

History of Philosophy A: Lecture Nine

1. Back to Aquinas

A teleological argument (roughly) argues that God must exist because there is some reason to think part or all of the universe is *designed*. That is, that (part or all of) the universe requires a *designer*. Just as the CA says that there must be a first cause, and that first cause must be God, TA says there must be a designer, and that designer is God.

The medieval formulation comes to us from Aquinas. We've already mentioned his Five Ways. The first three were cosmological in character. The Fifth is teleological in character.

The fifth way is taken from the governance of the world. We see that things which lack intelligence, such as natural bodies, act for an end, and this is evident from their acting always, or nearly always, in the same way, so as to obtain the best result. Hence it is plain that not fortuitously, but designedly, do they achieve their end. Now whatever lacks intelligence cannot move towards an end, unless it be directed by some being endowed with knowledge and intelligence; as the arrow is shot to its mark by the archer. Therefore some intelligent being exists by whom all natural things are directed to their end; and this being we call God.

So Aquinas is here arguing that there are inanimate things in the world that 'act with a purpose' (e.g. water falls from the sky to form rivers that feed the land; bananas are perfectly shaped to be gripped by people etc.). Next Aquinas says that if something is acting towards an end, but is itself not intelligent, it must have a designer (e.g. computers act towards ends, and must have designers; automated manufacturing lines etc.) Aquinas finishes by saying that this designer must be God.

For those who keep up with contemporary views on biology, this should all sound rather familiar. It's very similar to the debate about *creationism*. That is, there are some who believe that the only explanation of human beings the way they are is that God made us. Versus (the over whelming number of) those who believe in *evolution*. That is, that natural processes led to us being such and such a way. And, of course, the leader of the evolutionist side of the debate is Dawkins. To have Dawkins tell it, the teleological argument was done for during the 19th century when Darwin came up with evolution and how natural selection could explain the design in the world But this isn't quite right! It looks as if it may have been done for *long before then*.

2. Back to Ockham

Take as an example the arrangement of our teeth (e.g. the tearing/rending teeth at the front, the flat grinding teeth at the back). Aquinas takes the position that the arrangement of these things must be explained by *design* (and, therefore, that there is a God). Ockham says there is no such evidence. Instead, were we to not have teeth in that arrangement we'd have died and not be here. But it's only by chance that it's such-and-such an arrangement that is good for us to have.

Nor, indeed, was Ockham even the originator of this line of thinking. We can go all the way back to the *pre-Socratic* philosopher Empedocles (490-430 BC). He had a theory of natural selection. Empedocles believed there had long ago been a wide variety of different types of people (heads with no necks; arms *sans* shoulders; people who were just limbs). These people all interbred, to create more people (people with *lots* of heads; creatures with lots of hands; creatures whose faces looked the opposite way from their breasts; creatures with the bodies of oxen and face of men; creatures with the face of oxen and the bodies of men.). Eventually, the 'unsuccessful' varieties died out leaving us with us. We aren't *designed* at all, but just the result of random production and chance.

3. Paley and the Watch Analogy

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 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 purpose ... [The requisite] mechanism being observed ... the inference we think is inevitable, that the watch must have had a maker. Every observation which was made in our first chapter concerning the watch may be repeated with strict propriety concerning the eye, concerning animals, concerning plants, concerning, indeed, all the organized parts of the works of nature. ... [T]he eye ... would be alone sufficient to support the conclusion which we draw from it, as to the necessity of an intelligent Creator. ...

So Paley is arguing that every part of nature, including ourselves, shows elements of design. So we are analogous to the watch. And so just as the watch is designed, and it would be *crazy*, to say otherwise, so we too are designed. So it's very similar to the Thomist argument. But the elements of arguing *from analogy* are more explicit (although as Kaye makes clear, the medieval philosophers are fond of it as well!)

4. Hume on the Teleological Argument

Such analogical arguments for God were discussed by Hume in his *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*. Hume sets up a debate between three fictional characters: Cleanthes, Demea and Philo. Cleanthes proposes the teleological argument.

Cleanthes argument is that the entire universe, and every part of it, exhibits the complex properties that are indicative of design. So it is very similar to the Thomist/Paley line of argument. But Hume, during the *Dialogue*, raises various problems.

Problem one

Even if there were a designer, why think it was God? So, just as with the cosmological argument, we may have proved the existence of something, but not that the something is God.

Problem two

Even if there were a God, doesn't He too demonstrate properties that make Him seem complex? And if He's complex, the argument demands He must be designed. So who designed God? Again, similar to an objection to the cosmological argument.

Problem three

Is the analogy justified? Arguments from analogy are a bit tricky. Object *A* has features *x* and *y*. Object *B* has features *x*, and so is analogous to *A*. Therefore *B* has features *y* as well.

But that's not a great way of arguing. For instance, the works of Caravaggio are very interesting to look at. So is the universe. Does it then follow that, as the universe is analogous to Caravaggio's paintings, the universe was *designed by Caravaggio*! No!

5. Wrapping it up

So we've got Ockham/Empedocles running the natural selection line against the teleological argument. And we have Hume arguing more directly against the analogical reasoning. Does that mean the TA is done for? Well, there is a reason that the Ockham/Empedocles line has problems. There's a reason we had to wait till Darwin for people to be convinced that the teleological argument could result in the creation of species. Whether Ockham really made a convincing case or not, I leave up to you. There are still holes in his argument, and room for manoeuvre that the Thomist could rationally take. For instance, people found it hard to think *entirely new species* could come about (and that Empedocles fantastic tale might be reflective of reality). Of course, when Darwin came along he had his own arguments. He basically played on knowledge that was well known (that natural selection could result in different breeds) and showed that, by analogy, it could work for species.