

Key concepts

- The 18th century Scottish philosopher David Hume is the key thinker often used in challenging inductive arguments for the existence of God. For Hume, cosmological arguments raised concerns in relation to the notion of causes.
 1. Hume thought the quest for a first cause was illogical. He argued that the notions of eternity and infinity renders the quest irrelevant.
 2. He rejected the notion that a principle that was relevant to the 'part' (i.e. a cause) could be applied to the 'whole' (i.e. universe); Hume argued that this was 'an arbitrary act of the mind'. Russell later developed this, referring to it as the 'fallacy of composition'.
 3. Since we can only reason with certainty what we have experienced, to ask about origins of a universe is meaningless as we have no experience of this.
- Hume's objections to the teleological were mainly based around the watchmaker analogy. Paley post-dated Hume but the watchmaker analogy had been raised much earlier by Rene Descartes amongst others.
 1. Comparing a mechanical instrument (watch) to an organic one (the world around us) is inappropriate. A better analogy would be with a vegetable.
 2. Assuming there is a governing intelligence behind the universe is not sound inductive reasoning according to the evidence we have available.
 3. Any notions of 'design' that we do induce would not tell us how many 'designers' there were, nor whether or not it was the God of classical theism.
- 4. In addition, any 'designer' of our world would be open to criticisms of incompetence, creating an imperfect, almost apprentice-like world.
- 5. Features of our world such as disease and natural disasters would also question the morality of such a designer.
- 6. Hume distinguished between deliberate and authentic design on the one hand and the appearance of design on the other. The teleological argument fails to do this as there are other explanations for this 'apparent' order.
- Today, there are alternative scientific theories that explain the origins of the universe and the existence of human life.
 1. The Big Bang theory suggests the universe originated from a random appearance of a singularity (a single point in space-time).
 2. Charles Darwin's theory of evolution and the notion of survival of the fittest posit that appearance of order emerges from an underlying process that is both unpredictable and random.
 3. For Richard Dawkins, a watchmaker has foresight with precise notions of purpose and predicted outcomes; natural selection is blind and unconscious.
 4. James Lovelock's Gaia hypothesis sees the world as a complex self-regulating process of interactions between organisms and their inorganic surroundings, working together to contain and maintain life without the need for external influence.

Issues for analysis and evaluation

Key arguments/debates

The main debate is about whether or not there is a definitive sense of 'order'.

Richard Swinburne argued that despite all the problems, the simplest conclusion of an absolute being makes sense.

Key questions

Does the evidence suggest authentic order or illusory order?

Are the alternative scientific theories providing a full explanation?

Key quotes

'How can any thing, that exists from eternity, have a cause, since that relation implies a priority in time, and a beginning of existence?' (David Hume)

'Just because every human has a mother does not mean the whole of humanity has a mother.' (Bertrand Russell)

'The only watchmaker in nature is the blind forces of physics.' (Richard Dawkins)

'...in tracing an eternal succession of objects, it seems absurd to inquire for a general cause or first author.' (David Hume)

'The universe is just there, and that's all.' (Bertrand Russell)

Key words

ANALOGY

WHOLE

ASSUMPTION

BIG BANG

SELF-REGULATING

HUME

BLIND

DESIGNERS

SINGULARITY

UNDERLYING
PROCESS

CAUSE

GAIA

DISEASE

DARWIN

FALLACY OF
COMPOSITION

DAWKINS

ARBITRARY

AUTHENTIC

INCOMPETENCE

PART

EXPERIENCE

APPEARANCE

LOVELOCK