

The design argument

First, some discussion of the midterm exam.

The midterm will be held in class two weeks from today, on Thursday, October 9. It will be worth 20% of your grade.

The material which will appear on the exam may include material covered up to the end of class on October 2, the Thursday before the exam.

The exam will consist of 4 essay questions, of which you will answer 3 of your choosing.

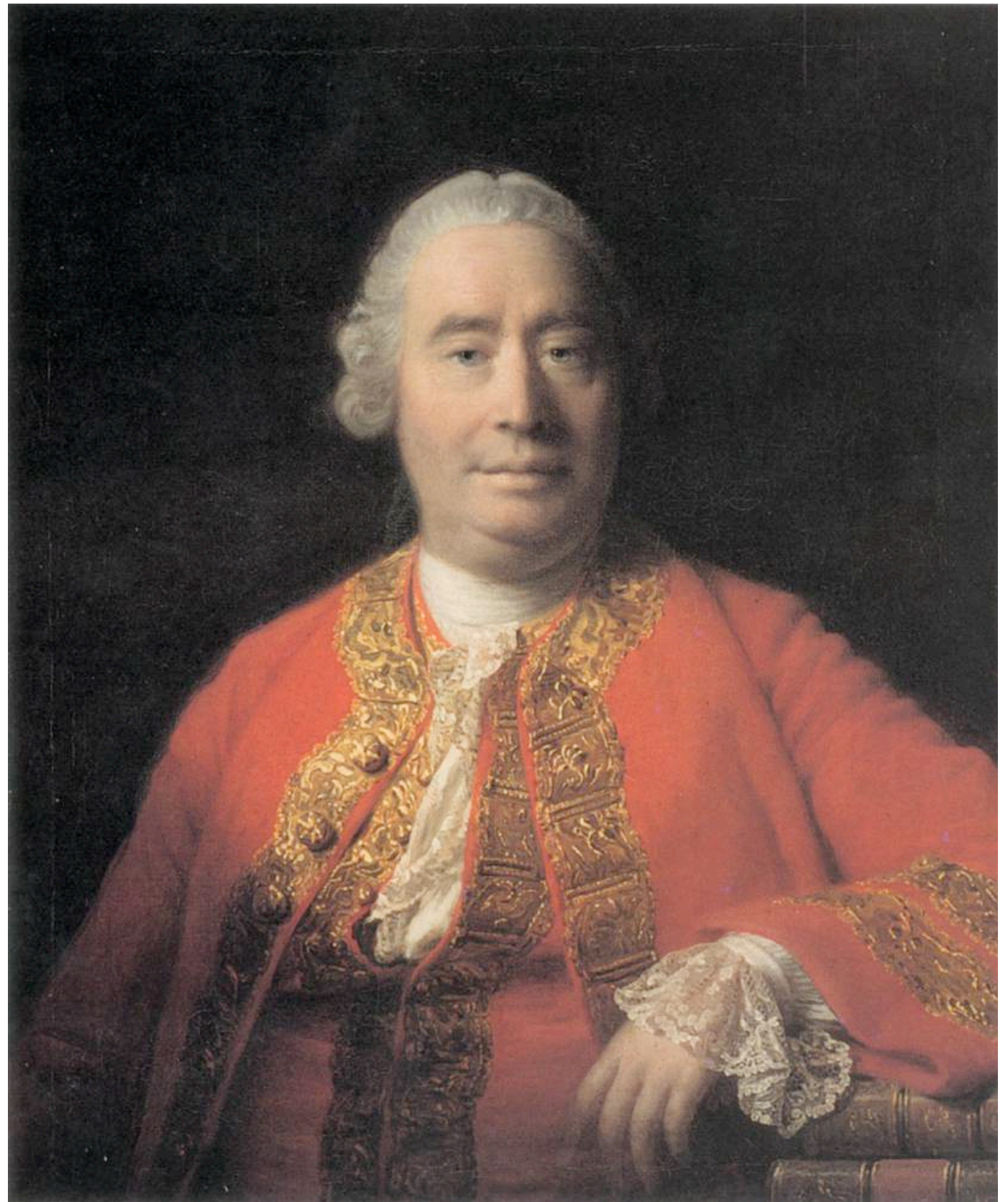
Each question will ask you to explain one or more of the arguments which was in the readings and discussed in class. In addition to explaining the argument or arguments, you will also be asked to evaluate them, and say how an opponent of the argument(s) might respond.

Born in Edinburgh, Scotland in 1711, David Hume is usually thought to be the greatest English-speaking philosopher who ever lived. Despite this, because of his reputation as an atheist, he was never able to get an academic position.

For today we read a selection from Hume's *Dialogues on Natural Religion*, which was published after his death in 1776.

The topic of the part of the *Dialogues* which we read is the “design argument,” which is, historically, arguably the most important argument for the existence of God. We will be distinguishing a few different versions of the argument, and discussing them today and next time.

This book is written in dialogue form; there are three characters, Cleanthes, Demea, and Philo. How would you characterize the positions of each of these characters?



Cleanthes gives the following statement of the design argument:

Cleanthes: Not to lose any time in circumlocutions, said *Cleanthes*, addressing himself to *Demea*, much less in replying to the pious declamations of *Philo*, I shall briefly explain how I conceive this matter. Look round the world: Contemplate the whole and every part of it: You will find it to be nothing but one great machine, subdivided into an infinite number of lesser machines, which again admit of subdivisions to a degree beyond what human senses and faculties can trace and explain. All these various machines, and even their most minute parts, are adjusted to each other with an accuracy which ravishes into admiration all men who have ever contemplated them. The curious adapting of means to ends, throughout all nature, resembles exactly, though it much exceeds, the productions of human contrivance; of human design, thought, wisdom, and intelligence. Since therefore the effects resemble each other, we are led to infer, by all the rules of analogy, that the causes also resemble, and that the Author of Nature is somewhat similar to the mind of man, though possessed of much larger faculties, proportioned to the grandeur of the work which he has executed. By this argument *a posteriori*, and by this argument alone, do we prove at once the existence of a Deity and his similarity to human mind and intelligence.

Here is one way to think about the argument that Paley has in mind here:

1. The universe is analogous to human artefacts, but greater.
2. Analogous things have analogous causes.

- C. The universe must have a maker which is analogous to makers of human artefacts, but greater.

This version of the design argument is sometimes called *the argument from analogy*.

One strength of this argument is that, if it is correct, it shows there exists a being which not only created the universe, but made it the way that it is on purpose. This is part of many people's background view of God's relation to the universe -- not just that God got things started (as Aquinas' first way tries to show) but also that God made the universe the way that it is intentionally.

The argument from analogy is the main focus of Philo's criticism in the passages we read.

The first point that Philo makes is that arguments from analogy are, in general, only as strong as the similarity between the things claimed to be analogous. He says, for example

“That a stone will fall, that fire will burn, that the earth has solidity, we have observed a thousand and a thousand times; and when any new instance of this nature is presented, we draw without hesitation the accustomed inference.

This is because one stone being dropped is quite similar to another stone being dropped. But the case we're interested in -- the similarity of the universe to human artefacts -- seems quite different:

“If we see a house, Cleanthes, we conclude, with the greatest certainty, that it had an architect or builder because this is precisely the species of effect which we have experienced to proceed from that species of cause. But surely you will not affirm that the universe bears such a resemblance to a house that we can with the same certainty infer a similar cause, or that the analogy here is entire and perfect. The dissimilitude is so striking that the utmost you can here pretend to is a guess ...”

Indeed, Hume thinks that the problems are even worse than this. The vast differences between the human artefacts whose makers we know and the universe make it unlikely that we can tell anything about the maker of the universe from the similarity between the two:

“All the new discoveries in astronomy which prove the immense grandeur and magnificence of the works of nature are so many additional arguments for a Deity, according to the true system of theism; but, according to your hypothesis of experimental theism, they become so many objections, by removing the effect still farther from all resemblance to the effects of human art and contrivance. ...

In a word, Cleanthes, a man who follows your hypothesis is able, perhaps, to assert or conjecture that the universe sometime arose from something like design: But beyond that position he cannot ascertain one single circumstance, and is left afterwards to fix every point of his theology by the utmost license of fancy and hypothesis. The world, for aught he knows, 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: It is the work only of some dependent, inferior deity, and is the object of derision to his superiors: It is the production of old age and dotage in some superannuated deity; and ever since his death has run on at adventures, from the first impulse and active force which it received from him ...”

A proponent of the design argument might reply that the design argument is not meant to “fix every point of theology” or tell us everything we think we know about God; rather, it is just meant to show us that the universe has a creator who is in some measure similar to human creators of artefacts like houses and watches.

What might Hume say to this reply?

One thing Hume would certainly say about even this limited version of the design argument is that it is, in a certain sense, unstable: the form of reasoning used in the argument is supposed to lead to a conclusion which that very form of reasoning undermines. Recall the following passage:

“How, therefore, shall we satisfy ourselves concerning the cause of that Being whom you suppose the Author of Nature[?] ... Have we not the same reason to trace that ideal world into another ideal world or new intelligent principle? But if we stop and go no farther, why go so far? Why not stop at the material world? How can we satisfy ourselves without going on ad infinitum? ... If reason ... be not mute with regard to all questions concerning cause and effect, this sentence at least will it venture to pronounce: that a mental world or universe of ideas requires a cause as much as does a material world or universe of objects ...”

What argument does Hume have in mind here?

He seems to be posing a dilemma for the proponent of the argument from analogy. The proponent of that argument seems to be assuming some principle like the following:

Anything which, like artefacts, is well-suited to its purpose, must be the product of an intelligent designer.

Either this principle is true, or it isn't. If it isn't, then the argument from analogy does not get started. But if it is, then -- supposing that God is well-suited to God's purposes -- it looks like God must be product of an intelligent designer. Either way, it looks like the argument from analogy loses.

So the argument from analogy appears to face serious problems. But the argument from analogy is not the only version of the design argument.

The design argument begins by noticing certain features of the universe, and argues that these features provide strong evidence for the existence of God. One such feature, Cleanthes says, is the “adapting of means to ends” throughout the universe. Historically, the most prominent example of this is the suitability of environments to the living things which inhabit those environments. Our question is: why is this feature of the universe provide strong evidence for the existence of God?

One response to this question -- the response given by the proponent of the argument from analogy -- is that these features provide such evidence because they are analogous to human artefacts. The eye is suited to the task of vision in just the way that the gears of a watch are suited to the task of telling time.

A second response to this question is that these features of the universe are quite unlikely to have arisen purely by chance and that, for this reason, their having been created by God is the *best explanation* of their existence. This idea can be used to formulate a different version of the design argument, which we can call the ‘best explanation design argument.’

One simple way to think about this ‘best explanation’ argument is as follows:

1. Living creatures are well-suited to the environments in which they live.
2. God’s having created living creatures is the best explanation of the fact that living creatures are well-suited to the environments in which they live.

C. God created living creatures.

Here we are saying that a certain theory --- the theory that God created living creatures --- is the best explanation of a certain facts that we can observe. This is a form of reasoning familiar from science. We observe some data, and believe that theory which best explains the data. But what does it mean to say that a theory is the best explanation of something?

This is a difficult question, to which we will return later. But here’s one thing that it involves. Often we say that a theory T best explains some fact if the following is true: if T were true, we would expect the fact in question to obtain; but if T were not true, the fact in question would be extremely unlikely to obtain.

Can you think of any examples of cases in which we would believe a theory on the basis of this being true?

Let’s suppose that this is what we mean by ‘best explanation.’ Then is the argument above valid?

What does this show about the argument? Does it show that it is a bad argument?

One thing you may want to think about is whether Hume's criticisms of the argument from analogy can be modified so as to apply to this argument.

But, setting this aside, it seems that the 'best explanation argument' is a pretty good argument, if its premises are true. But are they? Is creation by God really the best explanation of the suitability of living creatures to their environments?

A plausible reply to this question is that if the only alternative is something like chance or coincidence, then creation by God might well be the best explanation of this observed fact. But, given the theory of evolution, it is not the only alternative. And perhaps, when we better understand what makes something the best explanation, we'll see that the theory of evolution is a better explanation of the observed facts than creation by God.

This is the main reason why the theory of evolution is thought to undermine belief in God. It is not that there is an argument from evolution to the conclusion that God does not exist; rather, it is that one otherwise promising argument for the existence of God appears to be undermined by the theory of evolution.