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Can We Prove That God Exists?

8

The Teleological Argument

William Paley (1743–1805), English philosopher and theologian, wrote a number of apologetic works; the two most famous are *Evidences of Christianity* (1794) and *Natural Theology, or Evidences of the Existences and Attributes of the Deity Collected from the Appearances of Nature* (1802). He is best known for stating the argument from design for the existence of God.

The third great argument for God's existence, like the cosmological argument, draws on experience. But here the experience is the order, design, and apparent purposefulness of the physical universe. This argument, usually called the *teleological* argument, or the argument from *design*, contends that God's existence is proven from a single experience. This is illustrated with an analogy that compares the world to machines—just as machines have makers, the world has a maker, who is God. Paley's well-known book *Natural Theology* argues from analogy by comparing a watch to the world. Just as no one would claim that a watch came into existence by chance, no one should make such a claim about the natural world. It, too, exhibits design and intelligent purpose, just as much as any object of human invention. Therefore a divine designer must exist to account for the order and purposefulness of natural objects.

This argument has always had great emotional and aesthetic force. Everyone has been deeply moved at one time or another by the order of natural processes. Acorns always, or almost always, grow to be oaks. The sun rises in the east at a precisely predictable time each day. Water boils at 100 degrees Celsius, not a degree less. This order extends from individual objects in nature to great interacting systems of things in the physical and biological realms. Since, unlike human beings, physical objects have no intelligence to design their own goals and means to achieve them, it appears necessary to assume that some external force, perhaps outside nature as a whole, has “programmed” them to act as they do. Such a designing force must be God.

From William Paley, *Natural Theology* (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1838), 211–16.

At the same time you will want to consider certain problems. First of all, natural processes are not always uniformly perfect; many work to our disadvantage, even causing great pain and suffering. Could God's designs fail to be perfect? Another problem with this argument may be its anthropomorphism, or tendency to assign human qualities to nature. Just because we design and plan our activities does not mean that nature itself exhibits design. Allied with this difficulty is the structure of the argument itself. It is clearly an argument from analogy, an analogy with the skill of a craftsman. But there is an old saying that "every analogy limps," or fails to make its case with deductive necessity. Is there some hidden "limp" in this analogy, too?

❧ To Study ❧

1. What is the analogical argument stated by Paley? Structure the argument carefully.
2. State Paley's answers to possible arguments against his analogy.
3. Why couldn't the watch simply be the result of laws of metallic nature?

STATEMENT OF THE 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 have always been there. Yet why should not this answer serve for the watch as well as for the stone? Why is it not as 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 . . . 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, if a different size from what they are, or placed after any other manner, or in any other order than that in which 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 of these 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 from 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 springs of steel, no other metal being so elastic; that over the face of the watch there is placed 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 . . . the inference, we think, is inevitable, that the watch must have had a maker; that there must have existed, 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.

- I. Nor would it, I apprehend, weaken the conclusion that we had never seen a watch made; that we had never known an artist capable of making one; that we were altogether incapable of executing such a piece of workmanship ourselves, or of understanding in what manner it was performed; all this being no more than what is true of some exquisite remains of ancient art, of some lost arts, and, to the generality of mankind, of the more curious productions of modern manufacture. Does one man in a million know how oval frames are turned? Ignorance of this kind exalts our opinion of the unseen and unknown artist's skill, if he be unseen and unknown, but raises no doubt in our minds of the existence and agency of such an artist, at some former time, and in some place or other. Nor can I perceive that it varies at all the inference whether the question arise concerning a human agent, or concerning an agent of a different species, or an agent possessing, in some respect, a different nature.
- II. Neither, secondly, would it invalidate our conclusion, that the watch sometimes went wrong, or that it seldom went exactly right. The purpose of the machinery, the design, and the designer, might be evident, and, in the case supposed, would be evident, in whatever way we accounted for the irregularity of the movement, or whether we could account for it or not. It is not necessary that a machine be perfect in order to show with what design it was made; still less necessary where the only question is whether it were made with any design at all.
- III. Nor, thirdly, would it bring any uncertainty into the argument if there were a few parts of the watch concerning which we could not discover, or had not yet discovered, in what manner they conduced to the general effect; or even some parts concerning which we could not ascertain whether they conduced to that effect in any manner whatever. For, as to the first branch of the case, if by the loss, or disorder, or decay of the parts in question, the movement of the watch were found in fact to be stopped, or disturbed, or retarded, no doubt would remain in our minds as to the utility or intention of these parts, although we should be unable to investigate the manner according to which, or the connection by which, the ultimate effect depended upon their action or assistance; and the more complex is the machine, the more likely is this obscurity to arise. Then, as to the second thing supposed, namely, that there were parts which might be spared without prejudice to the movement of the watch, and that he had proved this by experiment,

these superfluous parts, even if we were completely assured that they were such, would not vacate the reasoning which we had instituted concerning other parts. The indication of contrivance remained, with respect to them, nearly as it was before.

- IV. Nor, fourthly, would any man in his senses think the existence of the watch, with its various machinery, accounted for by being told that it was one out of possible combinations of material forms; that whatever he had found in the place where he found the watch must have contained some internal configuration or other; and that this configuration might be the structure exhibited, viz., of the works of a watch, as well as a different structure.
- V. Nor, fifthly, would it yield his inquiry more satisfaction, to be answered, that there existed in things a principle of order, which had disposed the parts of the watch into their present form and situation. He never knew a watch made by the principle of order; nor can he even form to himself an idea of what is meant by a principle of order, distinct from the intelligence of the watchmaker.
- VI. Sixthly, he would be surprised to hear that the mechanism of the watch was no proof of contrivance, only a motion to induce the mind to think so:
- VII. And not less surprised to be informed, that the watch in his hand was nothing more than the result of the laws of *metallic* nature. It is a perversion of language to assign any law as the efficient, operative cause of anything. A law presupposes as an agent, for it is only the mode according to which an agent proceeds; it implies a power; for it is the order according to which that power acts. Without this agent, without this power, which are both distinct from itself the *law* does nothing, is nothing. The expression, "the law of metallic nature," may sound strange and harsh to a philosophic ear; but it seems quite as justifiable as some others which are more familiar to him such as "the law of vegetable nature," "the law of animal nature," or, indeed, as "the law of nature" in general, when assigned as the cause of phenomena in exclusion of agency and power, or when it is substituted into the place of these.
- VIII. Neither, lastly, would our observer be driven out of his conclusion, or from his confidence in its truth, by being told that he knew nothing at all about the matter. He knows enough for his argument: he knows the utility of the end: he knows the subserviency and adaptation of the means to the end. These points being known, his ignorance of other points, his doubts concerning other points, affect not the certainty of his reasoning. The consciousness of knowing little need not beget a distrust of that which he does know. . . .



APPLICATION OF THE ARGUMENT

Every indication of contrivance, every manifestation of design, which existed in the watch, exists in the works of nature; with the difference, on the side of nature, of being greater and more, and that in a degree which exceeds all computation. I mean that the contrivances of nature surpass the contrivances of art in the

complexity, subtlety, and curiosity of the mechanism; and still more, if possible, do they go beyond them in number and variety; yet in a multitude of cases, are not less evidently mechanical, not less evidently contrivances, not less evidently accommodated to their end or suited to their office than are the most perfect productions of human ingenuity. . . .


To Think About


1. “For the usual denial of God’s existence tended to encourage people to expect a rationality in human affairs experience is likely to contradict. Religious belief, as Lichtheim saw it, had been a protection against a too-great expectation of reasonableness, a protection men in the past had benefited from, and which contemporary man, insofar as he has lost his traditional faith, has had to do without.” **W. T. Stace**
 2. “That some form of religion is indispensable to any society seems no longer an open question. It has been long debated whether a society could get along without any religious organization of its life. Recent experience has made clear that if a traditional religion disintegrates, men will not calmly proceed to live without any religion at all. A new religion, or, if we prefer, a new substitute for religion, will spring up to fill the vacuum and to perform the historic functions of a religion. And this new ‘religion’ will be much worse than the old one it supplants. For it will inevitably express some need of the moment: it will be onesided and fanatical.” **Paul Tillich**
 3. “The most ordinary misinterpretation of faith is to consider it an act of knowledge that has a low degree of evidence. . . . If this is meant, one is speaking of belief rather than of faith.” **Paul Tillich**
 4. Relevant evidence to cite for the teleological argument:
 - a. “The world is intelligible in a very high degree. The world, somehow or other, is capable of being understood by means of the logical and mathematical categories of the human mind.
 - b. “The evolutionary process . . . has operated *as if* it were intended to produce variety, beauty, mind, and intelligence.
 - c. “The inorganic world . . . is remarkably well adapted—physically, chemically, thermally, and so on—to the maintenance of life.
 - d. “Nature has developed in such a way that there are numerous phenomena which elicit in human beings a sense of beauty.
 - e. “The conditions of human life have developed in such a way that man is able to postulate, pursue, and, to a high degree, achieve moral ideals.” **William H. Halverson**
 5. “God is the fundamental symbol for what concerns us ultimately. . . . Where there is ultimate concern, God can be denied only in the name of God.” **Paul Tillich**
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 Readings 

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