THE TELEOLOGICAL ARGUMENT

INTRODUCTION

The teleological argument is also known as the design argument. Just as the cosmological argument has its basis in a simple fact (the universe exists), the teleological argument follows suit by having its basis in another simple yet indisputable fact: things within the universe are highly complex.

It is postulated that the only reason there is order and such complexity in the world is that God must have designed it with a purpose in mind.

When the patterns and order throughout the universe are considered, it is easy to understand the jump to believing the universe must have a purpose and thus was designed by a higher being. The only being we know of who is powerful enough to create a universe is God.

Therefore, God exists.

In summary, the earth is too complex to have just appeared; there must have been an intelligent designer, one which gave everything purpose. That intelligent designer can only be God.

ARGUMENTS IN SUPPORT OF THE TELEOLOGICAL ARGUMENT

1. Theology

Christians believe that God is the creator of the universe, that without God there would be nothing. Where do they get this idea from?

The Bible is full of references to God as creator of all things, but it is in Genesis that we find the creation story.

> *'[1] In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth. [2] And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters. [3] And God said, 'Let there be light: and there was light.'*
>
> Genesis 1:1-3

Christians differ in their view of creation. Some believe it is to be taken literally; that God created the world in six days. Others believe it is allegorical, that God created the world, but then the world continued to adapt and grow, evolving to the point where we are at today.

One thing all Christians agree on, however, is that God was the creator, at the centre of everything in the universe, creating everything for a purpose.

You can read more about the creation story here.

2. William Paley's Watch Theory

An English clergyman and philosopher, William Paley (1743-1805) came up with, arguably, the most famous support for the teleological argument: Paley's Watch Theory.

The theory is based around the logic of analogy. It uses inductive logic; based on the notion that we can draw a conclusion from things we observe.

In 1802 he published his famous work, *'Natural Theology or Evidences of the Existence and Attributes of the Deity'*.

Within it he compared the world - with all its complexities – to the intricacies of a pocket watch:

> *'Suppose I found a watch upon the ground, and it should be inquired how the watch happened to be in that place, I should hardly think ... 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 a stone (that happened to be lying on the ground)?*
>
> *For this reason, and for no other; namely, that, if the different parts had been differently shaped from what they are, if a different size from what they are, or placed after any other manner, or in any order than that in which they are placed, either no motion at all would have been carried on in the machine, or none which would have answered the use that is now served by it.'*
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> *- Natural Theology, Or Evidences of the Existence and Attributes of the Deity*, 1802

Just like the pocket watch, with its intricate workings, the world could not just appear. Everything within the watch works together so perfectly, each tiny piece an important part of the process. The watch had to have had an intelligent designer, someone who put all the mechanisms together. Thus, he argued, the world must have had an intelligent designer too. It is not possible for the world to just appear on its own, working the way it does with all its complexities and purpose.

In summary:

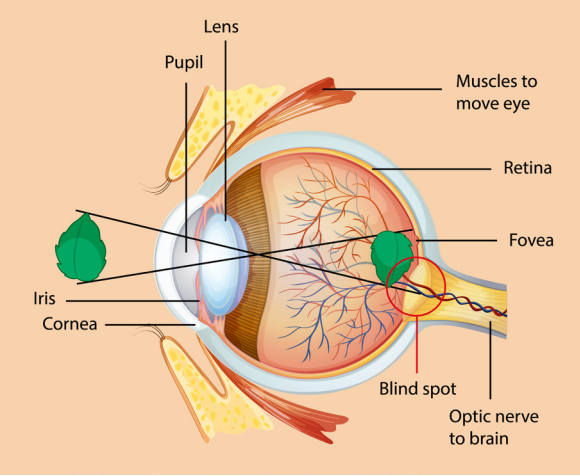
- If you came across a pocket watch you would presume its intricate design was made by a watchmaker; it didn't just appear on its own.
- The universe is so much more intricate, so we may safely assume that it also didn't just appear on its own. It must have been designed by someone.
- This someone can only be God, as he is the only person who is powerful enough.
- Therefore, God exists.

One of the best ways to approach the teleological argument is to consider the world around you...

Consider the Eye

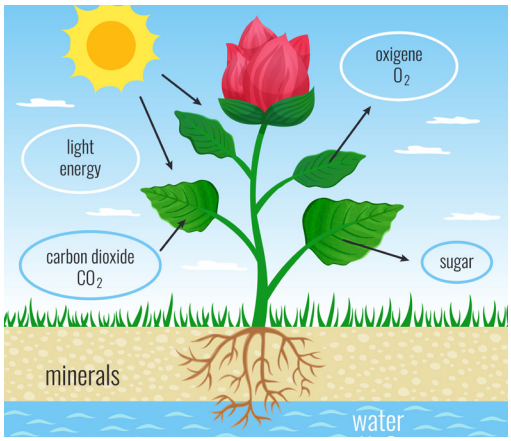
Your eye can distinguish 1 million light surfaces.

When you read, light bounces off 14 million colour sensors and 200 million black and white sensors, sending countless electrical impulses along the optic nerve to be processed by the most complex computer known to man.



Consider Nature

- The complicated process of photosynthesis.
- Precipitation cycle
- Animal, birds and insects: the ways in which they are adapted to suit their environments perfectly



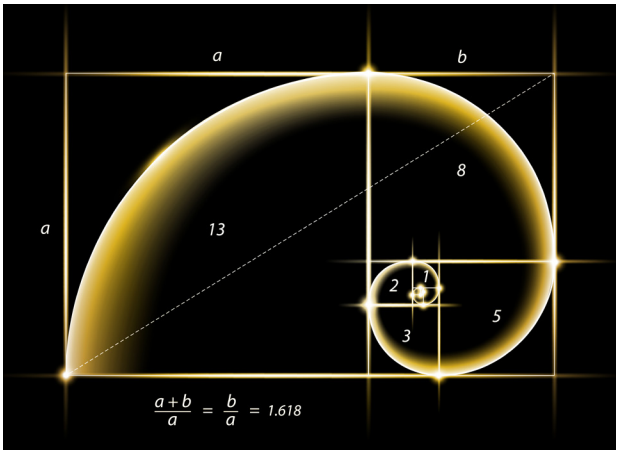
Consider Fibonacci's Golden Ratio

In the 12th century, a man called Fibonacci discovered a sequence of numbers that proved to be more than he could have ever imagined:

0, 1, 1, 2, 3, 5, 8, 13, 21, 34, 55, 89, 144, ...

These numbers appeared in nature over and over again. Everything follows this pattern.

He determined a Golden Ratio – also known as Divine Proportion or Phi – as 1:1.618. Everything in the universe is based on this ratio; it defines beauty, balance and harmony.



The Golden Ratio is everywhere, in art, architecture, advertisement, music, birds, insects, flowers etc. The human body is even based on this ratio. For example, if you take a finger; your fingernail is 1 unit in length, you have 2 hands, each with 5 digits, and your 8 fingers are each comprised of 3 sections. All Fibonacci numbers!

Even our DNA molecules are based on the ratio. It measures 34 angstroms long by 21 angstroms wide for each full cycle of its double helix spiral. 34 and 21, of course, are numbers in the Fibonacci series and their ratio, 1.6190476 closely approximates phi, 1.6180339.

Many people feel that this Golden Ratio points to an intelligent designer.

How could it all of these things – and many more in the universe - occur by accident?

There has to have been a designer behind it all.

3. Aristotle's Four Causes

The Greek philosopher Aristotle (384-322 BC) developed principles to demonstrate *'Complexity, Order and Purpose'*. He stated that for something to come into existence there were four things – causes – which should be considered that are needed in bringing something into being. These are:

- Material
- Efficient
- Formal
- Final

if we apply these principles to, for example a work of art depicting a horse, it will help in understand them better:

- Material cause – without the existence of the canvas and the paint we wouldn't have a work of art.
- Efficient cause – the work of art needs the skill and work of an artist; it doesn't just appear.
- Formal cause – random sploshing of paint on a canvas would not necessarily produce a painting of a horse. Rather, there needs to be a shape created which reflects the anatomy of the horse.
- Final cause – the reason all the other causes take place is because a of the artist's intention. All three of the other causes have been used in order to realise this intention: the overall reason for the painting's existence is to fulfil the artist's purpose.

It is this final cause is that provides a key idea behind the teleological argument. This cause is one which doesn't push things into effect from behind, rather it works in advance by drawing things towards an end goal. Deliberately and carefully.

4. St Thomas Aquinas

Aquinas presented his own form of the teleological argument in his Five Ways. His fifth 'Way' postulated that the whole of nature, which works in harmony, points towards a grand designer.

Fish need to swim so they have fins and tails; dogs need to gnaw bones, so they have strong teeth. We can either say this is merely accident or we can argue for 'design' or deliberate intention, by an intelligent designer, i.e. God.

Aquinas argued that the discerning person will choose the latter.

5. F.R. Tennent: The Anthropic Principle

FR Tennent (1866-1957), a British theologian and philosopher, lent further support to the teleological argument with his theory, also known as the *The Goldilocks Principle*. It is based upon the idea that, just like in the Goldilocks story, where she eventually found the porridge, chair and bed which was 'just right', everything is the universe is 'just right' for human development. For example, the way in which gravity works and the earth's climate.

The world is so perfect for human life that it could not be an accident. The exact conditions for human life are so improbable that someone must have designed the world exactly to meet our needs.

He thus argues that only an intelligent designer could have created a universe so suited to human development, so God must exist as He is the only being cable of doing so.

6. Sir Isaac Newton's Thumb

The scientist Isaac Newton (1642-1727) used the thumb print for what he considered evidence for God's existence. He argued that because each person has an individual and unique thumb print that this pointed to a designer rather than random chance.

CRITICISM OF THE TELEOLOGICAL ARGUMENT

1. David Hume

David Hume (1711-1776) was a Scottish philosopher who made two solid criticisms of the teleological argument:

- He questioned the success of analogy, stating that human inventions, for example a pocket watch, could not be compared to living things. Hume pointed out that living things are organic in nature whereas man-made machines are mechanistic. Therefore, safe conclusions cannot be drawn.
- Hume accepted that the teleological argument did have some merit, that there was, in fact, some evidence of order and design in the world. In which case it was not an unreasonable conclusion that it must have been designed. But he questioned the conclusion that the designer was God, suggesting it could be another designer, even a group of designers.

In his book, '*Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion'* (1779), Hume famously wrote:

> *'This world for aught we know, is very faulty and imperfect compared to a superior standard and was only the first rude essay of some infant deity who afterwards abandoned it, ashamed of his lame performance.'*

2. Science - Charles Darwin: The Theory of Evolution

The theory of natural selection, put forward by Charles Darwin (1809-1882), proposes to show a way of understanding how species develop without reference to a designer God.

Species gradually evolved over time and continue to through natural selection and speciation due to isolation.

This argues against the philosophical arguments for God's existence, including Newton's claim that due to thumbs being so detailed, it proves a God must have designed them. Evolutionary theory states that we have thumbs because, in our need for them, we have evolved over time to have them, rather than having them designed from the outset by an intelligent designer.

3. Richard Dawkins: '*The Blind Watchmaker'*

Richard Dawkins (1941-), an English ethologist and author, argues that the universe is too disordered to have been intelligently designed. In his book, '*The Blind Watchmaker'* (1986), he stated that if there was a God, then He must be blind as there is too much suffering that occurs in the world. If there was a designer, therefore, they cannot be thought of as intelligent if they cannot spare people from diseases or allow natural disasters.

This links to the problem of evil and suffering, which many people cite as a reason for their disbelief in the existence of God, doubting his omnipotence and omnibenevolence.

You can find out more about Richard Dawkins ideas here.

Does evolution completely cancel out the teleological argument?

'In the beginning were created only the germs or causes of the forms of life, which were afterwards to be developed in gradual course.'

You might be forgiven for thinking that this comes from the pen of a modern biologist. However, you would be wrong!

These are, in fact, the words of Saint Augustine (354-430), a North African bishop and philosopher. They were written over 1600 years ago, not in an attempt to defend the biblical account of creation, rather it was his take on the creation story.

Augustine wanted to know where life comes from. He didn't believe that organic life sprang into being on its own.

Instead, Augustine argued that God created the world with the capacity to develop life over time. The analogy he used was that of seeds waiting to sprout from the ground.

Rather than creating life directly, Augustine's view was that God arranged for life to emerge gradually on earth in accordance with fixed laws. To Augustine, God is timeless and not bound by human understanding of time. Therefore, the six days of creation could as easily be six million years.

Darwin, himself, appeared to agree with this idea; despite all the controversy around his theory of evolution, he never said God didn't exist.

Many Christians today also agree that evolution and the idea of God as an intelligent designer are entirely compatible. Made more persuasive when one considers that the order of creation from the Bible is the same order according to the theory of evolution!

TASKS

1. Create a list of:
    a. 5 things which have moving parts that rely on each other for the object to serve its purpose.
    b. 5 other examples of complexities from the universe/nature.

    Do these things persuade you that there might be an intelligent designer? Why/why not? Explain your answer.

2. Create a biographical profile about William Paley. Be sure to include information about:
    a. When/where he was born/lived/died.
    b. An explanation of the his 'Watch Theory'.
    c. Do you think his *'Watch Theory'* is convincing? Why or why not?

3. Complete independent research on Fibonacci's Golden Ratio.
    a. Explain the Golden Ratio.
    b. List 5 other examples of where it can be found.

4. Aristotle said that there were four causes behind everything in the universe.
    a. Which of Aristotle's four causes is the key idea behind the teleological argument?
    b. How does it connect to the teleological argument?

    Explain your answer in full.

5. Do you think that FR Tennent's Anthropic Principle offers good support to the teleological argument? Explain your answer.

6. David Hume said that there were two major problems with the design argument. Under the following titles, briefly explain them:
    a. Problem one – the success of the analogy
    b. Problem two – who designed the universe?

7. Why is evolution seen as the biggest threat to the teleological argument? Explain your answer.

8. Explain why Saint Augustine would have not had a problem with the theory of evolution. Explain your answer in full.

9. *'The way in which the world works is too perfect for there not to have been an intelligent designer.'*

    Do you agree with this statement? Explain your viewpoint, with reference to the arguments for and against in this resource.