



David Hume: 18th Century Philosopher

Hume's discussion of the argument from design

Winifred

In this next audio recording we are going to hear a conversation between Timothy Chappell, the Course author for this Book and Peter Kail, who is Fellow and Tutor in Philosophy at Saint Peter's College, Oxford about Hume's discussion of the argument from design.

Timothy Chappell

Peter, one thing that you encounter as soon as you open Hume Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion, is that you are dealing with an Eighteenth Century text and it's written in a very different way from modern texts. People nowadays don't have sentences that run on for paragraphs. They don't write in such a flowery way. Somebody might find this – all this very off putting. How would you encourage a student who felt like that?

Dr Peter Kail

After some practice you can actually come to appreciate someone who is actually a very, very elegant stylist in the English language. You may actually come to enjoy reading Hume far more than many modern philosophers.

Timothy Chappell

So Hume and the Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion is writing dialogues. Why do you think he does that?

Dr Peter Kail

My own view is that Hume is trying to dramatise an ideal philosophical exchange whereby there is a very animated discussion but it's genteel. There is a strong personal appreciation for each of the persons concerned and in some sense doesn't come to a complete determinate or dogmatic conclusion.

Winifred

Let's get on then to the Argument from Design. What is the argument as advanced by Cleanthes?

Dr Peter Kail

Well it rests on the following idea that something we identify as an effect we tend to think its causes must be similar to effects like it. Now let me explain. If you see some water puddle like form of water on the pavement then in principle you assume well I've seen rain bringing about those puddles in the past so I assume from the principle that like effects have like causes. That when I see another puddle I assume that the kind of cause that brought it about was similar to that of rain. Now, if you then look at the structure of the world, it's a very complex organisational structure that is in many senses like an artefact. But our experience of what brings about artefacts the causes of artefacts, is that of intelligence. So Cleanthes on the idea that like effects have like causes argues that given this kind of complexity we must assume that the cause of that complexity is like that of the cause of artefacts which is intelligence.

Timothy Chappell

Right. So complicated object designer that's the inference from the effect to the cause. And the world too is a complicated object.

Dr Peter Kail

That's right.

Timothy Chappell

So it too must have a designer.

Dr Peter Kail

Absolutely.

Timothy Chappell

Well, one question about an argument like that of course is that these relations aren't invariable. There are many ways of causing puddles. I have a puppy, which is a reliable cause of puddles. If you have a fire hydrant that you knock the top off as they always seem to be doing in New York, you can cause a puddle that way. So given a puddle, why do you have to assume that there was rain before? And again given an artefact why do you have to assume that there was a designer before?

Dr Peter Kail

Well that's an interesting question and that's one of the – one of the issues that's discussed in the dialogues. The issue is the extent to which the effect, namely the complexity, is like that of an artefact. Now the typical example you had is you talked about a puddle but of course there are puddles and puddles. Some puddles have a particularly watery kind and occur outside. Some puddles are a raw yellow colour and tend to occur indoors or can occur indoors. So one of the things that's under discussion in the dialogues is the extent to which the natural world is really like an artefact. And one of the things that's pushed is well in some respects it's like an artefact but in many others it's not like an artefact. There are a number of different objections to apply on that and if I may I will start.

Winifred

Yes. Take us through then what the objections are

Dr Peter Kail

Well the first thing is if you look at the sense in which the world is an artefact the like effects like causes principle doesn't give you all that you might want out of a conception of God. One thing that Hume says later on in the dialogues is that it's impossible to infer from the structure of the world as we know it the moral attributes of God. So for example we're all familiar sadly enough with how much natural evil there is in the world and typically philosophers of religion have tried to reconcile the presence of such natural evil with the idea that God is wholly benevolent. Now Hume's take on this is rather different because it's not a matter of reconciling one with the other. It's rather saying well look nothing in the structure of the world suggests that the whatever the cause of the universe is that it must be benevolent. It simply says well there may be a cause but it doesn't in any sense whatsoever suggest that that cause must be benevolent.

Timothy Chappell

So if Cleanthes tries to set up the Argument from Design, Philo will hit back with the problem of evil.

Winifred

So that's objection one.

Dr Peter Kail

That's objection one

Winifred

What's his next objection?

Dr Peter Kail

Well let's suppose that it's sufficiently like an artefact. Another traditional view of God is that there's one and only one God. But Philo points out that our experience of designs of building artefacts often involves more than one person. Ships are made by teams rather than as it were a particular person so nothing again nothing in the alleged analogy between artefacts and structure points to uniquely to a single God.

Timothy Chappell

So here it sounds almost as if the analogy is doing too much work.

Dr Peter Kail

I think that's a nice way of putting it.

Timothy Chappell

You might say that if you see God's relation to the world as analogous to the relation of a builder to a house then you ought to conclude that God has lots of attributes the builders have. Maybe God drives a white van for example. That seems to be taking the analogy too far.

Dr Peter Kail

I think that's right. There is also then a second way that the argument is attacked, which is to press the extent to which there genuinely is an analogy here. And to press that what we were discussing earlier, the like effects like causes principle. So it seems initially plausible. You say well there is something really complex. Our experience of the causes of this complexity tends to be that of intelligence. However, here's something that is very, very complex, an egg. And an egg is brought about by a chicken. But – it's a mistake then to think that as it were it's designed by the chicken. It's rather that it's a complex structure that's brought about by biological growth and not intelligence. But now we have a problem. The argument initially started by saying look every time we see complexity well we recognise in some instances the causes of complexity must be intelligence. But now well in other instances it isn't. So it just depends. But now we get to this spectacularly single instance namely the causes of the order of the Universe, and our principle of inference namely like effects like causes, seems to be something that it's very difficult to know that it's applicable in this particular instance. Why? Because the particular instance is so singular and such a one off all indications are that we are artificially stretching that principle of inference. We have now ways of compare – comparing what the causes of the Universe were with other instances.

Timothy Chappell

So Hume leaves us with the thought that there's probably something in The Argument from Design- just not very much.

Dr Peter Kail

I think that's right but you also have to bear in mind that he also says that the cause and causes of the Universe probably bear some analogy to the rotting of a turnip - three paragraphs in.

Winifred

So he didn't hold the argument in very high regard.

Timothy Chappell

Peter Kail – thank you.