

## Objections To The Teleological Argument

**The Teleological Argument:** In Hume's Dialogues, part 2, the character Cleanthes begins by stating the Teleological Argument. Whenever we see matter arranged in a complex and intricate way, he says, where all of the parts function together in certain ways, we infer that an intelligent MIND is the cause of this complexity. For instance, we never find matter arranging itself without a mind. Throw a handful of metal parts on the ground and you will never see them form a pocket watch.

Now, the universe is an immense and complex machine, he says, and this complexity resembles the sort that is found in things that are created by human beings. Due to this resemblance, we can infer that both the universe AND human creations (e.g., houses, furniture, machines, etc.) are the result of intelligent beings. The argument can be summarized as follows:

1. Every time I have encountered a complex machine, it has been the result of an intelligent creator.
2. Similar effects prove similar causes.
3. The universe is similar to a complex machine.
4. Therefore, the universe is a result of an intelligent creator.

**Objections to the argument:** The character Philo raises several objections:

(a) Dissimilarity: Philo rejects premise 3, pointing out that the universe is not really as obviously similar to a machine as the argument claims. He says, "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."

Not only is the arrangement of the universe not obviously analogous to the complexity of a house, or furniture, or machines, etc., but the portion of the universe that we are basing our claim that the universe is complex and designed is too small to make some generalized claim about the whole. The part of the universe that we observe is just a tiny corner, for a very short period of time, and known imperfectly. How can we conclude from this anything about the complexity or organization of the WHOLE?

Furthermore, we only know what sorts of causes are responsible for what sorts of effects because of REPEATED observations. For instance, we infer that one billiard ball striking another is the cause of motion in the second only after we observe this happening several times. But, in the case of God creating a universe, there is no repetition in observation to be made. God and the universe are singular, unique entities. We have never observed the origin of a universe—so, we have NO IDEA if they are "designed" as houses are.

(b) The principle of premise 2: Philo challenges the principle asserted in premise 2. He says that we really only establish certainty about the nature of a cause when we have IDENTICAL effects. Consider chemistry, for example, where similarity of effect is not enough to establish sameness of cause. For, in chemistry, just the SLIGHTEST change can result in HUGE differences. He says, "Unless the cases be exactly similar, they repose no perfect confidence in applying their past observation to any particular phenomenon."

(c) The nature of God: Philo points out that, even if this argument were successful, and it proved that there was some intelligence responsible for the universe, we would not know anything about the NATURE of such a being just by looking at the creation. He asks, "Would the manner of a leaf's blowing, even though perfectly known, afford us any instruction concerning the vegetation of a tree?" Put simply, even if we accept that there is an intelligent designer of our universe, this does not demonstrate that God (as conceived of in Western religions; i.e., omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent) exists.

**Conclusion:** These objections are taken by Philo to be decisive against the idea that the argument from design can establish the certainty of God's existence.

## Other Objections

Here are a number of other objections against the Teleological Argument that we raised in class:

**1. Observational Selection Effect:** When asking the question, “What is the probability that any existing observer will observe that the universe they live in is fine-tuned for life?” the answer seems to be: 100%. This is because, if the universe were NOT fine-tuned for life, there couldn't BE any observers. Therefore, it doesn't seem that odd that our universe is fine-tuned. If it WEREN'T, no one would be around to notice.

Reply: Consider the following scenario:

- Firing Squad: You are in front of a firing squad of 1000 sharpshooters. You hear them being given instructions to shoot you on the count of three. One! Two! Three! You cower as you hear many guns firing, but you do not feel any bullets hitting you. You take off your blind-fold and look around. There are 1000 bullet holes in the wall behind you, but not one of them has hit you. All 1000 of the sharpshooters missed their mark.

In this scenario, it would be quite reasonable to think that the sharpshooters had PLANNED to miss their mark. The probability that they all simultaneously missed their mark WITHOUT some pre-arranged agreement or plan is simply too ridiculously small. Now, if someone said, “It isn't actually that odd that you are observing what seems to indicate a pre-established plan. For, the only circumstances where you would be ALIVE to observe anything at all are ones where it would SEEM as if there was a pre-established plan”—this would not be a very satisfying refutation of the hypothesis that they sharpshooters had arranged ahead of time to not kill you. And neither should it be satisfying in the fine-tuning case; for, the fact remains, the observation (fine-tuning) is an incredibly IMPROBABLE one, and the theistic hypothesis seems to support the observation better than the atheistic one.

**2. Super Laws:** It would be very probable that the universe would turn out to be fine-tuned if it were governed by super-laws. These would be more fundamental or basic laws responsible for the present laws, parameters, and physical constants of the universe. Maybe these super-laws are such that they only allow for a set of physical parameters that does permit life.

Reply: This only pushes the question back one level. For, now we may ask, “Who designed the super-laws?”

**3. Multiple Universes:** It would be very probable that some universe would turn out to be fine-tuned if there were an infinite number of universes. For, if there are an infinite number of universes, each with their own set of physical parameters, surely SOME of them will inevitably be life-permitting.

Reply: Again, this only pushes the question back one level. For, now we may ask, “Who designed the multiple universes?” Furthermore, at the very least, it is worth pointing out that the atheist is now committed to a much more radical hypothesis than they previously were. Now, not only is the atheist committed to ONE universe existing inexplicably, but an INFINITE NUMBER of universes existing inexplicably.

**4. Who Designed God?:** If the super-laws or the multiple universes require a designer, then so does God. Put simply, who designed God?

Reply: First, theologians typically state that God is “simple.” That is, not complex. Thus, God would not require a designer.

A more satisfying response is this: All the theist is claiming is that fine-tuning is more probable on theism than atheism. The claim is that we ought to accept theism because it has incredible explanatory power. The question about God's origin is an entirely different one. The advocate of the Teleological Argument states that God explains fine-tuning better than random chance. Nothing more. After accepting theism, perhaps there ARE further questions to be asked, such as “Who designed God?” But, those questions are beside the point.

**5. Other Forms of Life:** It seems like the Teleological Argument is only considering life as we know it; i.e., carbon-based, water-dependent, oxygen-dependent, existing at a certain temperature, in certain gravity, etc. Maybe there are lots of other possible forms of life we can't conceive of. In that case, maybe the physical constants of the universe could be a lot different than the theist claims, and still be life-permitting.

Reply: This misses the aim of the theist's argument. The theist is not claiming that, if we altered the physical constants of the universe, the universe would no longer permit CARBON-BASED life forms. Rather, the claim is that all life requires only COMPLEXITY of some sort—and that, if the constants were altered slightly, not even COMPLEXITY would be possible. For instance, consider the rate of expansion of the universe. If the universe had expanded slightly more slowly at the Big Bang, it would have collapsed back in on itself and there would be no universe AT ALL. There can't be life of ANY sort if there is no universe at all.

**6. Prior Probability vs. Explanatory Power:** The theist seems to focus all of their efforts on hyping up the fact that their theistic hypothesis has explanatory power. That is, if theism is true, it seems to do a really good job of explaining the observation of fine-tuning. However, a good scientific hypothesis actually has TWO virtues. Explanatory power is only one of them. The other is prior probability. That is, if there are two competing hypotheses, the one that posits the sorts of entities and phenomena that are more probable to exist (given what we already know about reality) is considered to be better.

To better illustrate prior probability, consider the following case:

- **Missing Toothbrush:** My toothbrush is missing. I form two hypotheses to explain this fact. The first hypothesis: There is a race of aliens that lack the technology to create toothbrushes, and they have been in my neighborhood abducting toothbrushes and taking them away in their spaceships. The second hypothesis: I misplaced it somewhere earlier.

Now, BOTH of these hypotheses have a lot of explanatory power. If EITHER hypothesis were true, it really would explain why my toothbrush is missing. However, intuitively, one of these two hypotheses is still MUCH better than the other. We think the "I misplaced it" hypothesis is MUCH better than the alien abduction hypothesis because the former has a much higher PRIOR PROBABILITY than the former. That is, given what we know about reality, the event of misplacing a toothbrush seems much more probable than the event of an alien abduction (that is, the former is much more consistent with what we already know to be true).

Similarly, though theism does a good job of EXPLAINING why the universe would appear to be fine-tuned, it posits a very bizarre entity to do the explaining; namely, an omniscient, omnipotent, morally perfect being. And that sort of being has a much lower prior probability than the sorts of things that the atheist posits; namely, more universes, more laws, more matter and energy, etc.

Reply: Perhaps the SORT of entity that is being posited is odd, but notice the claim that is NOT that odd: Fine-tuning, organization, and complexity are the product of an INTELLIGENT MIND. That claim is VERY consistent with what we already know. We observe it every day. So, theism's prior probability is not really that low.

Actually, it is the ATHEIST hypothesis (that fine-tuning is NOT the product of intelligence) that is the one that is less consistent with what we already know to be true. We NEVER observe radical complexity and organization occurring via random chance.