

Dr. Jim Spiegel, Philosophy of Religion, Session 3, Theistic Arguments, Part 2, The Teleological Argument

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This is Dr. James Spiegel in his teaching on the philosophy of religion. This is session 3, Theistic Arguments, Part 2, the Teleological Argument.

Okay, we've already talked about the cosmological argument for the existence of God.

Let's turn our attention now to two other theistic arguments: the teleological argument, or the argument from design, and the argument from mind or consciousness. So we'll begin with the teleological argument, or the argument from design, which reasons from apparent design in the world to the existence of a supernatural designer. The teleological argument is so-called because the root word there, *telos*, means purpose, goal, or end.

The idea is that there are evident in nature all sorts of animate as well as inanimate entities and structures, which suggest that the world has been purposed and intentionally arranged to fulfill certain ends or goals. So, arguments for the existence of God, which focus on those facts about the world, are called teleological arguments. Now, there are different kinds of design.

When we talk about design, we could be referring to a variety of different things. We can talk about design as order, as purpose, as complexity, as unity within the complexity, beauty, and information. So, just to give an example of design in the form of order, I remember having an eye exam a couple of decades ago and talking about the teleology of the human eye with this optometrist.

He noted to me that in the lens of the human eye, there are seven layers of tissue that have to be just so many microns apart in order for our vision to not be blurred. If it's soft, it's the slightest bit, then we won't have clear vision. So, in terms of the ordering of those different layers of tissue in the lens of the human eye, they have to be just so in order to be functional.

So that would qualify, many would argue, as design in the form of order. There's also temporal order. We can talk about different cycles, biological rhythms or cycles, such as the human body, menstrual cycles, sleep cycles, and other forms of temporal cycles that are crucial to having a healthy, functional life.

And in terms of design as purpose, even those who are not theists will talk about the purpose of, say the pancreas or the purpose of the lungs to oxygenate blood, the purpose of the heart to pump blood. All the different organs in our bodies serve various purposes, and we can look at them as a form of design. And so it goes, different kinds of design.

William Paley was a natural theologian in the late 18th century who made famous his watch analogy. Basically, his argument was that we recognize a certain design in human artifacts like watches or clocks. We recognize that these things, even if we did not watch them get created or built by human engineers, we know that they must have been made by someone because they're so well designed.

So, Paley believes that the world is analogous to, say, a watch or a human-made device, only radically more complex and functional than any watch or clock. So, his basic argument is that a human artifact, like a watch, has order, complexity, and unity. There's a mutual cooperation of the parts of the thing.

It works towards an end, in this case, the end of keeping time for us. It's created by an intelligent designer, while the world is the second premise. The world in which we live exhibits order, complexity, unity, and mutual cooperation of parts and works towards an end. Therefore, the world probably has intelligent designers.

That's the basic argument that has been roundly criticized ever since Paley, including by the renowned David Hume, a Scottish philosopher who was a skeptic who critiqued this argument even before Paley published it in a work he wrote in about 1801. Hume had been dead for a quarter century, and he'd already critiqued the argument very well. It's a popular argument, but it has a pretty deep flaw, namely the fact that, as Hume points out, there could be other natural explanations for the apparent design that we witness in the world.

He notes that there is an important difference between a watch and the world, namely that we have seen people make watches. We have seen engineers construct, design, and construct timekeeping devices, but nobody's ever seen a god make a universe, right? I know I haven't, or at least I missed that episode of Nova. So, that's an important flaw when it comes to that version of the teleological argument.

In recent years, though, with the advance of scientific understanding regarding the laws of nature, a new form of design argument has emerged called the fine-tuning argument. And the idea here is that the universe seems to be finely tuned for the possibility of life. Here, we're focusing on inanimate design.

We can also talk about design in living creatures and fine-tuning when it comes to, say, biochemistry or genetics. But in the context of the focus of this version of the fine-tuning argument that we'll talk about has to do with inanimate design, just in

the physical universe, you have all these laws of nature that converge for the possibility of life. And Robin Collins is one of the most prominent defenders of this fine-tuning argument.

So, we'll talk about his version of the argument. And he begins with a couple of basic assumptions. One of them is just the observation that any cosmologist, any physicist, will tell you that the universe is fine-tuned in the sense that it exhibits a precise balance of physical parameters that are necessary for life.

In order to have life in any universe, you have to have certain stability and complexity in that universe in order for life to be possible. So, this is what we observe when it comes to such laws as the inverse square law of gravity: objects are attracted to other objects proportional to their mass and inversely proportional to the square of the distance between them. That is absolutely crucial that that law be in place, as well as Avogadro's constant, the strong and weak nuclear forces, and dozens of other what we call natural laws, in order for life to be possible.

And finally tuned to the point where, you know, the very slightest deviation would make life impossible. The Big Bang expansion rate would be another one. In the Big Bang, the universe had to have expanded at just the rate it's expanded because if it was any slower in its expansion, it would have collapsed back on itself, and you would really have had no universe.

If it had expanded even the slightest degree faster than it did, then it would have been; the matter would have been too diffuse, and life-supporting stars would have not been able to form. So, the Big Bang expansion rate, being exactly what it is, has been essential for the possibility of life as well. Keep in mind that this is just to have a universe that would permit life.

This has nothing to do with the actual creation or development of life in a universe that has these physical parameters. It's just we're talking about a universe that is life-permitting. The other key assumption that Collins notes is the principle of confirmation.

When considering two competing hypotheses, an observation counts as evidence in favor of the hypothesis under which the observation is most probable or least improbable. So, we have basically two hypotheses competing here. One is theism, that there is an intelligent designer of the universe.

The other is the atheistic view; there is no intelligent designer, and there is no God. Which of those hypotheses is best confirmed by what we observe in terms of the fine-tuning of the universe? So, the core argument, according to Collins' version, is this: that the fine-tuning of the universe is not improbable given theism. That's a very modest claim, isn't it? He's not saying that it's likely.

I, as a theist, personally maintain that given the nature and existence of God, we would expect a finely-tuned universe. You don't have to go that far. You just need to acknowledge for this argument that the fine-tuning of the universe is not improbable. It's not unlikely.

Secondly, the fine-tuning of the universe is very improbable, and this is an understatement under the atheistic single-universe hypothesis. The odds are so remote as to be infinitesimally small that the fine-tuning of the universe as we observe it could have happened just on its own, to the point of vanishing probabilities. The conclusion is that the fine-tuning data provides strong evidence in favor of theism.

Here, we don't need to say that it proves the existence of God. What counts is proof. We could debate that.

We don't need to go there so long as we can just conclude that this does provide very strong evidence. You have a potentially strong argument for the existence of God here. So that's the argument, and Collins considers a number of objections to this argument.

One is that perhaps there's a more fundamental law, one basic law of nature, that dictated or guaranteed, as it were, that all of the particular laws of nature that we're familiar with would be exactly what they are, that those regulations would be exactly what they are. So, we don't need to appeal to any kind of intelligent designer. We can just appeal to a more fundamental law of nature, is the idea.

Here, Collins's reply is that it is just pure speculation. We don't have any independent reason to believe in such a more fundamental law that dictated these other laws would have the parameters they do. So, it's what's called an ad hoc argument.

You need independent evidence supporting a particular proposal that refutes a belief that you want to challenge. But what is the independent evidence for a more fundamental law here? There is none. Anyway, this appeal to a more fundamental law really only just moves the problem back one step.

Because if there is a more fundamental law of nature that guarantees that all these other particular laws would be set exactly as they are, just right for the possibility of life, we can then ask, well, what explains that? That we got that lucky that there would be this fundamental law of nature. It certainly would prompt us to ask, hmm, doesn't that suggest in itself a kind of intelligent design that there would be that fundamental law that guaranteed a fine-tuned universe? Another objection suggests that for all we know, other forms of life could exist under different physical

parameters. All that we know is life in this universe where we have these laws of nature that are set the way they are.

Maybe in a very different universe, there could be other life forms that we can't conceive of because we live in this universe. Collins' response to this is that any living system, so far as we can even conceive of it, would have to have a certain amount of complexity and stability. A basic understanding of life from a biological perspective at least involves some degree of metabolism.

That requires immense complexity as well as stability and unity. Our understanding of life and our whole concept of it would dictate that much. We can only go based on what we know here.

Everything we know scientifically about life is that it involves such organized complexity. Even if there are other forms of metabolizing systems that we've never experienced that could be out there, we do know that they would have to be very organized and complex but also unified and stable. You need the laws of nature to be set basically where they are in order for that to be possible.

A third objection is the many universes hypothesis. What if our universe is not the only universe but one of the myriad universes that have been produced in some way we know not how, maybe by some deep metaphysical universe-producing mechanism that's belching up universes by the trillions and quadrillions? If you get enough universes, it's like the proverbial chimpanzees in the room of typewriters for centuries and eons of time; eventually, one of them is going to produce a Shakespearean play.

If we can somehow get innumerable universes, then that offsets the odds against having a kind of random convergence of all these laws that are just right for the possibility of life. So that's the appeal to the many universes or multiple universe hypothesis. What do we say to that? Collins' response is that other things are equal, and we should always go with the hypothesis for which we have independent evidence.

Again, do we have any independent evidence for a universe generator or the existence of myriad other alternate universes? We certainly have a lot of Hollywood films and TV shows that operate on the premise of parallel universes or multiple universes. We find it from an aesthetic standpoint intriguing, just like time travel films and books. It's all very entertaining.

Or invisibility. Last week I read H.G. Wells' book, *The Invisible Man*. I'd never read that before.

Great book. It's full of all sorts of lessons about technology and unanticipated dangers or risks, as well as hazards that may be involved in this case with invisibility. So, we can talk about these things in a fictionalized setting.

Invisibility and time travel in multiple universes. But that doesn't imply there's any independent evidence for this. And there is no independent evidence, certainly no scientific evidence, for multiple universes.

Now, it may be possible; we can conceive of it and imagine it, but that doesn't mean there's any independent evidence for it. When we're talking about evidence in this case for design, for the existence of God, to come up with some sort of rebuttal to undermine the apparent evidence for design because of the fine-tuning, it needs to be based on something empirical, on some independent grounds, and that's what we don't have here. So again, it's an ad hoc hypothesis.

And just to define that, an ad hoc hypothesis is a proposal or a theory that is devised just to guard a particular theory from an objection and which is not independently testable. That certainly applies to the multiple universe thesis. How could you possibly test that when it's referring to something that transcends our universe, which, in a natural understanding of science, seems to defy science or scientific theorizing?

A standard conception of science is that it's an exploration, a study of the physical universe, our universe. Once you start proposing things that go beyond this universe, you're getting into what would appear to be the supernatural. So you can argue this multiple universe theory is a kind of supernaturalistic approach in itself, which would be ironic because, in this context, it's aimed at trying to undermine or refute belief in a supernatural God.

Collins also notes that the multiple universe hypothesis just moves the design problem up a level. Because if there is a universe generator, if there is some sort of system producing all of these trillions and quadrillions of universes, that naturally raises the question, well, who set that up? How did that get arranged? That's a pretty impressive system that produces a single universe and myriad universes. And that's just the kind of thing that would suggest some sort of supernatural power that is unimaginably great and brilliant and wise, as well as powerful.

So that's the argument from design in the form of fine-tuning. All right, so we'll move from here to the next theistic argument, which is that of the argument from the mind. This is a theistic proof or theistic argument, which reasons from the fact of consciousness, particularly human consciousness, to the existence of a sufficient cause for this, God.

It's also variously known as the argument from rationality, sometimes the anthropological argument. So, to spell this out, let's just begin by talking about two competing views of human nature. Historically, Christians and other theists have maintained that human beings are basically a body and a soul, or spirit or mind.

I'm a spirit, soul, mind. But that kind of dualism is true about human nature. We're body and soul.

So, there's something spiritual about us. On the other hand, you have physicalism. The physicalist, materialist, or naturalist maintains that everything in the world, including humans, can be described entirely in terms of physics.

Only matter or energy exists. Physical states cause other physical states. And that applies to human beings as well as everything else in nature.

So, you and I are just a mass of material. Various chemical configurations and energy states. That's it.

There's nothing more to us than our material body. That's physicalism. So you have dualism, mind-body dualism, and physicalism.

Now, there are a number of standard arguments for mind-body dualism. One of them is that the argument is from awareness or consciousness. How is it that matter or a material being ever begins to think or be aware? The fact that human beings and other organisms have the awareness that they perceive and that we can think is something that needs an explanation.

And that many argue defies ultimately a material explanation. There's the argument from subjectivity, which is closely related. And that is, it refers to the subjective character, the first-person quality of experience.

That there's something that it is like to be me. There's something that it is like to be you. You have a first-person perspective that cannot be captured in third-person descriptions.

Many years ago, it was about 50 years ago, a naturalist philosopher named Thomas Nagel wrote an article called, What is it Like to Be a Bat? His point in the article is that bats have what is called echolocation, it's a kind of perceptual ability, sensory capacity that you and I don't have, but that bats have, and that, say, dolphins and porpoises and whales have. And it's a kind of perception that whales have, emitting basically pulses of sound that then bounce off of whatever objects are in their environment, and it creates, I guess, some sort of internal mental map for them. And we can talk about this in third-person terms.

Scientists have done a lot of analysis of echolocation. But no matter how knowledgeable we become on the sensory capacity of echolocation, we still don't know what it's like to be a bat or a dolphin that has this capacity. You would have to become such a creature to understand that.

Nagel's point in bringing this up is that consciousness has that kind of irreducible subjectivity to it, this irreducible first-person quality. And it's a problem for physicalists to account for this because, again, from a scientific standpoint, all we can do is provide third-person descriptions of the world, third-person descriptions of our bodies and our brains, and that is necessarily going to miss this first-person character of conscious experience. So, severe limitations with physicalism, many would argue, point towards something about us that transcends the physical.

Then there's an argument from intentionality, which focuses on the fact that mental states have a certain aboutness to them. Our thoughts, in many cases, transcend. So, I can think about the President of the United States, Joe Biden.

When I think about Joe Biden, my thoughts, as it were, transcend me and refer to this person who is, I assume, somewhere in Washington, D.C., right now. How is that? How do you account for such intentionality that is transcendent of our own gray matter? That, too, points to something that transcends the physical. Then there are arguments from near-death experiences, which is a topic we could talk about at length on its own is NDEs, as they're called, are people who die temporarily, and their heart stops beating.

They may even have a flat EEG or an electroencephalogram. There's no discernible brain activity. Then, after several minutes, they're revived, and they come back reporting all sorts of rich experiences, in many cases, reporting things that they saw or heard elsewhere as their soul traveled, say, beyond the hospital or their home.

It is corroborated by the later investigation of fascinating accounts, many of which have spawned books and movies. It's become somewhat of a cultural phenomenon, but it's useful for our thinking about the philosophy of mind because if any one of these experiences is authentic and real, and it is possible for people to transcend their own bodies in this way, that would point to some kind of mind-body dualism. So, NDEs seem to confirm a kind of dualistic view of human nature.

So, all of these arguments support mind-body dualism. The reason that we're talking about this is that if human beings have a spiritual aspect, a soul, or a supernatural spirit that cannot be accounted for in just physical or material terms, then there must be some sort of supernatural cause for our souls.

And that, of course, points to God or some sort of creator. So, we can summarize the argument from the mind in this way. Human beings have minds; as we've talked

about, we display mental characteristics such as consciousness, perception, subjectivity, and intentionality, and our mental features cannot be explained in purely physical terms.

So goes the argument. Therefore, our minds must have a supernatural cause. There must be something non-physical that gave rise to our minds.

And that cause must itself be a mind or have mental capacities that can account for our own mental capacities. And presumably, it would have to be a very powerful, intelligent being who is also as personal as we are. Personal in the sense that it makes choices and acts for ends.

So that's the argument from the mind. There's much debate on the subject of mind-body dualism. This and objections have continued to be levied against the argument from the mind.

One of them is that inferring the existence of a supernatural mind is giving up. That human behavior, human thought, is a part of our experience that is scientifically assessed. It's appropriately examined through scientific, empirical scientific means.

So, to appeal to a supernatural being as the explanation for our minds is basically giving up on the scientific project. To prematurely foreclose against a natural explanation for consciousness. Daniel Dennett, a major philosopher of mind and naturalist, has constantly, repeatedly emphasized this as an argument for the physicalist view.

We should refuse to give up so easily and opt for belief in the supernatural when we haven't given science enough of a chance to explain the phenomena that we're talking about here. I think a good response to this is to point out that making an evidentially justified inference is not giving up. It's actually rational success.

Given what we know about intentionality and subjectivity and basic awareness and NDEs, that is positive evidence for something supernatural going on in the realm of consciousness. So, it's not just giving up. It's reasoning on the basis of positive facts that, okay, in some cases are more philosophical than scientific, but in some cases, they are scientific as well.

Secondly, some objects that infer the existence of a supernatural mind are unscientific, and that's why we shouldn't make that inference. You're necessarily going to be doing philosophy; some would say theology.

I don't think you necessarily have to become theological here in your reasoning, but certainly, maybe the reasoning is primarily philosophical and not primarily scientific. Is that a problem for the dualist and for the theist? Well, to insist that the solution

must be scientific in the sense of providing a natural explanation for human consciousness really begs the question. That seems to be the whole question at issue.

Can human consciousness be explained in scientific and, therefore, physical terms? The argument here is that, well, no. There are, there must be something supernatural going on in order to account for consciousness, and it's precisely because of these other kinds of observations, again, some of them philosophical, that we conclude that the ultimate explanation is not just physical; it's not just scientific. So, insisting that an explanation about any phenomenon has to be scientific really begs the question of favoring physicalism when that's the very question at issue.

Are there supernatural causes of events and phenomena in the world? And then, finally, there's the objection that appeals to Occam's razor or principle of parsimony, that other things being equal, the simpler of, say, two competing explanations need to be preferred. So it would be a simpler explanation, wouldn't it, if we could account for human consciousness just in terms of matter, in terms of physics, and not have to appeal to the supernatural. But Occam's razor says that one should not multiply entities without good and sufficient reason or other things being equal. We should go with the simpler explanation.

So that really begs the question, are other things equal here? And they're not because we have so many phenomena, so many facts about consciousness that can't be explained in physicalist terms. That is a great unequalizer, and it's precisely for that reason that we conclude, or the theist concludes, that there must be a supernatural realm and supernatural causes to account for human consciousness. So, there are a number of objections and replies to my argument.

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