only two types of explanation - scientific and personal.)
- C2. Therefore, there is no better explanation of the regularities relating to the operation of the laws of nature than the explanation in terms of persons.
- C3. Therefore, the regularities relating to the operation of the laws of nature are produced by a person.
- C4. Therefore, such a person, who can act on the entire universe, exists.

### **SWINBURNE'S RESPONSE TO HUME**

Swinburne has offered an argument from analogy. The argument depends on (P2) and with it, (C1). So we may ask, how strong is the analogy between human action and the designer's actions through the operation of the laws of nature? In his *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion*, Hume presents a similar challenge, although in the context of a design argument from spatial order. We can adapt his objections to apply them to Swinburne's argument.

First, it seems that human actions and the laws of nature are very different indeed. Why choose human reason as a model for explaining the operation of the laws of nature, rather than anything else? Swinburne responds by thinking again about the best explanation. We should appeal to human reason because other causes of order in the universe rely on the operation of the laws of nature which they don't themselves explain.

Second, Hume argues that, when thinking about what might explain spatial order, we need to consider the possibility that it could be the result of random changes in the distribution of matter. Could we apply that to temporal order as well? To do this, we need to say either that there are no laws of nature or that the laws of nature themselves change over time, randomly producing order or disorder.

Both alternatives are problematic. We have no reason to say that there are no laws of nature and every reason to think that there are. But then, could the operations of the laws of nature themselves change randomly over time, sometimes producing regularity, sometimes producing chaos? Perhaps, but given the amount of order in the universe, and the universal applicability of laws of nature, this is a poor explanation of our experience. Thus, Swinburne argues that explaining temporal regularities in personal terms remains the best explanation.

A third objection that Hume raises is that Hume also notes that our concept of causation includes the concept of 'constant conjunction': whenever you have the cause, you get the effect. So to make a claim about cause and effect, we need

*repeated* experience of the cause and effect occurring together in order to infer that one thing causes another. We cannot make any inferences about unique cases, such as the universe.

Swinburne rejects this argument. He notes that cosmologists have drawn all sorts of conclusions about the universe as a whole. Uniqueness is relative to how something is described. For example, many of the processes involved in the universe as a whole, e.g. its expansion, can be identified repeatedly in other contexts.

### **IS THE EXISTENCE OF A DESIGNER A GOOD EXPLANATION?**

Even if the explanation in terms of a designer is technically the 'best' - because there is no other - we still might not accept it if it isn't a good explanation.

One important criterion for this is whether it is simple. Ockham's razor says 'Do not multiply entities beyond necessity'. Swinburne's explanation introduces a new entity - the designer.

But this is not yet an objection. If a designer is necessary to explain the laws of nature, then the explanation respects Ockham's razor.

Nevertheless, we might object that for the designer to be a satisfactory explanation of design in nature, we would in turn need to explain the designer. A mind is as complex and as ordered as nature, so if the order in nature requires an explanation, so does the order of the designer's mind. If we can't explain the designer, then it would be better to stop our attempts at explanation at the level of nature.

Swinburne argues that this misrepresents explanation. Science is full of examples of explanation that don't explain what is assumed in the explanation. Science will introduce an entity - like a subatomic particle - in order to explain something, e.g. explosions in a nuclear accelerator. However, these new entities now need explaining, and scientists don't yet know how to explain them. This is absolutely normal, and has happened repeatedly throughout the history of science.

If we will always have something we can't explain, why invoke a designer? Why not just say we can't explain scientific laws? Because invoking a designer explains one more thing, namely the operation of scientific laws, and we should explain as much as we can. This is a principle of science and philosophy. If you give up on this, you give up on pursuing these forms of thought. So we can still say that the designer is a good explanation for the operation of scientific laws even if we can't explain the designer.