

# Lecture Notes

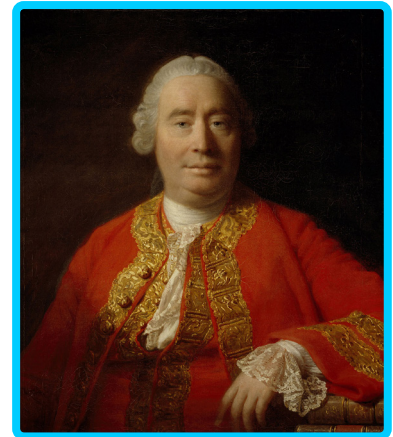


## Hume on the Cosmological and Design Arguments



Notes on Hume's Criticisms of the arguments from Observation

Designed to accompany the lecture from Cogito Education

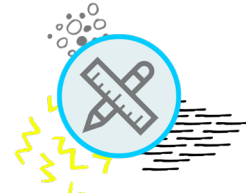


### Who was Hume?

- David Hume was an Empiricist (someone who believes that we gain knowledge only through the senses)
- He lived in Scotland (1711 - 1776)
- He didn't believe in God, but it was dangerous for him to say so at the time
  - > So, he criticised the arguments for the existence of God in a dialogue form (a dialogue is when several characters discuss a topic. Plato also wrote dialogues)
- The book in which he wrote his criticisms of the arguments for the existence of God was "A Dialogue Concerning Natural Religion"

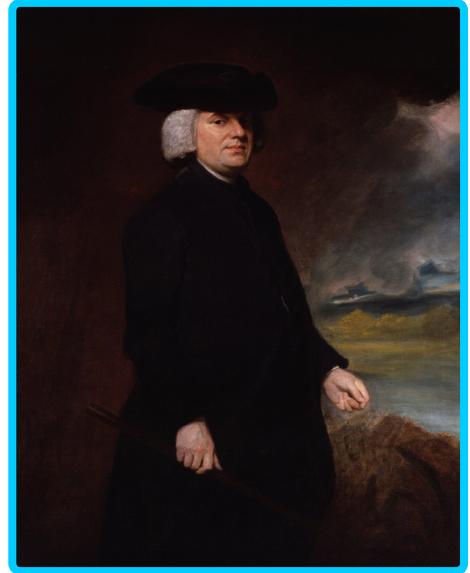
### The Arguments Hume was attacking

- Here, we're going to look at Hume's criticisms of two arguments for the existence of God:
- The Design Argument
  - > The idea that there is complexity and order in the Universe that can only be explained by the existence of God
- The Cosmological Argument
  - > The idea that there are chains of cause and effect, and because they can't go on forever there must be a first cause (God)
- The most famous versions of these arguments at the time would have been in St Thomas Aquinas' book "Summa Theologica"



## Paley's Design Argument

- Although William Paley published his *Natural Theology* after Hume's *Dialogues*, Paley was working in a very popular 18th Century tradition of design arguments
- It was this tradition of arguments which Hume was attacking
- For our purposes here, however, we won't look at the tradition as a whole, but its best example; Paley's design argument
- Paley's argument is as follows:



**Belief:** I can know that something is designed if it has a purpose and has moving parts



**Why:** If I see a watch and a rock on a heath, I know the watch to be designed because it has these elements, and I know the watch not to be designed because it lacks them

**Why:** It is too unlikely that something like a watch could have arisen by chance

**Belief:** Biological things have a purpose and have moving parts



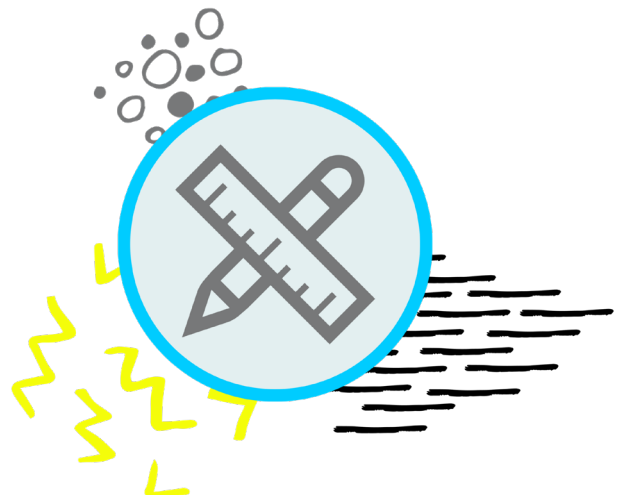
**Why:** I know a posteriori (through the senses) that things like an eye have:

- A purpose: To see
- Moving parts: Cornea, Iris, Pupil, Lens, Macula, Retina, Optic Nerve

**Conclusion:** Biology must be designed, just like watches and other machines are

### In brief

- We can know something is designed if it has complex parts and a purpose
- Biological things have complex parts and a purpose
- Therefore, we know that biological things are designed

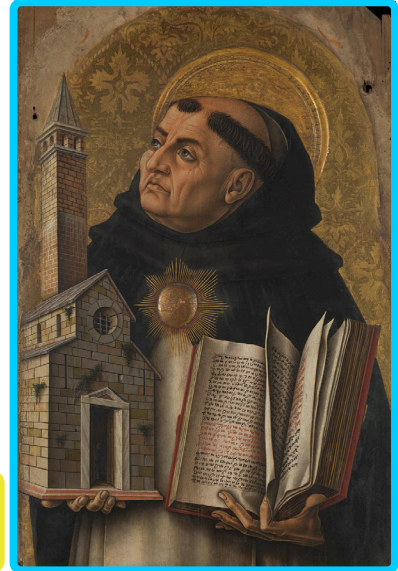


## Aquinas' Cosmological Argument

- Aquinas had three Cosmological Arguments in his "Summa Theologica"
- His Cosmological Arguments are:
  - > 1st Way: From Motion
  - > 2nd Way: From Efficient Causes
  - > 3rd Way: From Contingency and Necessity
- Here, we'll only examine his 1st Way:
- The Argument from Motion

For instance, wood is potentially hot, but the motion occurs when it is set on fire and then becomes actually hot

**Definition:** Moving from Potentially to Actually having a property



**Belief:** There is motion (changing from one state to another) everywhere in the world

**Why:** We observe things changing all the time (a posteriori evidence – through the senses)

**Belief:** The cause of a change from potentiality to actuality must come from something that is already in actuality

**Why:** we observe this (a posteriori) in the world: Fire is in actuality hot, and changes wood, which is potentially hot, into the state of being actually hot

**Belief:** Something cannot cause itself to change from potential to actual

**Why:** Because the cause of a change is something in actuality bringing something in potentiality into actuality

And something cannot be both potential and actual in the same respect (e.g. something can't be both potentially hot and actually hot)

**Belief:** Something that is changing must be changed by another thing which is in a state of actuality

**Why:** Because something cannot cause itself to change from potential to actual

**Belief:** This means there must exist, in the world, a series of causes

**Belief:** A series of causes cannot be infinitely long

**Why:** Because infinite causes doesn't provide an ultimate explanation of the of a thing

**Conclusion:** There must be a first mover (changer)

In brief

- There is constant motion
- Something in motion must be moved by something else
- So there must be a series of motions
- This series cannot go on forever
- So there must be an ultimate mover, who is not moved by any other thing (God)

## Hume on the Design Argument

- Before having his most sceptical character (Philo) criticise the Design Argument, Hume first has his character Cleanthes state the argument
- It is important to remember that Hume's book is a Dialogue, and not all of the characters represent his view
- Here, Hume believes Philo's criticisms of Cleanthes' argument are correct

### Hume's "Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion"

There are three central characters in the Dialogues:

- Cleanthes (Believer in God – supports the design argument)
- Demea (Believer in God – supports the cosmological argument)
- Philo (Sceptical about God)



## The Argument Stated

- Hume has Cleanthes propose a version of the design argument:



"Look around the world: Contemplate the whole and every part of it: You will find it to be nothing but one great machine, subdivided into an infinite number of lesser machines, which again admit of subdivisions [...]. The curious adapting of means to ends, throughout all nature, resembles exactly, though it much exceeds, the productions of human contrivance; of human design, thought, wisdom, and intelligence. Since therefore the effects resemble each other, we're led to infer, by all the rules of analogy, that the causes also resemble; and the Author of nature is somewhat similar to the mind of man; though possessed of much larger faculties, proportioned to the grandeur of the work, which he has executed. By this argument a posteriori, and by this argument alone, do we prove at once the existence of a Deity, and his similarity to human mind and intelligence."

(Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion, David Hume, Oxford World Classics, 1993, ed. J.C.A. Gaskin, pg. 45)

- This argument is an **analogy-based**, design argument:
  - > There is order, regularity, patterns (etc.) in the person-constructed world,
    - Similarly, there is order, regularity, patterns in the natural world.
  - > Much, if not all, of the person-made world is teleological (moves towards a particular aim).
  - > So, given the similarity in type of the natural world, this would suggest that the natural world, too, has a similar teleological order embedded in it.
  - > Just as the teleological order in the human made world is designed by an intelligence (us), the teleological order in the natural world must be designed by an intelligence (God)

## The First Criticism – A disanalogy

- Hume, in the voice of Philo, first criticises the Design argument by claiming that it is a disanalogy (two things that cannot be compared)
  - > He says that the analogy that Cleanthes makes between man-made things and the Universe is too weak
- Here is Philo's argument:



“[Philo speaking]: If we see a house, CLEANTHES, we conclude, with the greatest certainty, that it had an architect or builder; because this is precisely that species of effect, which we have experienced to proceed from that species of cause. But 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, or that the analogy is here entire and perfect. The dissimilitude is so striking that the utmost you can here pretend to is a guess, a conjecture, a presumption concerning similar cause; and how that pretension will be received in the world, I leave you to consider.”

(Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion, David Hume, Oxford World Classics, 1993, ed. J.C.A. Gaskin, pg. 46)

- Hume (in the voice of Philo) is here making an argument that we can only claim that something has a specific cause if we have seen that kind of thing having that kind of cause before
  - > In order to make sense of this, we need to understand Hume's distinction between species and instances:
    - Species: A type of thing (e.g. cars)
    - Instance: A specific thing (e.g. my car)
  - > It is from seeing a species of thing always caused by a specific thing, that we can conclude, on seeing a new instance of that thing, that it is also caused by the same specific thing
  - > As Philo puts it:



“[Philo speaking]: When two species of objects have always been observed to be conjoined together, I can infer, by custom, the existence of one whenever I see the existence of the other: And this I call an argument from experience.”

(Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion, David Hume, Oxford World Classics, 1993, ed. J.C.A. Gaskin, pg. 51)

- > So, when I always see the species “car” moving after fuel has been put into it, I can infer that my instance of car (my car) will only move once I've put fuel into it
- > In other words: In order to claim that something is caused by something else, we need to have a lot of experience of it

- In Cleanthes' Design Argument, we can see this kind of reasoning in the first instance:
  - > Human-made machines (a species of thing) have a cause (humans)
- But, he then argues that the universe is the same kind of species as machines, and so must have a similar cause (an intelligent creator)
  - > Philo's reply to this is that there is too big a difference between the universe and a machine – they are not the same species
    - And if they are not the same species, then the analogy fails
    - You cannot claim, says Hume, on this reasoning, that the Universe must have an intelligent creator

## Discussion on Hume's Analogy Criticism



- Richard Swinburne's response:
  - > Swinburne argues that the proper way to understand arguments like Paley's is not as an analogy at all:

"The [design] argument is, I think, best treated not as an argument from analogy (the way typical of the eighteenth century) but ... as an argument from evidence that it would be probable would occur if theism is true, but not otherwise."

(Richard Swinburne, "The Existence of God", OUP 1979, 2004, p. 168)

- Rather, he thinks, it should be seen as an argument from evidence
- The evidence being that humans are exactly the kind of beings we would expect to see if God existed
- And whilst all animal life evolved, the original building blocks were inorganic and so must have combined in a highly unlikely way to form the first life
- This means that:
  - > If God does not exist, then humans existing is highly unlikely
  - > If God does exist, then humans existing is likely
- Therefore, God more likely exists can designed life

## The Fallacy of Composition

- Hume's next criticism of the design argument is that it commits the fallacy of composition
- The fallacy of composition is a mistake in reasoning that looks like this:
  - > Every member of a group have property x

- > Therefore, the group has property x
- > An example of this might be: Every person in the country of Sweden has a heartbeat, therefore the country of Sweden has a heartbeat
- > Just because members of a group have a property, it doesn't mean that the group itself has that property
- Here is how Philo puts the criticism:



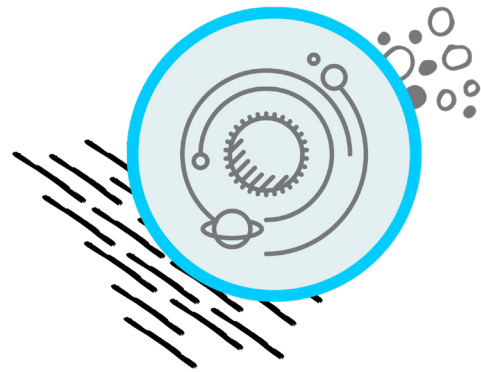
“... can a conclusion, with any propriety, be transferred from parts to the whole? Does not the great disproportion bar all comparison and inference? From observing the growth of a hair, can we learn any thing concerning the generation of a man?”

(Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion, David Hume, Oxford World Classics, 1993, ed. J.C.A. Gaskin, pg. 49)

- The Fallacy of Composition occurs in Cleanthes' argument when he suggests that because a part of an animal is unlikely to occur by chance, therefore the animal as a whole is unlikely to occur by chance

## Hume on the Cosmological Argument

- In this part of the *Dialogues*, something rather interesting happens:
- Hume has his character Demea present a version of the Cosmological Argument which is largely a priori (through reason alone) in nature
- Then, instead of having Philo, the sceptic, criticise the argument, he has Cleanthes criticise it. This is because Cleanthes is an Empiricist
- The criticisms raised by Cleanthes can really be seen as Hume's own



### The Argument stated

- Hume has Demea state the Cosmological Argument as an a priori (using reason alone) proof of the existence of God:
  - > “Whatever exists must have a cause or reason of its existence it being absolutely impossible for any thing to produce itself, or be the cause of its own existence.” (Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion, David Hume, Oxford World Classics, 1993, ed. J.C.A. Gaskin, pg. 90)
  - > This creates a chain of causation
  - > This chain cannot go on forever, because if it did, then it would be without a cause
    - And everything has a cause
  - > So, there must be an “external cause” of the Universe; God

### Hume's Empiricism

- One reason that Hume rejects the Cosmological Argument is that it attempts to prove a matter of fact (God) a priori
- Hume has Cleanthes reply to Demea on his behalf:



“...there is an evident absurdity in pretending to demonstrate a matter of fact, or to prove it by any arguments a priori. Nothing is demonstrable, unless the contrary implies a contradiction. Nothing, that is distinctly conceivable, implies a contradiction. Whatever we conceive as existent, we can also conceive as non-existent. There is no being, therefore, whose non-existence implies a contradiction. Consequently there is no being, whose existence is demonstrable.”

(Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion, David Hume, Oxford World Classics, 1993, ed. J.C.A. Gaskin, pg. 91)

- The objection here is that you can only prove very specific things a priori:
  - > You can prove a statement to be true that is contradictory when reversed, because then it is contradictory not to believe it
    - For example, the statement:
    - “All bachelors are unmarried men”
    - Can be known a priori because to reverse it (all bachelors are married men) is a contradiction in terms
    - So it can be known a priori
    - But it doesn’t tell us much - it’s what Hume calls a statement of a “relation of ideas”
  - > But, Hume argues, you cannot prove a statement to be true if it is not contradictory when reversed
    - For example, the statement:
    - “Fred is a bachelor”
    - This cannot be known a priori because reversing it (Fred is not a bachelor) is not contradictory
    - Because contradiction is fundamentally the only tool to determine truth/falsehood a priori, we cannot know statements like this a priori
    - We need a posteriori experience of the world (in this case, asking Fred if he is a bachelor)
    - Statements like these are what form the vast majority of what we consider to be our knowledge of the world. They are what Hume called “matter of fact”
- Hume then says that claims about the existence of God are not contradictory when reversed, so we cannot know if they are true a priori

## The Fallacy of Composition (again)

- Hume also thinks that the Cosmological Argument commits the fallacy of Composition
  - > Remember, this is the fallacy of believing that because each member of a group has a certain property, the group itself must have that property
- Cleanthes’ attack on the Cosmological Argument goes like this:



“In such a chain too, or succession of objects, each part is caused by that which preceded it, and causes that which succeeds it. Where then is the difficulty? But the WHOLE, you say, wants a cause. I answer, that the uniting of these parts into a whole, like the uniting of several distinct counties into one kingdom, or several distinct members into one body, is performed merely by an arbitrary act of the mind, and has no influence on the nature of things. Did I show you the particular causes of each individual in a collection of twenty particles of matter, I should think it very unreasonable, should you afterwards ask me, what was the cause of the whole twenty. This is sufficiently explained in explaining the cause of the parts.”

(Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion, David Hume, Oxford World Classics, 1993, ed. J.C.A. Gaskin, pg. 92-93)

- According to Hume, the **Fallacy of Composition** occurs in the design argument when **Demea** claims that:
  - > Each thing must have a cause
  - > The chain of things must have a cause
- The mistake, according to Hume, is to think that the collection of things must have a cause, when it is adequately explained by stating the cause of each individual thing
- If this is true, then the Universe doesn't require God as an explanation, and we can stop at simple explanations of physical things

## Discussion on Hume's Fallacy of Composition Criticism



- One way you could reply to this kind of criticism is to reference a more modern version of the Cosmological Argument
- The kinds of argument that Hume was attacking had their roots in those like Aquinas' arguments
  - > They held that, because each member of a group has a certain quality, the group itself must have that quality (this is the **Fallacy of Composition**)
- This isn't true of modern versions of the argument, for instance William Lane Craig's Kalam Cosmological argument:

1. Everything that begins to exist has a cause
2. The Universe began to exist
3. Therefore, the Universe has a cause

- Here, the Fallacy of Composition is **avoided** because Craig identifies a certain quality that, if it is possessed must mean a thing has a cause
- This isn't a collection of things requiring an explanation, but rather a claim that anything that has that property must be caused
  - > And then the claim that the Universe has that property
  - > And so must be caused