

Notes on the Teleological Argument

The Teleological Argument (Argument from Design)

Aquinas' Argument:

The world has a purpose.
Everything that has a purpose has a maker, i.e. is caused by a rational mind.
Therefore the world has a maker, i.e. is caused by a rational mind.

The weakness in this argument is its appeal to purpose. Purposive "laws," like the argument's first premise, are called teleological (from *telos* in Greek meaning *end* or *purpose*). As sketched below, in modern science teleological explanations are rejected in favor of explanations in terms of efficient causation.

Hume's Analysis of the Argument:

A mind is the cause of human artifacts
X is the cause of the world
Human artifacts are similar to the world (because both have a purpose)
Therefore, a mind is X

Schema of the Argument. Let \approx represent "is similar to:"

A \approx the cause of B
C \approx the cause of D
B \approx D
Therefore, A \approx C

From a strictly logical point of view, the argument is invalid. There are many examples of A, B, C, and D such that the premises are true, but the conclusion false. (My parents caused me. Your parents caused you. You and I are both people. Therefore, my parents are the same as yours.)

Valid Form of the Argument. Let = represent identity.

A = the cause of B
C = the cause of D
B = D
Therefore, A = C

This argument is valid, even trivial, but is irrelevant to the issue of design in the universe because identity means sharing all the same properties and the items

compared in the argument, represented by B and D, are not identical. The world and a watch, for example, are not identical – one is made of flesh and other of metal.

Hume makes five criticisms of the argument:

1. The analogy (similarity) between the artifacts and the world is too weak to insure that they have the same cause.
2. If the world has a cause, it may well be natural rather than supernatural.
3. If the world has a supernatural cause, that cause needs a cause to explain it.
4. If the cause of the world is both supernatural and self-caused, then it may be imperfect.
5. If the cause of the world is supernatural, self-caused, and “perfect”, this fact does not entail that other religious doctrines are true, e.g. that the cause of the world has a personality and is good and just, or that there is life after death.

Concept of “Purpose”

The concept of “purpose” in the argument has been understood in various ways.

- **Plato and Neoplatonists:** every material thing, including the world as a whole, copies (has as its purpose) to imitate a perfect idea or form.
- **Aristotle and most medieval philosophers:** every species tends to (has as its purpose or “final cause”) the realization of its essence (species definition, nature, form).
- **Leibniz:** every substance (called a monad) has as its natural end to become a fully rational being.
- **Hegel, Marx and the German Idealists:** history progress to a necessary end (called “the Absolute” by Hegel and a state of perfect “freedom” by Marx).
- **Herbert Spenser** (19th century social Darwinist): the goal of evolution is to produce “the survival of the fittest,” i.e. the fittest species.
- **Pierre Teilhard de Chardin** (Jesuit paleontologist): the goal of evolution is toward complexity, consciousness and ultimately the “Omega Point” at which all souls are in communion with God.

More recent teleological advocates, who we will discuss in class, are:

- **William Demski** (Discovery Institute): the goal of evolution is to produce “complex specified information.”
- **Thomas Nagel** (*Mind and Cosmos*): evolutionary history tends toward the production of individuals with consciousness and rational cognition.

Teleological Causation

A **teleological cause** is contrasted with an **efficient cause**. The notion of efficient cause dates to Aristotle.

Aristotle's Analysis of Efficient Causation:

Substance *A* is the *efficient cause* of *B*'s having the property *P* at a time *t* iff at a time *t'* prior to *t*, *A* actually has *P* actually at *t'* and *B* has *P* potentially but not actually, and at *t* *A* passes *P* to *B*.

The form (essence, nature, definition) of *A* is the *final cause* of *A*'s having the property *P* at a time *t* iff *P* is an essential property (part of its species definition) of *A* at a time *t'* later than *t*, *A* does not actually have a *P* actually at *t* (but can potentially have *P*) and *A* acquires *P* at *t'*.

Hume has a simpler analysis of efficient causation that does not depend on Aristotle's ontology of matter and form. Like later natural scientists Hume does not accept teleological causation.

Hume's Analysis of Efficient Causation:

A is the (*efficient*) cause of *B* iff *A* is prior to in time *B*, *A* is contiguous to *B* in time and place, and *A* is "necessarily connected" to (invariably is followed by) *B*.

Later natural science explains efficient causation in terms of the notion of a natural law.

Modern Science's Understanding of (Efficient) Causation:

A is the (*efficient*) cause of *B* iff there is a natural law that says every event of type *A* is followed by an event of type *B*, with a probability of *p*. (If *p* is 1 if the law is deterministic; if *p* is less than 1, the law is "probabilistic,")

Normally, in modern science, except in the case of the smallest or ultimate constituents of causation which have no deeper analysis, causal explanations are of complex events that can be broken down into intermediate steps, and these steps that constitute what is called the *mechanism* whereby *B* results from *A*. That is, when *A* is the (efficient) cause of *B* the science in question normally breaks down the causal process into a distinct causal steps that lead from *A* to *B*. In some cases a more specialized science may be required to explain the details,

e.g. causal relations in biology can be reduced to intermediate steps in chemistry, and chemistry to physics.

If there were any teleological explanations in modern science, they would have to be cases in which ordinary efficient causation does not explain the phenomena.

If A at a later time t is *caused teleologically* by B at an earlier time t' (i.e. if A is the *final cause* or *purpose* of B), then there is no explanation in terms of efficient causation that explains why B follows A , even in terms of a detailed sequence of intermediate causal events.

There are rigorous standards for confirming and disconfirming proposed laws of efficient causation. On the other hand, there are no scientific standards for appraising claims of teleological causation, and by definition, in such cases the ordinary standards for assessing a causal relation, namely those of efficient causation, cannot verify a causal link. So-called teleological “explanations” simply fall outside modern science.