

Lesson 5: Assessment of Hume's Objections to the Argument of Design

David Hume (1711–1776) of Scotland was one of the empiricist and skeptic philosophers of the West. He opposed many metaphysical foundations such that he had also disputed the proofs of the existence of God. In view of the fact that during his time the most popular proof ever presented for the existence of God in the Western world was the argument of design or teleological argument, he had also posed a serious challenge to it, raising some objections to it.

Many Western theologians and philosophers have considered his objections justifiable, thus treating the argument of design untenable. In their philosophical and theological discourses, the Muslim theologians have also paid attention to Hume's misgivings with the argument of design, thereby replying to each of them. In this lesson, we shall examine Hume's objections to the argument of design.

First Objection

The argument of design is founded on comparison and similitude. That is, the phenomena in the universe are likened to human artifacts such as a house or a machine. If we see a house, we immediately conclude with utmost certainty about the existence of an intelligent, powerful and astute architect. By witnessing the existing order in the world's phenomena, we will also realize the existence of a wise and powerful creator, but this comparison can be disputed, for if ever we conclude about the existence of its builder by merely seeing a house, it is because we have experienced it before. [1](#)

So is the case with other human artifacts. But we have observed such an experience regarding the phenomena of the world with a particular order and arrangement, and we have never experienced its emergence by means of a wise and intelligent creator, in that we would also regard the existing world and the order governing it as a product of a wise and intelligent creator on the basis of previous experiences.

Reply

The argument of design is not an empirical proof. A proof is empirical when the middle limit (major syllogism) of a ruling or proposition is empirical, but the middle limit in the argument of design is a rational ruling or case, as stated in the previous lesson.

Rationally, ultimate order necessitates consciousness and willpower. If ever there is ultimate order in the world of nature, its rational interpretation is not possible without the acceptance of a wise, powerful and independent creator. In the exposition of the argument of design, if ever the method of comparison is used and human artifacts (house, machine and the like) are cited as examples, the intention is not to make similitudes and comparisons as the foundation of the argument of design, but rather to cite examples from a rational and axiomatic perspective.

In other words, the human side and empiricalness of human artifacts are not exclusive to the argument of design. The criterion and focus of this proof is the rational outcome of the ultimate order and the interference and knowledge and willpower. The ultimate order may be a human artifact or a natural phenomenon. The manner of its emergence may be witnessed and experienced by the senses, or not. Whenever the ultimate order is the criterion for judging itself, comparing the natural order to the human order does not undermine the argument; in fact, this even strengthens the argument because the natural order is a manifestation of the powers and perfections of the ultimate order.

As a result, the rule (dependence of the order on knowledge and willpower) will become more decisive and clearer. This method of argumentation is that which is called “the analogy of precedence” and it means that a rule applies to an individual and lower manifestations of an entity, it will also be applied to the individual and higher manifestations by precedence. If annoying the parents by utterance of the word “Fie”² and the like were faulty, annoying them by abusive language and beating by precedence shall also be faulty. In the words of Claude M. Hazwey (?), an electronic machine designer, “If a design is necessary for a calculator, how is it possible for the human body – given all its physical, chemical and biological peculiarities – to be needless of a design?!”³

Second Objection

Perhaps, it can be accepted that through the argument of design, a supermanager of the universe can be proved, but in this way we will never be able to prove the existence of a creator as described in the heavenly religions; that is, a God that has no defect at all in His attributes of glory and beauty.

From a particular effect, we can only infer a cause which is capable of bringing the said effect into existence. From a limited and finite universe, therefore, we can never arrive at a limitless and infinite creator.⁴

Reply

Every proof or argument has an intended purpose, and the argument of design is intended for nothing but to refute the materialists' view and prove that the world of nature is an effect and is created, and has come into being according to a conscious and wise design and plan. But as to whether the Creator of the universe is finite or infinite in terms of existential perfections, whether He is indivisible or composite, whether He has essence or not, whether His Attributes are identical with His Essence or extraneous to it, and the like are beyond the scope of the argument of design.

[As Professor Muḥṣṣahhar says,]

“The value of the argument of design is solely limited to the extent of elevating us to the frontiers of the supranatural. This argument only proves that nature has something beyond itself to which it is subject and that Beyond is conscious of Itself and Its acts. As to whether this transcendent is necessary or contingent, eternal or emergent (*ḥādith*), one or multiple, finite or infinite, omniscient and omnipotent or not, this lies outside the limits of this argument. These are issues which wholly and solely belong to the domain of metaphysics, and metaphysics proves them with the help of other arguments.”⁵

Third Objection

From the order and stability of the world of nature, one cannot conclude about the perfection of knowledge and wisdom of its creator because it is possible that the present order might have come into being after a series of trial and error “acts” by its creator for a long period of time. If we see a ship, initially we conclude about the intelligence and excellence of its builder, but after knowing that he copied its design from others and that the said design has undergone a series of trial and error designings for the past centuries, our amazement for the ship's builder will soon vanish.⁶

Reply

The said objection – as in the case of the previous one – stems from a mistaken understanding of the function of the argument of design. Once we accept that the argument of design indicates the world of nature's connection to the supranatural world and testify to the involvement of knowledge and willpower in the emergence of the order of nature, we have confirmed the correctness of the argument of design. Whether the Creator of the universe has acquired His perfections or essentially possesses them is beyond the scope or function of the argument of design and it must be examined through other ways.

Fourth Objection

The bedrock of the argument of design is that the similarity of the effects is a proof of the similarity of the causes, and since the human effects imply intelligent and independent agents, natural effects which in terms of order have also similarity with human effects are indicative of an agent or agents that are similar

to human agents.

The outcome of this argument is proving the creator of the universal that is similar to human agents. Now, if one considers God to be free from any sort of similarity or comparison, he cannot accept the conclusion of the argument of design. The argument of design, therefore, is a rational argument and not an all-encompassing one.⁷

Reply

First of all, the argument of design is not anchored in similitude and comparison. Secondly, comparing or likening two things to each other does not imply their similarity in all aspects. In fact, only the common feature of the two things being compared is the criterion or standard [for comparison]. For instance, the human being's comparison to the lion is from the perspective of bravery and not in other aspects of the lion.

Therefore, if, by comparing the natural effects to the human effects, the universe's need for an intelligent and independent Creator is inferred, what is intended is only the aspect of intelligence and willpower, and not other human characteristics and traits. Even the level of the human being's intelligence and willpower is not the point, but only the essence of intelligence and willpower. In this case, the argument of design has no conflict at all with the Creator of the universe being free from any similitude or comparison.

Fifth Objection

The world of nature, more than being similar to a ship, house or any other human artifact, is more similar to a living being such as an animal or a plant. Therefore, instead of supposing an external cause or origin of the universe, we can consider an internal cause or origin of it, as in the case of the origin of animal or plant life. In this case, the argument of design cannot prove [the actuality or the reality of] a metaphysical existence.

"I confirm that the world has other parts which have closer similarity to a house. These parts refer to the animals and plants. It is clear that the universe is more similar to an animal or a plant than to a watch or a sewing machine. Therefore, most probably its cause is similar to the primary cause; hence, we can infer that the cause of the universe is similar or comparable to the animal birth or plant growth."⁸

Reply

Firstly, comparing the world of nature to the animal and plant is logically problematic, because both animal and plant are an integral part of the world of nature. Now, we must either compare the entire universe to its part, a part of the universe to another similar part, or a part of the universe to itself. None of the stated propositions is logically acceptable, but comparing the universe to human artifacts does not

have such things to be avoided.

Secondly, for us to regard the system of the universe as a dynamic and self-evolving system (and not a mechanical system) neither contradicts the theistic belief on the relationship between God and the universe, nor provides the rational interpretation to the system of the universe. This is so because concomitance is established between the ultimate order and the involvement of knowledge and willpower in the emergence and regulation of that order.

If such knowledge and willpower cannot be found within the universe, as the animals and plants do not have such traits, then we must believe in a metaphysical, intelligent and independent Origin of the universe, and this is exactly the conclusion which the argument of design is supposed to prove.

Sixth Objection

There are happenings in the world of nature which are unfavorable to other creatures. These happenings are the same natural disasters such as earthquakes and typhoons. Given the existence of undesirable phenomena, how can one consider the design of the universe as originating from a sound and good-intentioned Intellect?

“When one studies nature – given all its unwanted descriptions, i.e. typhoons, earthquakes and the conflict of one component of nature with another component – can it be concluded that the planning is made by sound and good intellect?”⁹

Reply

Firstly, proving all the Divine Attributes of Perfection is beyond the ambit of the argument of design, and they must be proved through other ways.

The existence of natural disasters is in no way incompatible with the Divine Attributes of Perfection, with the Divine Unity, with the Divine justice and wisdom, and with the other Divine Attributes of Beauty and Glory. This subject will be treated in detail in the future discussion.

Review Questions

1. State and assess David Hume’s first objection to the argument of design.
2. Write down Hume’s second objection along with its refutation.
3. Write down Hume’s third objection along with its refutation.
4. Write down Hume’s fourth objection along with its refutation.
5. Write down Hume’s fifth objection along with its refutation.

6. Write down and assess Hume's sixth objection to the argument of design.

1. If we see a house, we conclude with all certainty that it has an architect or builder, for it is exactly the same thing we have experienced and caused by a particular factor, but we cannot certainly confirm that the universe has such a similarity to a house such that we can deduce a similar cause with the same certainty and conviction. This lack of similarity is so clear that what can be claimed at most is a guess, conjecture or hypothesis regarding a similar cause. Richard H. Popkin and Avrum Stroll, *Kulliyat-e Falsafeh (General Philosophy)*, trans. Dr. Sayyid Jalal al-Din Mujtabaw, p. 212.
2. "Fie" is a word used to express mild disgust, disapprobation, annoyance, etc. [Trans.]
3. *Ithbat-e Wujud-e Khud* (Proving the Existence of God), pp. 166–170.
4. John Hick, *Falsafeh-ye Din (Philosophy of Religion)*, trans. Bahrām Rāzī, p. 64.
5. *'Ilal-e Girāyesh be Maddigar* (Causes of Inclination to Materialism), p. 154.
6. *Kulliyat-e Falsafeh (General Philosophy)*, p. 217.
7. *Ibid.*, pp. 217–218.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 218.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 224.

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