

The Design Argument

“Comment on the strengths and weaknesses of the Design Argument.”

The design argument, or teleological argument is an argument for the existence of God, based on the design and purpose we experience in the world.

It works on the basis that we can see and experience order, benefit, purpose and suitability in the world; this makes it an a posteriori argument. As Cicero said thousands of years before the advent of Christianity and “modern” religion; *“what could be more clear or obvious when we look up to the sky and contemplate, that some divinity or superior intelligence is behind it?”*

The fact that the argument is a posteriori means that we can see the existence of unnecessary beauty, which serves no ‘purpose’ other than human enjoyment, as FR Tennant says *“nature is not just beautiful in places; it is saturated with beauty.”* However, as rationalists and sceptics such as Hume are quick to point out, with a posteriori evidence we can never be 100% certain, *“empirical facts cannot support religious conclusions.”*

If we accept that there is a creator, there is however nothing to support the idea that that creator is God (or more specifically the God of classical theism). In fact if the designer **was** God, why has he left evil and religious ambiguity in the world? The theists argue that it is simply easier to say that God was the designer, but we have no evidence to support that inductive leap.

William Paley came up with a famous analogy to support and explain the design argument. In his analogy, known as the Watch Analogy, he says that when wandering across the countryside you come across a stone. Now since the stone is simple and common you assume it is just simply ‘there’. However when you come across a watch you wonder *why* it is there and *who* put it there – because it is simply too complicated to have just always been there.

David Hunt modernises this analogy by applying it to a factory found on a desert island. The sceptic in his analogy says; “*that thing is just a conglomeration of atoms that happened to come together in that for by chance plus billions of years of random selection.*” This quote demonstrates how silly it is to assume the watch (or world) made itself.

Hume, however, refutes this, he says that there are problems with that analogy, the foremost being that the universe is not a machine, and is therefore non-comparable to a watch. It can be said that the universe would be more like an animal or vegetable, because it grows out of itself rather than being ‘made’.

Despite the natural sciences of botany, zoology and biology seeming to support the design argument in the 17th and 18th centuries by showing just how much design and beauty there was in the world – this was all changed when Darwin published ‘Origin of the Species’, and described the process of evolution.

Many people would say that evolution disproves the design argument because it shows we were not just put here, but that we evolved ultimately from simple sugars and proteins into human beings.

Theists such as Polkinghorne however say that evolution does not fully account for existence. He says there still needs to be someone who ‘oversees’ creation. This idea, that God is responsible for creation though evolution is called the Anthropic Principle. Swinburne agrees with this idea, saying that “*the very success of science in showing us how deeply ordered the natural world is, is that it provides strong grounds for believing that there is an even deeper cause of that order.*”

Science can also be used to support the design argument since it shows that the probability of our existence is miniscule (in fact 1×10^{40} degree of accuracy), this cosmological constant – if different – would have made life on Earth either impossible, or very different to how we know it today. They say this constant is proof that *someone wanted* human life to evolve on Earth.

That said, a modern theory put forward by David Reece deal with that issue by saying that there are multiple (in fact probably infinite) universes. In which case the idea of our existence being improbable is overcome because out of millions of universes, the chance of life existing *somewhere* is far greater.

The criticism of this 'multiverse' theory is that there is no evidence for it whatsoever. It is therefore just as great a leap of faith as accepting the existence of God.

In conclusion, the main strengths of the argument lie in the fact that design and regularity are obvious and have been recognised since the ancient Greeks. The main weakness of the argument is that though the design is obvious – that does not 100% prove a designer, nor does it prove that that designer is God.