

Sermon 13: Traditional arguments for God: Part Two

This is perhaps the oldest and most popular argument for God, it is the argument from design. The Greek word *telos* which means 'end' is used because if we are able to discern design because something is purposed for a particular end, this betrays an intelligent purposer, namely God.

The ancients

The wonderful strength of this argument is that it is not made by Christians alone, but has been made by many, here are a few ancient examples.

Socrates: 'with such signs of forethought in the design of living creatures, can you doubt that they are the work of choice or design?'

Cicero: 'When we see a mechanism such as a planetary model or a clock, do we doubt that it is the creation of a conscious intelligence.'

Minucius Felix in response to the Greek Epicurean notion that that the universe is a chance accumulation of atoms: 'I feel the more convinced that people that hold this universe of consummate artistic beauty to be not the work of divine planning, but a conglomeration of some kind of fragments clinging together by chance, are themselves devoid of reason and perception.'¹

'According to Plato, there are two things that 'lead men to believe in the gods': the argument based on the soul, and the argument 'from the order and motion of the stars, and of all things under the dominion of the mind which ordered the universe.' What a lovely statement of the divine design evident throughout the universe! Plato employed both these arguments to refute atheism and concluded that there must be a 'best soul' who is the 'maker and father of all, the 'King', who ordered the primordial chaos into the rational chaos we observe today.'²

Aristotle in his work *On Philosophy* wrote:

'When thus they would suddenly gain sight of the earth, seas, and the sky; when they should come to know the grandeur of the clouds and the might of the winds; when they should behold the sun and should learn its grandeur and beauty as well as its power to cause the day by shedding light over the sky; and again, when the night had darkened the lands and they should behold the whole sky spangled and adorned with stars; and when they see the changing lights of the moon as it waxes and wanes, and the risings and settings of all these celestial bodies, their courses fixed and changeless throughout all eternity—when they should behold all these things, most certainly they would have judged both that there exists gods and that all these marvellous works are the handiworks of the gods.'³

This sounds very much like Psalm 19:1-3, 'The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims his handiwork. Day to day pours out speech, and night to night reveals knowledge. There is no speech, nor are there words, whose voice is not heard.'⁴ As well as Romans 1:19-20, 'For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. ²⁰ For his invisible attributes, namely,

¹ Blanchard, p263.

² Reasonable faith, p100.

³ Ibid, p100-101.

⁴ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#). (2016). (Ps 19:1–3). Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles.

his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse.⁵ Paul then tells us that the conclusion of gods and not God is part of the suppression of truth.

Aquinas

Aquinas made use of the teleological argument. We have already shown that he used five proofs of God's existence, the first three make up the cosmological argument this leaves the 4th and 5th. His fourth proof is the argument from goodness or perfection. This is an argument used by Anselm in *Monologion* and Augustine. It argues that if there are degrees in beauty or goodness, if one thing is better than another, 'Assuming that such judgements have an objective foundation, St. Thomas argues that the degrees of perfection necessarily imply the existence of a best, a most true, etc., which will also be the supreme being.'⁶ This argument leans strongly on Platonic notions of participation. 'The argument is Platonic in origin and presupposes the idea of participation. Contingent beings do not possess their being of themselves, nor their goodness or ontological truth; they receive their perfections, share them.'⁷

Fifth argument: Aquinas argues that when we observe inorganic objects operating for a particular purpose, like an arrow shooting towards a target, this cannot happen by chance but must result from intention. Aquinas gave another variety of this argument when he argued that when we view a number of inorganic objects working in harmony towards a combined goal, and even contrary qualities cooperating for a joined end, this must proceed from a guiding intelligence. A designer, architect, governor is the best explanation.

Many scientists echoed this idea. Copernicus spoke of it as 'this divine work of the great and noble Creator.' Kepler the father of modern physical astronomy spoke of being 'carried away by unutterable rapture,' at the ordered intricacy of the universe. Newton said, 'This most beautiful system of the sun, planets and comets could only proceed from the counsel and dominion of an intelligent and powerful being.'

William Paley

Paley is famous for his Watchmaker use of this argument:

'in crossing a heath, suppose I pitched my foot against a stone, and were asked how the 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 the watch happened to be in that place; I should hardly think of the answer which I had before given, that, for anything I knew, the watch might always have been there. Yet why should not this answer serve for the watch as well as for the stone? Why is it not admissible in the second case, as in the first? For this reason, and for no other, viz. that, when we come to inspect the watch, we perceive (what we could not discover in the stone) that its several parts are framed and put together for a purpose, e.g. that they are so formed and adjusted as to produce motion, and that motion so regulated as to point out the hour of the day; that if the different parts had been differently shaped from what they are, of a different size from what they are, or placed after any other manner, or in any other order, than that in which

⁵ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#). (2016). (Ro 1:19–20). Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles.

⁶ Copleston, p343

⁷ Copleston, p344

they are placed, either no motion at all would have been carried on in the machine, or none which would have answered the use that is now served by it. To reckon up a few of the plainest parts, and of their offices, all tending to one result: We see a cylindrical box containing a coiled elastic spring, which, by its endeavor to relax itself, turns round the box. We next observe a flexible chain (artificially wrought for the sake of flexure) communicating the action of the spring from the box to the fuse. We then find a series of wheels, the teeth of which catch in, and apply to each other, conducting the motion of the fuse to the balance, and from the balance to the pointer; and at the same time, by the size and shape of those wheels, so regulating that motion, as to terminate in causing an index, by an equable and measured progression, to pass over a given space in a given time. We take notice that the wheels are made of brass in order to keep them from rust; the spring from steel, no other metal being so elastic; that over the face of the watch there is paced a glass, a material employed in no other part of the work; but in the room of which, if there had been any other than a transparent substance, the hour could not be seen without opening the case. This mechanism being observed (it requires indeed an examination of the instrument, and perhaps some previous knowledge of the subject, to perceive and understand it; but being once, as we have said, observed and understood), the inference, we think, is inevitable; that the watch must have had a maker; that there must have existed, at some time, and at some place or other, an artificer or artificers, who formed it for the purpose which we find it actually to answer; who comprehended its construction, and designed its use.⁸

'According to Paley, we would conclude this even if other potentially disconfirming facts were true. For example, even if we had never seen a watch made, this watch would convince us that it must have a designer. Moreover, even if the watch didn't always function properly, it still offers evidence of being designed rather than arising out of random chance. Third, even if we couldn't discover the function of some of the watch's parts, that would not weaken the inference that the watch as a whole was designed. Finally, suppose we found that the watch had the ability to manufacture other watches so that the watch itself was probably produced by a previous watch. That still wouldn't cause us to question the design of the watch. Instead, we would marvel at the intelligence that produced the original watch in such a way as to allow the production of further watches. None of these facts would dissuade us from believing that the watch shows evidence of an intelligent purposive creator.⁹

Objections

David Hume made various arguments against this view. Firstly, he complained that it was an argument by analogy. But this is unfair for analogies work where they fit. Secondly, 'Any universe, regardless of origin, will *look* designed. If things in the universe were not adapted to one another (and thus apparently designed), how could there be a universe at all? So, the sheer fact of design isn't proof of God. It suggests that we should ask for the cause, but Hume maintained that nothing in the argument demands that God be that cause. It is always possible, for instance, that the universe contains an infinite number of atoms moving about randomly. Given infinite time, sooner or later they will fall into the

⁸ Reasonable Faith, p102-3.

⁹ Feinberg, J. S. (2001). [*No One Like Him: The Doctrine of God*](#) (pp. 196–197). Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books.

combination we know as our universe. The teleological argument doesn't rule out the possibility that design resulted in that way.¹⁰

Thirdly, 'The world (the effect) is finite and imperfect, so to produce this world all that is needed is a cause that is equal to or greater than the effect. But a cause that is even greater than the effect needn't be infinite. Thus, the God postulated by this argument may be very wise and very powerful, but need not be all-wise or all-powerful.'¹¹ This argument only works if you also believe in an eternal universe otherwise you will have to reckon with the notion that someone eternal had to create time, someone all powerful had to create all things, someone uncreated and who has being from Himself must be the cause of everything else.

Fourthly, 'Since we have only one instance, how can we judge that universes most probably are designed by God? If we had numerous experiences of the origin of worlds, then we could make a probability judgment, but given the uniqueness of the case, no such judgment should be made. This objection undercuts not only the teleological argument but also, apparently, any other argument for God's existence based on probability.'¹² The trouble with this argument is that it is biased against miracles and cannot allow any truth other than verificationist versions of it.

Another common objection and one raised in Dawkin's book *The Blind Watchmaker* is that the world is full of evil and things that don't work well. But Paley covers this objection because even a watch that doesn't work well still points to a maker. And we would account for the 'brokenness' by the biblical teaching of the fall.

This argument has gotten a new lease on life with further scientific discoveries. The more that we know about the universe, the more detail and complexity we see. Arguments of this complexity from chance are now becoming near statistical impossibilities practically needing faith in miracles to sustain it. Cosmic-fine tuning, irreducible complexity and intelligent design are all outworking's of the teleological argument.

Cosmic fine-tuning

'by 'fine-tuning' one means that small deviations from the actual values of the constants and qualities in question (namely gravitational force, electromagnetism and the weak and strong nuclear force) would render the universe life-prohibiting or, alternatively, that the range of life-permitting values is exquisitely narrow in comparison with the range of assumable values.'¹³

Richard Dawkins in his book *The God Delusion* rejects that God as a designer is the reason behind the apparent design in the universe. He summarizes his argument as follows:

- 1) 'One of the greatest challenges to the human intellect has been to explain how the complex, improbably appearance of design in the universe arises.

¹⁰ Feinberg, J. S. (2001). [*No One Like Him: The Doctrine of God*](#) (pp. 197–198). Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books.

¹¹ Feinberg, J. S. (2001). [*No One Like Him: The Doctrine of God*](#) (p. 198). Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books.

¹² Feinberg, J. S. (2001). [*No One Like Him: The Doctrine of God*](#) (p. 198). Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books.

¹³ Reasonable Faith, p158.

- 2) The natural temptation is to attribute the appearance of design to actual design itself.
- 3) The temptation is a false one because the designer hypothesis immediately raises the larger problem of who designed the designer.
- 4) The most ingenious and powerful explanation is Darwinian evolution by natural selection.
- 5) We don't have an equivalent explanation for physics.
- 6) We should not give up hope of a better explanation arising in physics, something as powerful as Darwinism is for biology.

Therefore, God almost certainly does not exist.'p170

There are several problems with this argument. Firstly, the conclusion does not follow from the premises, at best one must conclude that one should not infer a designer from design, the argument carries no power to disprove God. Many people might believe for other reasons like the moral argument, or the cosmological argument.

Secondly, who designed the designer is a category mistake problem. All effects have a cause but God is not an effect. Thirdly, the problem of apparent design is not solved, if we an astronaut found a machine on the moon, he may not know who made it but could know it was made and designed. Fourthly, holding out in hope for an explanation is an act of faith which Dawkins attacks.

I think this is a good argument, it is also a truth the Bible assumes all people do know yet suppress, Rom. 1:19-20, 'For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. ²⁰ For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse.'¹⁴

¹⁴ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#). (2016). (Ro 1:19–20). Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles.