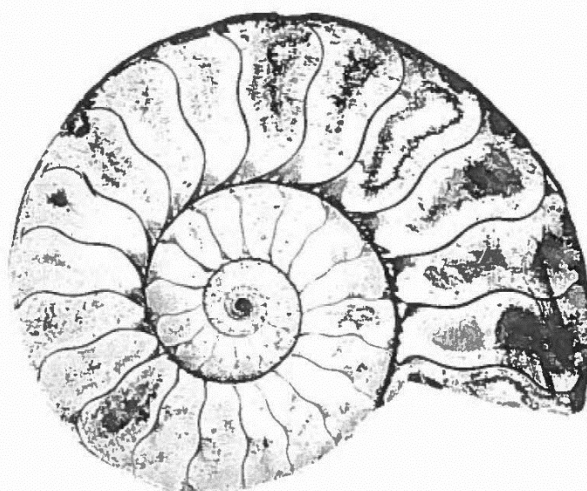


## Candidate 1

# How convincing is the Teleological Argument as proof for the existence of God?



Scottish Candidate Number:

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## How convincing is the Teleological Argument as proof for the existence of God?

*'When you see a sundial or a water-clock, you see that it tells the time by design and not by chance. How then can you imagine that the universe as a whole is devoid of purpose and intelligence, when it embraces everything, including these artifacts themselves and their artificers'<sup>1</sup>*

*Cicero, 106 – 43 BCE*

Perhaps the very utterance of “teleology” in Cicero’s time would have sparked confusion. After all, the Argument from Design as it is currently understood only came into existence in the mid-thirteenth century with the Catholic philosopher Thomas Aquinas’ five proofs for the existence of God (his *Quinque viæ*)<sup>2</sup>. However, Cicero’s works on the Argument were undoubtedly some of the first in a long line of philosophical reasoning for the existence of an intelligent designer. With every development in the Argument, though, there are subsequent criticisms ranging from those of the Epicureans in the third century BCE (at the time disputing the argument for an intelligent designer, rather than God per se) to other philosophical minds, such as David Hume and Immanuel Kant. First introduced over a millennium ago, the Teleological Argument is no less relevant or contentious today. Even the advent of the industrial era and the “age of science” in the 19<sup>th</sup> century did nothing to quash the Teleological Argument. The Teleological Argument only gained greater prominence within society as it was challenged by the fields of evolutionism and secularism. Renewed interest in the Teleological Argument in contemporary society has been heralded by recent scientific advancements, such as developments in the study of microbiology, that may actually serve to validate the Argument from Design in the natural world.

Before we begin to analyse the justifications for the perceived validity of the Teleological Argument, and the subsequent criticisms of such arguments, it seems sensible to remind ourselves of the nature of the Teleological Argument: it is an argument for the existence of an intelligent designer based on perceived evidence of design in the natural world. In Christian theology the “intelligent designer” is seen to be God, yet elements of the Argument can be found throughout all main religious faiths. The Argument is generally considered to consist of two separate aspects, the first being Design qua Regularity, which posits that the regularity of natural order observable throughout

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<sup>1</sup> Cicero, MT, *De Natura Deorum (The Nature of Gods)*, 1972, p158-159

<sup>2</sup> Aquinas, T, *The Summa Theologica (Part 1); The Existence of God*, 2012, Third Article, “Whether God Exists?”, Obj. 2

the universe – for example, the consistency of the laws of physics – is evidence for design. This is because such regularity is, arguably, extremely unlikely to have occurred by chance. The second aspect is that of Design qua Purpose, which is explained by the etymology of the word “teleology”. In general philosophical use, the word “teleology” refers to ‘interpretation in terms of purpose’,<sup>3</sup> and is derived from the Greek word *telos*, meaning end or goal. Quite literally, this aspect of the Argument asserts that all things within the natural world progress towards their *telos*, and this progression is evidence for design.

In evaluating the strength of the Teleological Argument as proof for the existence of God, it will be pertinent to analyse the Argument from Analogy and its associated criticisms, specifically those of Hume and Mill. We will then turn to the Theory of Evolution, as it offers an alternative, scientific explanation for evidence of Design qua Purpose and Design qua Regularity in the universe. Finally, we will proceed to examine this theory’s associated responses, notably the Argument from Fine-Tuning and the Anthropic Principle.

*The Universe troubles me, and much less can I think,  
That this clock exists and should have no clockmaker<sup>4</sup>*

*Voltaire, 1694 – 1778*

The philosopher Voltaire was perhaps the first to introduce the Argument from Analogy, as expressed in the above quote. However, it was the philosopher and theologian William Paley who offered the most concise and renowned version of the Argument from Analogy. Paley’s analogy, similar to that of Voltaire, focuses on a pocket watch. He reasoned that if, when walking across a heath, one came across a watch, one would not suggest that the watch had lain there forever, as a stone might have. Rather, one would recognise that the watch must have had an intelligent designer, who formed it for the purpose of telling the time, due to the irreducibly complex nature of the mechanisms within the watch. For the watch to work as intended these mechanisms would have to function in perfect harmony. Arguably, the concept of design that Paley identified in the watch can also be found throughout the universe, in the intricacies of the natural world and the way that natural entities work together with “purpose” for survival. Like the watch, Paley claimed that the natural world is so complex in its workings that such complexity cannot have been established simply through chance.<sup>5</sup> One perceived strength of Paley’s argument is that it is based on inductive,

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<sup>3</sup> Chambers Concise Dictionary, 1988, p1024

<sup>4</sup> Arouet, F, *Les Cabales: Oeuvre Pacifique (The work of the Cabal of Pacifists)*, 1772, p9

<sup>5</sup> Paley, W, *Natural Theology; or Evidences of the Existence and Attributes of the Deity Collected from the Appearances of Nature*, 1837, p9

a posteriori reasoning. This means that an understanding of the purpose behind the design of the universe is not required for one to agree with the Teleological Argument, just as an understanding of the workings of a watch is not required for one to understand that the watch is intelligently designed. The fact that the Argument from Analogy does not rely on an understanding of the nature of God – which may have religious faith as a prerequisite – but merely observations of order in the natural world, has contributed to its credibility among theists and atheists alike.

Paley's Argument from Analogy links closely to that of the philosopher David Hume's character Cleanthes, which is as follows:

1. *all design requires, by definition, a designer*
2. *a great design requires greatness in the designer*
3. *there is great design in the world (as evident in the order present within nature)*
4. *therefore, there must be a great designer to the world.*<sup>6</sup>

Cleanthes suggested this "great designer" was God. Cleanthes' argument is similar to the Argument from Analogy, as it draws conclusions from the notion of intelligent design as we perceive and define it in ordinary life. Arguably, the fact that both arguments liken apparent design within nature to artificial human design shows just how analogous order as intended by humans and order in the natural world is. Perhaps this is indicative of just how closely order within the natural world can be assimilated with the workings of an intelligent designer. While, when viewed in isolation, this close assimilation is by no means "proof" that order within nature is a product of intelligent design, the apparent similarities between the two types of order does strengthen the analogy at the heart of the Argument from Analogy, and thus contributes to the convincingness of the wider Teleological Argument.

These arguments from analogy have, however, faced significant criticism, notably from Hume, in the form of his characters Philo and Demea.<sup>7</sup> In these characters, Hume maintained that the analogy confuses entities that are made, with entities that arise through natural processes. In particular, Hume claimed that things created through human design and the natural world are not analogous to one another because we do not have the same experiences of each.<sup>8</sup> Arguably, for example, we have many examples of watches being made by watchmakers, and therefore it would be reasonable to believe, on encountering a watch, that it was made by a watchmaker, because this is what experience predicates. However, we have no experience of the universe being created by an

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<sup>6</sup> Hume, D, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, 1779, p47

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.* p48-49

<sup>8</sup> Hume, D, *Dialogues Concerning Natural religion*, 2007, p11

intelligent designer, and therefore the analogy drawn between designed entities (such as the watch) and the universe is neither accurate nor reasonable. Rather, it would be more accurate to compare the universe with a tree, as this would show how structure and order can be achieved in organic biology through natural processes. For now, it seems reasonable to argue a posteriori that as the universe appears to operate naturally – in the sense that it evolves in the apparent absence of external direction or movement (or at least such external control cannot be observed) – it would be better compared to a natural entity.

Hume also criticised the aspect of Cleanthes' argument in which he reasoned that there is great design in the universe and that this is indicative of the existence of a great designer of the universe. Hume argued that design in the universe is not "great"; there are many imperfections in the natural world, including natural disasters, disease, and "violent tendencies" among animals.<sup>9</sup> As an example of such, we need look no further than the Tarantula Hawk, a species of wasp that uses its sting to paralyse its prey, before laying an egg inside it. This hatches into larva which eats the prey alive, specifically avoiding vital organs to keep it alive for as long as possible. Surely, the unimaginable suffering that the Tarantula Hawk causes cannot be seen as evidence for a good designer.

Therefore, according to Cleanthes' own logic, God cannot be "perfect", in the way classical theism describes him. Whilst this logic would not necessarily disprove the existence of an intelligent designer of the universe, it certainly shows that such an intelligent designer cannot be a perfect one. To illustrate this point, we could liken the imperfections present within the natural world to a poorly designed house. If it had visible design flaws (for example, if the roof were not watertight), we would think poorly of the designer. So too, the universe appears to show visible signs of imperfection, and thus we should not perceive a designer of the universe to be great.

One response to this, expressed in the "Free-will" Theodicy, is that suffering and evil is in fact inevitable. This theodicy posits that God (as the universe's designer) has granted people free-will and the ability to live their lives as they please, yet this free-will is not always used for the common good. As morally imperfect beings, we can use our free-will to harm others, and God is unable to stop this lest he interfere with our free-will. The theodicy claims that free-will is more important than moral perfection, and thus God allows us free-will even if we occasionally use it for immoral ends.<sup>10</sup> Therefore, if suffering and evil is truly inevitable due to the free-will we have been given, even the most perfect designer could not limit it, and hence the presence of suffering and evil in the world does not prove incontrovertibly that the designer is imperfect. Thus, according to this reasoning, the Teleological Argument could still act as a convincing proof for the existence of God.

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid. p41-42

<sup>10</sup> Bennet, G; Hewlett, M; Russell, R, *The Evolution of Evil*, 2008, p126

However, what of situations where suffering and evil is not caused by human action? Neither human action (nor inaction) causes natural disasters; they are in no way a product of free-will. Yet natural disasters can cause immense suffering. The 1931 China floods, for example, led to the deaths of over two million people.<sup>11</sup> As the causes of such tragedies cannot be attributed to free-will, their occurrences cannot be defended according to the Free-will Theodicy. Therefore, if an intelligent designer of the universe exists, such disasters would be a product of their poor design. Thus, we should not perceive a designer of the universe to be great, and Cleanthes's argument actually proves that an intelligent designer of the universe could *not* be the God of classical theism.

The British philosopher John Stuart Mill also questioned how a perfect God could create an imperfect universe. He suggested that in creating an imperfect universe, the designer must either be lacking in omnipotence, or, if sentient, goodness. In his *Three Essays on Religion*, Mill remarked:

*'Not even on the most distorted and contracted theory of good which was ever framed by religious or philosophical fanaticism, can the government of nature be made to resemble the work of a being at once good and omnipotent'.<sup>12</sup>*

*Mill, 1806 – 1873*

Mill claimed that if the designer were to be limited in power, we could question what is limiting this power.<sup>13</sup> If this were the case, perhaps an entity more powerful than the designer, who controls the designer's actions, exists? Perhaps this entity is itself God? Regardless, it is too much of a leap of logic to progress from saying that a designer of the universe may exist, to saying that a designer of the universe *might* exist, but due to the flaws present in the universe, this designer *might* be limited in power by another entity, who *might* be God, when the alternative (that there is no designer) is much more plausible. Certainly, according to Ockham's Razor, the assertion that no designer of the universe exists is simpler, and therefore should be favoured. Either way, the attributes Mill ascribed to the designer do not fit with the attributes ascribed to the God of classical theism, and therefore, following Mill's logic, as with that of Hume, God cannot be the universe's designer.

While Cleanthes' argument is not necessarily flawed, as the reasoning involved is sound and logical, Hume's criticisms certainly suggest that an alternative explanation exists. One alternative – that order in the natural world has been propagated through evolution – is perhaps more plausible given that we have empirical evidence and experience of such being the case, whereas we have no experience of order arising through intelligent design. Hume's criticism also highlights the self-

<sup>11</sup> Courtney, C *The Nature of Disasters in China; The 1931 Yangzi River Flood*, 2018, p5

<sup>12</sup> Mill, J, *Three Essays on Religion*, 1874, p38

<sup>13</sup> *ibid.* p183

defeating nature of Cleanthes' logic. While Cleanthes' argument does not necessarily disprove the existence of an intelligent designer of the universe, it certainly suggests this designer cannot be God. Thus, this aspect of the Teleological Argument is not convincing as proof for the existence of God.

An alternative design argument for the existence of God – the Argument from Fine-Tuning – is perhaps more convincing. The Argument from Fine-Tuning purports that the universe is too well suited for the existence of life for it to have arisen through any means other than intelligent design, and it is supported by the Anthropic Principle. The Anthropic Principle is the idea that the universe, in its current state, is particularly well suited to supporting human life. First proposed by British theologian and philosopher Fredrick Robert Tennant in 1930, it has three forms: the Weak Anthropic Principle, the Strong Anthropic Principle, and the Aesthetic Principle (the latter two of which are most relevant to this dissertation). In short, the Strong Anthropic Principle advocates that the universe is tailored for humanity.<sup>14</sup> Proponents of this argument claim that evidence of “fine-tuning” can be found in Earth's suitability to support human life (for example, in the way the atmosphere is composed of just the right amount of oxygen to allow us to breathe). The Aesthetic Principle argues that there is no evolutionary reason for humans to perceive beauty – it does not help us survive, as other human traits do.<sup>15</sup> However, it does exist, and therefore the presence of beauty, and our ability to perceive it, suggests the existence of an intelligent designer, who has given humans the ability to appreciate and wonder at their surroundings. As St Augustine of Hippo questioned, *'Who made these beautiful, changeable things, if not one who is beautiful and changeable?'*<sup>16</sup>

*St Augustine, 354 – 430*

Arguably, the reasoning present in the Strong Anthropic Principle and the Aesthetic Principle is flawed in its confusion of cause and effect. It is more likely that the universe fits our needs because human life has adapted to suit its surroundings through the process of evolution. If, for example, several sub-species of human beings evolved over time, each relying on the regular inhalation of a unique gaseous element, then the sub-species found most commonly on earth would be the ones that consume the gasses present in Earth's atmosphere, not because the Earth has been tailored to suit them, but because they were the only variations of the species that could have survived on Earth. Writer Douglas Adams presented this sentiment in a rather humorous analogy:

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<sup>14</sup> Carter, B, *Confrontation of Cosmological Theories with Observational Data; International Astronomical Union Symposium No. 63*, 1973, p291

<sup>15</sup> Tennant, F, *Philosophical Theology; Volume II; The World, The Soul and God*, 1968, p89-93

<sup>16</sup> Augustine, St, *Sermons (230-272B) on the Liturgical Seasons*, 1993, p70



*'Imagine a puddle waking up one morning and thinking, "this is an interesting world I find myself in – an interesting hole I find myself in – fits me rather neatly, doesn't it? In fact it fits me staggeringly well, must have been made to have me in it!"[sic]'<sup>17</sup>*

*Adams, 1952 – 2001*

Just as the puddle wrongly concludes that because it fits in the hole so well, the hole must have been designed to incorporate it, so too we would be wrong in thinking that our natural environment suits human life so well that it must have been designed with the purpose of supporting us.

Similar can be said of the Aesthetic Principle, as presumably we could find any medium beautiful if we had evolved to appreciate it. Many people consider sunsets to be beautiful; if the sun always set with a bright blue hue rather than a reddish one, surely we would find sunsets just as beautiful? In the western world we can appreciate the beauty of western styles of music – perhaps classical music, for example – while seeing some foreign styles as strange or unpleasant sounding. In the same way, someone unaccustomed to western styles of music may think the opposite. We grow to appreciate beauty in that with which we are familiar; that which we evolve in the presence of. Therefore, once again, logic predicates that we will always experience beauty, in one form or another, not because such beauty was necessarily created by an intelligent designer, but because it is what we have grown to consider "beautiful." Hence, our conception of beauty requires no explanation external to evolution.

While this criticism does not necessarily prove that God *cannot* be the source of "fine-tuning" in the universe, neither does it show that he *has* to be the source. It is one of the most basic principles of reasoning that we should not assume a positive proposition (such as "God is the cause of fine-tuning in the universe") is true simply because it *could* be true. Rather, we should establish the truth of a positive proposition through evidence and experience (reasons to believe that it is indeed the case). The fact that God *could* be the explanation of evidence of fine-tuning in the universe is not – on its own – enough to reasonably justify a belief that God *is* the cause of "fine-tuning" in the universe, and thus the Strong and Aesthetic Principles fail to establish God as the cause of "fine-tuning" in the universe. Therefore, this version of the Teleological Argument is not convincing as proof for the existence of God.

Despite its flaws, the Anthropic Principle has the advantage of being compatible with Charles Darwin's Theory of Evolution. Darwin, an English biologist and naturalist, argued that species have adapted to their natural environments over time through the process of natural selection. Some

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<sup>17</sup> Adams, D, *The Salmon of Doubt: Hitchhiking the Galaxy one Last Time*, 2003, p131



organisms are born with random genetic mutations that make them better suited than other organisms to survival in their natural habitats, and these organisms are more likely to survive and produce offspring, while others die out. This is known as “survival of the fittest”,<sup>18</sup> and, arguably, it serves to explain why many species appear extremely well-suited to survival in their natural environments. Tennant, the initial proponent of the Anthropic Principle, suggested that the entire evolutionary process could be the work of God.<sup>19</sup> Although this process occurs naturally, he claimed that God was required to initiate it. The Anthropic Principle certainly accommodates the Theory of Evolution, and the lack of conflict between them serves to strengthen the Anthropic Principle. The Theory of Evolution is well established and is based on science, so it can be empirically verified. Thus, there is more evidence to support the Theory of Evolution than the Anthropic Principle, which is based on reasoning alone, and therefore it would likely be the explanation that is favoured.

Another alternative argument for the existence of God is the Argument from Intelligent Design. This argument contradicts the Theory of Evolution and is based on the implausibility of Darwin’s theory. This theory asserts that life was created for the conditions of the universe by an intelligent designer, rather than adapting to the conditions of the universe through evolution.<sup>20</sup> While the theory only points to the existence of an intelligent designer, and not God, leaders of the Intelligent Design movement have asserted that the intelligent designer is the Christian God.<sup>21</sup> Intelligent Design consists of two main arguments against the Theory of Evolution: Irreducible Complexity and Specified Complexity. Irreducible Complexity, proposed by American biochemist Michael Behe, purports that certain biological systems are so complex that they could not possibly have arisen through evolution, and instead must have come about through intelligent design.<sup>22</sup> The Flagellum, a bacterial component, can be used to support this claim as it would initially appear far too complex to have come about through a step-by-step process (such as evolution), and rather must have been created instantly. In some ways, the Flagellum could be likened to a machine whose parts are so interdependent that they must have been created at the same time for a specific purpose. For Behe, the gradual process of evolution could not conceivably have produced natural entities such as the Flagellum with its inherent complexity. However, Kenneth Miller – an American biologist – observed that within the Flagellum there exists a simpler functioning mechanism: a bacterial syringe.<sup>23</sup> This

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<sup>18</sup> Darwin, C, *On the Origins of Species by means of Natural Selection or the Preservation of Favoured Races in the Struggle for Life*, 1861, p63

<sup>19</sup> Tennant, F, *Philosophical Theology; Volume II; The World, The Soul and God*, 1968, p222-223

<sup>20</sup> Wells, J, *The Politically Incorrect Guide to Darwinism and Intelligent Design*, 2006, p7

<sup>21</sup> Dembski, W, *Signs of Intelligence: A Primer on the Discernment of Intelligent Design*, obtained in *Signs of Intelligence; Understanding Intelligent Design*, 2001, p192

<sup>22</sup> Behe, J, *Darwin’s Black Box: The Biochemical Challenge to Evolution*, 2006, p187

<sup>23</sup> Miller, K, *Only a Theory: Evolution and the Battle for America’s Soul*, 2008, p58-63

shows that the Flagellum has not always served its current purpose and has arisen through gradual evolution. What purpose would this smaller functioning mechanism have if the Flagellum was created instantly by an intelligent designer? Miller's observations, therefore, show that the Flagellum (the basis of Behe's claims) does not exhibit irreducible complexity, and its development can be attributed to evolution.

The second of the two main arguments for Intelligent Design, Specified Complexity – proposed by mathematician William Dembski, also fails to usurp the Theory of Evolution. The Theory of Evolution posits that as DNA is passed from one generation to another in a species, chance genetic mutations occur, which serve to create biological variety. Dembski reasoned, however, that the chance of life progressing to the point it is at now through the random process of evolution is so infinitesimally small that it is not logically plausible.<sup>24</sup> If Dembski's reasoning is sound, we can conclude that the causes of biodiversity in the world must be an intelligent designer. However, Miller also criticised Dembski's reasoning, arguing that the probability of life evolving to its current state cannot be calculated backwards. He claimed that life has evolved to its current state and we have evidence of this being the case, however mathematically implausible this may seem.<sup>25</sup> Also, the Theory of Evolution purports that complexity within the natural world is inevitable: if one organism develops a mutation that serves a specific purpose in aiding survival, then this organism is more likely to produce offspring that have their own mutations that aid survival. This process will continue, with a species becoming gradually better suited to its natural environment. Hence, we can argue that, over the process of evolution, the microbiology of organisms will become more complex, with it appearing that certain biological mechanisms are acting with increasingly specific purposes. Consequently, we can say that evolution is not a "random process", as Dembski suggested, but rather one that is self-propagating and inevitable. Intelligent Design fails to successfully disprove the Theory of Evolution, and thus it holds no place as a more plausible explanation for evidence of fine-tuning in the universe. Therefore, this version of the Teleological Argument is unconvincing as proof for the existence of God.

Throughout this dissertation, it has become clear that while many variants of the Teleological Argument show an intelligent designer could exist, none prove that this designer is God. In fact, they appear to suggest quite the opposite. The "God" reached by the Teleological Argument is clearly an imperfect God; he lacks either omnipotence or omnibenevolence, and therefore cannot be the God of classical theism. Perhaps this flaw is inevitable and lies in the fact that the Teleological Argument attempts to encapsulate the entire notion of God's creation of the universe in one single

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<sup>24</sup> Dembski, W, *The Design Inference: Eliminating Chance through Small Probabilities*, 2006, p62-66

<sup>25</sup> Miller, K, *Only a Theory: Evolution and the Battle for America's Soul*, 2008, p75

line of reasoning. Of course, one could argue that it is our understanding of God through religion, rather than through experience of the world (and of evidence of design within it) that is flawed. In this case, perhaps the Teleological Argument serves to highlight the flaws present in religious doctrine. The fact remains, though, that the Teleological Argument is an argument for the existence of God. If not for the religious interpretation of God, the Teleological Argument would not exist, and thus the Teleological Argument can only ever be successful if it proves the existence of the God of classical theism. As discussed, the Teleological Argument only serves to establish that evidence of design within the universe could be the product of an intelligent designer – not God – and therefore, the Teleological Argument is unconvincing as proof for the existence of God.

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