

## How would Hume argue against the following proposition? Do you agree with him?

***The universe is like any other artefact: it is the product of design.***

### Summary of the features of the Argument

The argument rests on the *analogical* principle. The Universe is considered the 'Effect' and the monotheistic God the 'Cause'. The analogical principle is called by Everitt<sup>1</sup> the *similarity maxim*. In summarising Hume's stylistic expounding of the AD principle before his dissection of it, he states that it is an argument from *experience*.

There is an extrapolation from cause/effect relations in some parts of our experience to similar relations in parts of the Universe that we do not have experience of. The core of the case is 'similar effect, so probably similar cause' and if we see a similarity between the Universe and an artefact, say the case made by Paley's watch and the watchmaker<sup>2</sup>, it is reasonable to assume that the Universe must also be the product of design.

### The Criticism

One of Hume's lines of attack would focus on the limitations and nature of analogy. Analogies are considered more valid when a larger number of the properties of known object X are reproducible in unknown object Y that is being investigated. The construction of our understanding by analogy is based upon the close similarity between the known and the unknown. Hume would propose that the Universe is so different from anything else within our

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<sup>1</sup> 'Humean criticisms of the argument to design' in *The Non Existence of God*, pp98-100, Nicholas Everitt, Routledge, 2004.

<sup>2</sup> *Natural Theology: Evidences of the Existence and Attributes of the Deity*, 'The Watch and the WatchMaker', Paley, William quoted in Palmer, M., *The Question of God*, pp145-146, Routledge, 2001.

experience that any attempt to argue from analogy would be flawed. Put another way, an effective analogy requires other instances of the same object. With no other universe, the analogy fails.

This is described by Palmer<sup>3</sup> as Hume making the case that ‘uniqueness precludes analogy’. The most obvious consequence of this reasoning is that the supposed cause ‘God’ and the alleged effect ‘Universe’ can not follow by inductive inference because both are unique by definition. The Universe has a different logical status from any individual object or event within that Universe. However, Hume demonstrated he would be ready to concede the principle that the method of argument was valid but the conclusions you could draw by applying the method of analogy were far from the conventional theistic view of God as the designer<sup>4,5</sup>. These are summarised below.

1. Firstly, the evidence would suggest a large number of designers because of the multitude of functions and the tension between the end products. By analogy, it is actually unreasonable to consider the Universe as the product of a single design.
2. The second line of attack from the point of view of analogy is that *in our* experience, a designer has worked on pre-existing materials. Thus, we

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid, p106.

<sup>4</sup> ‘Humean criticisms of the argument to design’ in *The Non Existence of God*, p99, Nicholas Everitt, Routledge, 2004.

<sup>5</sup> *The Question of God*, Palmer, M., p116, Routledge, 2001.

can end up with a designer or team of designers that were not creators<sup>6</sup>.

3. Thirdly, our experience of designers is as physical beings<sup>7</sup> similar to us as men so God is again 'downgraded' to being made in man's image rather vice versa.

4. Fourthly, the most poignant attack for theists, is that the designer must lack any moral sense at all as opposed to one of moral perfection.

Hume noted 'how hostile and destructive to each other'<sup>8</sup> the creations of the designer are. There is nothing comparable amongst artefacts of this immoral and cruel behaviour and so Hume is here rejecting the concession of the first three arguments that there is a causal link.

### **Is it possible to answer Hume?**

Hume's attacks would be rooted in the conclusion from his *Treatise on Human Nature*<sup>9</sup> which is considered his primary philosophical work. His central conclusions were:

1. It is that we can only know cause and effect from *experience* not from *reasoning or reflection*<sup>10</sup>;
2. When we say 'A causes B' we mean only that A and B are constantly co-joined in fact but in reality, may not be so;
3. Necessity exists in mind, not in objects;
4. The impression of A causes the idea of B.

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<sup>6</sup> 'Humean criticisms of the argument to design' in *The Non Existence of God*, p99, Nicholas Everitt, Routledge, 2004.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, p100.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, p100

<sup>9</sup> *Treatise on Human Nature*, published in two parts, 1739-40.

<sup>10</sup> *History of Western Philosophy*, Russell, B., pp634-635, Routledge, 1991

For the second part of the question, the criticism of him and its relevance to the question is best expressed by reflecting on his words:

‘All probable reasoning is nothing but a species of sensation...Objects have no discoverable connexion together...[it is but] custom operating upon the imagination.’<sup>11</sup>

‘All our reasonings concerning causes and effects are derived from nothing but custom; and that belief is more properly an act of the sensitive, than of the cognitive parts of our nature.’<sup>12</sup>

‘If we believe that fire warms or water refreshes, `tis only because it costs us too much pain to think otherwise..’<sup>13</sup>

The basic conclusion then can be summarised that for the pure empiricist such as Hume, that nothing really can be known. No belief can be grounded in reason as they are all subject to “irrational convictions”. Russel observes that it follows that there is ‘no logical difference [for Hume] between insanity and sanity’<sup>14</sup>. In other words, Hume is comprehensively rejecting the principle of induction because all our knowledge is grounded in irrational convictions.

Russel admits this is a philosophical dead-end and represents the bankruptcy of 18<sup>th</sup> century reasonableness. In fact, he goes further to say that Hume’s conclusion has never been fully refuted and reason remains ‘bankrupt’ for the pure empiricist.

So, the obvious question is how did Hume deal with this sceptical conclusion?

The answer is found in BkI, part iv, sec ii of his *Treastise*:

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid. quoting Hume Book I, part iii, sec viii.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid. quoting Hume Book I, part iv, sec ii.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, p646.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid, p646.

“The sceptic still continues to..believe, even though he asserts that *he can not defend his reason by reason* [my italics]...That is, a point which *we must take for granted in all our reasonings* [my italics]”

Interestingly, Hume then writes the second part of the treatise ignoring this logical discontinuity and then establishes the rest of his thesis. The reason this is so interesting is that the “taken for granted” point must necessarily move with the thinker and what they believe.

Accepting Hume’s theory of knowledge, the design hypothesis then becomes equally as valid particularly *when* combined with theological explanations for the disorder and cruelty in the world. This theological “revelation knowledge” becomes equally as valid as empirical observations and indeed may provide a complimentary explanation than ones based purely on our senses. The Universe is now much better understood in the sense that the fundamental particles within it can not be considered without some acceptance of universal causality which are called the ‘Laws of Physics’. The Universe can no longer be considered “inevitable” as true randomness is the anti-thesis of these laws and we can reasonably conclude (with some qualification) design is present and points to an expert designer.

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