

The Argument from Design



Paley and Beyond

An Easy Story

- ❖ ‘In crossing a heath, suppose I had pitched up 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 had 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, namely 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 a purpose, e.g. that they are so formed and adjusted as to produce motion . . . This mechanism being observed—it required 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—there 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.’ —Paley, (*RR*, 56)

The Driving Thought

1. Suppose a certain entity e within nature is analogous to a specified human artefact a in relevant respects ϕ (e.g. orderliness, intricacy, efficiency, structure, evident purpose).
2. We know that a has ϕ precisely because it is a product of deliberate design by intelligent (human) agency.
3. Analogous effects typically have analogous causes.
4. Hence it is highly probable that e has ϕ precisely because it too is a product of deliberate design by intelligent agency.

A Simple Formulation

1. The universe, taken as a whole and in its sundry parts, is analogous to a specified human artefact a in relevant respects ϕ (e.g. orderliness, intricacy, efficiency, structure, seeming purpose).
2. We have good reason to suppose that the artefact is ϕ because, and only because, it was designed by an intelligent designer with a definite and discernible purpose in mind.
3. If x is analogous to y in respect of being ϕ , and x is ϕ because, and only because, it was designed to be ϕ by an intelligent designer, then it is reasonable to conclude that y is ϕ because, and only because, y was designed by an intelligent designer.
4. Hence, it is reasonable to conclude that the universe and its sundry parts was designed by an intelligent designer.

A Problem

- ❖ ‘. . . wherever you depart, in the least, from the similarity of the cases, you diminish proportionately the evidence; and may at last bring it to a very weak analogy, which is confessedly liable to error and uncertainty.’—
Hume (*RR*, 63)

A Better Formulation

1. It is an indisputable, remarkable fact that many natural objects appear to have a purpose: the eye for seeing, the hand for grasping, the heart is for pumping blood, etc.
2. If a hypothesis H is the only or best explanation of a remarkable fact or phenomenon ϕ , then it is reasonable to believe that H is true.
3. The only or best explanation for this appearance of purpose is that natural phenomena have the purpose they seem to have.
4. So, it is reasonable to conclude that natural phenomena have the purpose they seem to have.
5. If natural phenomena have the purpose they seem to have, then that fact too requires an explanation.
6. The only or best explanation is that the purpose observed in the universe is the product of an immensely powerful supernatural intelligence, namely God.
7. Therefore, it is reasonable to believe that God exists.

A Reasonable Premiss

- ❖ (2) If a hypothesis H is the only or best explanation of a remarkable fact or phenomenon ϕ , then it is reasonable to believe that H is true.
 - ❖ If we were to observe two people, a man and a woman, meeting every day at 17.15 in different locations for over a year, it would be reasonable first to hypothesize that they are meeting by design and then indeed to conclude that our hypothesis is true.
 - ❖ It does not matter that this could, in principle, be a cosmic accident. Absent specific evidence to the contrary, this would be a reasonable belief to endorse and promulgate.
 - ❖ That allowed, it is sometimes difficult to know:
 - ❖ when a fact or phenomenon truly is remarkable
 - ❖ when the explanation encapsulated in H really is the only or best
- ❖ Still, some version of (2) seems right-minded. So, let us grant it.

Some Concerns I

- ❖ Premiss (3) seems worrisome.
- ❖ (3) The only or best explanation for this appearance of purpose is that natural phenomena have the purpose they seem to have.
- ❖ Another possible explanation is that we import purpose to what is bereft of purpose.

Some Concerns II

- ❖ Premiss (6) is obviously problematic.
- ❖ (6) The only or best explanation for this appearance of purpose is that natural phenomena have the purpose they seem to have.
- ❖ It is enough for traditional versions of the argument to appreciate that Darwinian explanations are equally good or better—and wildly well attested.