

The Teleological Argument: Notes on van Inwagen, *Metaphysics*, chapter 9

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October 8, 2007

1 Teleological Argument - Aquinas's version

1. There are beings without knowledge that act for ends.
 2. If a being without knowledge acts for an end, this must be because it is directed by a being with knowledge.
- Therefore,
3. There is a being with knowledge that directs the beings without knowledge that act for ends.

Notes:

- Aquinas identifies the “being with knowledge” with God.
- The argument does not show that there is only one such being directing nature.
- Examples of premise 1 (for Aquinas): (a) Rock falling: end is to reach its natural place; (b) plant's leaves turning toward the sun: end is to maximize exposure to sun
- Since the overthrow of Aristotelian natural science, examples like (a) no longer look teleological.
- Biological examples like (b) still appear purposive, but Darwin gives us a way of explaining this appearance without supposing that actual purposes of a rational being are involved.

2 Teleological Argument - contemporary version

1. There are natural phenomena which give the appearance of being goal-directed.
(vI focuses on the example that basic constants such as the charge on an electron appear to be “fine-tuned” in such a way as to make life possible.)
 2. Either these phenomena are the result of sheer chance, or they have been designed by an intelligent creator in order to make life possible.
 3. Intelligent design is a better explanation than sheer chance.
- Therefore,
4. We should accept the hypothesis that the universe had an intelligent designer.

3 Criticisms

1. Chance as a Good Explanation. As far as we know, any values for the fundamental constants are as likely as any others. So any particular set of values, including the actual one, is vastly improbable. Since we wouldn't think the other values required a special explanation, and they are no less improbable than the actual ones, we don't need a special explanation for the actual ones either.

Response 1 (van Inwagen): The "Merchant's Thumb" principle. ("My thumb just happened to be over the hole in the cloth." –seems implausible in a way that "My thumb just happened to be over that non-hole area" wouldn't be.)

Response 2 (me): For other sets of values of the constants, intelligent design is not a better explanation than chance, because no intelligible purpose would be served by that "design." But in this case, design may be a good explanation, because the values do seem to serve an intelligible purpose.

2. Premise 2 is false. Chance and design do not exhaust the possible explanations. For example, evolutionary explanations, although they involve chance as a part of the explanation (random variation), also involve a very important component that is not chancy at all (natural selection).

Response: Evolutionary explanations may account for some of the apparent design in the universe (notably in biological organisms), but it can't explain why the fundamental constants have the values they do.

3. Multiple Universes. The argument presupposes that there is only one actual universe, with one set of values for the fundamental constants. It may be that in fact there are multiple actual universes with a wide range of values for the constants. This idea seems to be taken very seriously in modern physics.