

Design Argument : The Criticisms of David Hume

Introduction

David Hume (1711-1776) criticised the design argument in his 'Dialogues concerning Natural Religion' (1779) This was published after his death as it was ill advised to publish something making the case for Atheism in 18th Century Scotland! In the dialogues, Hume's characters Cleanthes, Demea and Philo are discussing attempts to prove the existence of God. Cleanthes is to some extent an empiricist who believes that the design argument works and can prove God's existence. Demea is more of a rationalist but ultimately believes that God's existence is a matter of faith. Philo is a sceptic and offers skilled and savage criticisms of the arguments for God.

Commentators believe that Philo is representing Hume's own position. His arguments are based on his belief in **empiricism**. He argued that design is something that we perceive and assume. Even if the world appears to be designed, this may just be **due to our interpretation** of the data that our senses provide.

Hume's Criticism

1. Humans **do not have sufficient knowledge** of the creation of the world to assume that there is only one designer. We see order in the world but we are not justified in assuming that order equals design.

A) As humans we only have experience of the things that we design and create. These may not provide an adequate analogy. We know that houses require a designer because we have experience of many houses being built. Yet we only have experience of this universe and we were not present at its beginning. He argued that it was impossible to draw conclusions about the whole from a small part 'We cannot know what a person is like from a single hair. How can we decide what God is like from just looking at the world?'

B) The universe is not like a vast machine. It is **more like a living thing** such as a vegetable or inert animal, something that grows of its own accord rather than something made by hand.

2. Hume's second key criticism is perhaps a little sarcastic. Suppose the universe was designed, it would **not necessarily follow that the designer was the God of Theism**.

A) We might have the work of several lesser gods or an 'apprentice' god who went on to create bigger and better worlds or 'the production of old age and dotage in some superannuated deity.' He speculates that there may be other worlds that are not as good as this one, made whilst this God was practising. The evidence of our senses – an imperfect world - would make this more likely than one all powerful, all good God

B) Hume felt that people who believe in God **project human beliefs onto a non-human world**. But actually If we use a human analogy it is more usual for a machine or something else that is complex to be **the product of many hands** rather than one designer.

3. Hume also suggests that matter is self-ordering. It may have an inner tendency towards order. Hume also refers to the Epicurean Thesis. This is the idea that given an infinite amount of time, the particles of matter in the universe could form in any number of combinations. Eventually there would be an ordered combination. So the order we observe may not be designed but the result of pure chance over time.