

THE ECOLOGICAL VALUE OF THE TELEOLOGICAL ARGUMENT

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Is there any relationship between the teleological argument for the existence of God and the environmental crisis and its solution? If there is, what sort of relationship is it? This paper will highlight two points. First, the teleological argument has various dimensions and one of them is the ecological dimension. Second, the loss of the teleological view of nature has been one of the basic theoretical reasons for the destruction of the environment; and its restoration would play an important role in the conservation and preservation of the natural environment.

I

The teleological argument, also called the argument from design, is one of the three classical arguments for the existence of God, along with the ontological and cosmological arguments. It is probably the most popular and widespread of all the arguments. Not just philosophers, theologians, and some scientists but even lay people have shown serious interest in it. It may be characterised as an argument for the existence of God which proceeds from observations of regularity, beauty, and providence in nature, through some sorts of analogical or inductive reasoning, to the conclusion that these must be the work of a Designer, namely, God¹

The teleological argument seems to have more dimensions than is seen at first sight. Primarily it has a religious dimension. It can help religious people to strengthen their religious beliefs and experiences through setting up habits of empirical thinking or spiritual feeling in which there is a disposition to see Divine design in all nature. Thus it

¹See for the details, Cafer S. Yaran, *The Argument from Design in Contemporary Thought*, unpublished PhD thesis, Department of Theology and Religious Studies, University of Wales, Lampeter, Wales, 1994.

contributes to the efforts of religious people to have a more rationally based belief in God or a more profound religious experience of Him. It can also help them to support and defend their beliefs in God against the temporary doubts raised in their own minds or against the objections of a non-believer. Secondly, it has a philosophical dimension, slightly different from the religious one, in which it is often considered as one of the logical arguments to prove the existence of God. Here it is evaluated from the perspective of rational validity or invalidity in a more logical and objective way. The third dimension of the argument is scientific and epistemological. As Kant says, the teleological argument "enlivens the study of nature, just as it itself derives its existence and gains every new vigour from the source . . . and extends our knowledge of nature by means of the guiding-concept of a special unity, the principle of which is outside nature."² It is interesting that even the most naive design arguments were steeped in observations of the natural world. Indeed, even Darwin "attributes much of his initial interest in the problem of natural adaptation to William Paley's meticulous recording of design in the plant and animal kingdoms."³

Finally, one may suggest that the teleological argument has another important dimension that seems not yet to have been dwelt upon: the ecological one. This paper will put forward this aspect of the argument. One may claim that there is a close relationship between the teleological argument and the ecological or environmental issues. For both of them have dealt with more or less the same object: nature or the environment. The term environment is often used simply to refer to the natural conditions like land, air and water in which the organisms live. Ecology is essentially the scientific study of the relationship between organisms and their environment. In this particular context, the teleological argument may be said to be the theological study of the similar things, e.g., the living organisms and their environment.

However, it will be useful to clarify one point at the outset. It is sometimes claimed that the theist or the defender of the argument from design faced by such drastic assertions as were made by Hume or Darwin and finding them difficult to rebuff, has often turned to "utilitarian

²I. Kant, *Immanuel Kant's Critique of Pure Reason*, translated by N. K. Smith, New York: Macmillan, 1965, p. 520.

³J. D. Barrow, and F. J. Tipler, *The Anthropic Cosmological Principle*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1986, p. 30.

supports", i.e., turned "to feeling, to moral demand, to aesthetic values, to mysticism."⁴ One could say that all these fields enforce the cumulative teleological argument. This essay will now seek to add a new field to these so-called 'utilitarian supports'. However, neither the ecological aspect nor the others are merely utilitarian supports for such an argument that is rationally or reasonably indefensible. Hence, the main intention in this paper is not to present an ecological support to the teleological argument, which is able to stand without these sorts of supports indeed, but to present a teleological support to the ecological awareness and protection.

II

Historically speaking, the teleological argument is the oldest argument for the existence of God being employed in a variety of cultures. Continuing the mainstream development through ancient Greek, medieval Jewish, Christian and Muslim thinkers, the argument had its golden age in the eighteenth century, principally in England. Then it was severely damaged by Hume, Kant, and Darwin's attacks in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. It may be said of this period that as the popularity of the teleological argument was declining, the environmental crisis in the world was rapidly growing. It may be claimed then that some of the reasons for the decline of the teleological argument such as the evolutionary naturalism and the Humean problem of evil were also among the important metaphysical or theoretical reasons of the environmental crisis.

The purely mechanistic interpretation of evolution has claimed that it was able to explain fully the adaptation of means to ends in living organs and organisms such as eye, ear, or human beings, by means of natural selection; and so, there was neither a supernatural Designer beyond these adaptations and designs, nor were they signs of God as the teleological argument asserted. This sort of understanding of evolution has damaged both to the teleological argument and to the natural environment. Indeed, H. Rolston states this clearly: "The greatest of the science-based values, if we may put it so, is exploitative resource use. This value is based both on applied, technological science and on a

⁴D. W. Gundry, "Paleyan Argument from Design," *Church Quarterly Review*, 151, 1951, p. 195.

theoretical, evolutionary ecoscience that seems to conclude that nature is intrinsically valueless. The believed absence of any intrinsic value and the enormous possibility of instrumental value couple to produce a single conclusion: The only reason for biological conservation is human welfare."⁵

Besides, it has been expressed by many thinkers that evolutionary naturalism has not been acceptable for various reasons; and organic evolution has neither been incompatible with the teleological argument on a wider scale, nor rendered invalid its theistic conclusion that God exists. although Darwinism can explain why some animals are eliminated in the struggle for survival, it could not account for the progressiveness in the evolutionary process culminating in the emergence of conscious animals with a rational and moral status. Furthermore, the extremely small range of initial conditions of the universe and the physical constants mentioned in the basic physical laws, which have been discovered in recent decades, are so fine-tuned for the evolution of intelligent life on the Earth that they strongly indicate the existence of God. As Richard Swinburne puts it, "if all the evidence is that the occurrence of boundary conditions and laws such as to permit the evolution of intelligent organisms are *a priori* (that is, unless there is a God) very unlikely, then . . . there is evidence that God brought them about."⁶

The other main reason for the temporary decline of the teleological argument was the Humean problem of evil. The first half of Part X of Hume's *Dialogues* is occupied by Philo and Demea pointing out just how much evil and misery there is in the world. Philo concludes that "neither man nor any other animal are happy."⁷ Showing nature as full of evil, disaster, suffering, struggling and cruelty became instrumental in the decline of the teleological argument, which, by contrast, put forward that nature was orderly, harmonious, beautiful, prolific, useful, and purposeful. This negative attitude in the understanding of nature subsequently

⁵Holmes Rolston III, "Science-based Versus Traditional Ethics," in J.R. Engel and J. G. Engel, eds., *Ethics of Environment and Development*, London: Belhaven Press, 1990, p. 70.

⁶Richard Swinburne, "Argument from the Fine-Tuning of the Universe," in John Leslie, ed., *Physical Cosmology and Philosophy*, New York: Macmillan, 1990, p. 157f.

⁷D. Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, edited by N. Kemp Smith, 2nd edition, Edinburgh: Bobbs-Merrill, 1947, p. 98.

damaged to the natural environment, too. For there could not be many reasons for loving, respecting and protecting such an evil environment any more. However, it seems that this was just an exaggerated and myopic description of nature. It has been rightly argued by many thinkers later that nature was predominantly good and that the evil within it was possibly a means for some other greater good.⁸

In this case, it can be concluded that the temporary decline of the teleological argument due to some misleading attacks, and consequently, the loss of the habit of looking at nature teleologically has been one of the significant metaphysical reasons for the environmental crisis that now afflicts the world. Therefore, in our day in which a new ethic embracing plants and animals as well as people, or, a new ecological world-view that can create a sustainable culture capable of treating the earth with gentleness and respect is looked for,⁹ it is really important to evaluate the teleological argument seriously from the perspective of ecology as well as theology and philosophy.

III

It seems that since the second half of the twentieth century both the importance of the teleological argument has been rediscovered by several philosophers, theologians and natural scientists, and the significance of the ecological awareness has been truly understood by many people all over the world. Now, it is time to bring them much closer together for the sake of the protection of natural environment. One could suggest that the answers given to the three questions below may be regarded not only as influencing our metaphysical ideas, but also as profoundly influencing our attitudes to the natural world. These crucial questions related to the environment, and their explanations in terms of the teleological argument may be summed up as follows.

1. *How should we look at nature and understand its laws?*

According to the teleological argument, both the whole and every part of the world, both the inorganic and organic sides of it, or both the amoeba

⁸See, John Hick, *Evil and the God of Love*, 1968, reprint and rev. ed., San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1978, pp. 318-336; and H. Rolston III, "Disvalue in Nature," *The Monist*, vol. 75, no. 2, 1992.

⁹Martin Palmer, "The Encounter of Religion," in J. R. Engel and J. G. Engel, eds., *Ethics of Environment and Development*, London: Belhaven Press, 1990, p. 51.

and human beings are extremely meaningful and valuable entities as evidence or signs of the existence and attributes of the eternal Creator beyond them. We can recognise these signs throughout all the universe from its beginning. For example, all the phenomena from the physico-chemical composition of the early universe, the composition of the atmosphere and the earth, the presence of water, oxygen, carbon, and so forth, to the elemental physico-chemical components of living beings, all sorts of plants, animals and human beings are evidence and signs of their Designer.

As far as the laws of nature are concerned, they were not devised by nature itself but have been laid down or made by a Designer according to a plan and a purpose. For instance, the expansion rate of the universe, the size of the electric charge of the electron, the ratio of masses of the proton and the electron, the distance of the earth from the sun, the rotational speed of the earth are all necessary for sustaining life on the earth, and all have a very low probability to exist merely through natural causes and laws. Especially since the development of the new mechanised physics, the design argument has been based upon the observation of meticulous contrivances in nature and the conviction of an underlying order of its universal laws. All pervasive "simple laws", as Swinburne puts it, "govern almost all successions of events. In books of physics, chemistry, and biology we can learn how almost everything in the world behaves. The laws of their behaviour can be set out by relatively simple formulae which men can understand and by means of which they can successfully predict the future." Whereas "the universe might so naturally have been chaotic, but it is not - it is very orderly." And in order to explain this, "the simplest such agent to postulate is one of infinite power, knowledge, and freedom, i.e. God."¹⁰ Therefore, for this argument, the natural laws should be understood ultimately as God's laws, and thus, as evidence of God's existence and attributes. In this case, both nature itself and the natural laws should be regarded as entirely meaningful, valuable, respectable, and sacred; and should be treated in accordance with this holistic perspective.

2. *What is the place of human beings in nature?* It is true that human beings have been regarded as having a special place among the rest of the earthly creatures. There has also been seen a close

¹⁰Richard Swinburne, *The Existence of God*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979, pp. 136, 141.

relationship between the teleological explanation of nature and the anthropocentric world-view from the early versions of the teleological argument to the modern ones. In this argument it has often been argued to prove or establish God's existence and providence that nearly all things around human beings are suitable for their material and spiritual needs and that this cannot be fortuitous. Therefore, there is a benevolent God who provides human beings with everything.

This common reasoning, however, should not be considered as harmful for the protection of environment, nor as one of the metaphysical reasons of ecological crisis. For, as Tennant puts it, the sort of anthropocentrism implied in the teleological argument "involves no human arrogance or self-exaltation. It does not assert that man . . . is the highest being under God, or the final stage of progressive cosmic evolution, or the whole end of the divine design . . . Nor does it imply that lower creatures evolved in the world-process are necessarily of but instrumental value as stages or means to ends, and when not figuring in man's genealogical tree, are mere by-products in the making of humanity." In the view of Tennant, "Anthropocentrism rather means that, whereas in the realm of Nature beneath man no final purpose can be discerned, such purpose may be discerned in beings possessed of rationality, appreciation, self-determination, and morality."¹¹

According to the teleological argument, what gives human beings a valuable place in nature is their intellectual, moral, and spiritual values, not their ability to dominate over other creatures. And it should not be overlooked that these qualities are also the basic human features which is necessary to protect the environment. Therefore, to talk of a good place for the intellectual and moral human beings having a free will and sense of responsibility should not be regarded as being in conflict with the ecological aims and should not be condemned for that reason. It does not seem wrong to respect human beings for their mental, moral and spiritual values, unless human beings and their rights have been idolized. What is wrong is to separate human beings and the rest of the creatures from each other, and then claim for human beings the right to selfish exploitation of all the natural sources.

With regard to our mutual relationship with nature, this argument

¹¹F. R. Tennant, *Philosophical Theology*, vol. II, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1930, pp. 113-114.

reminds us that we are connected to the rest of nature both materially and spiritually. The providential version of the argument has emphasised the material contribution of nature to the human beings such as food and drink. But this is not all. this argument also recognises that nature as a whole serves the development of moral personalities. For this argument, "Nature may fairly be called a school of virtue . . . Nature is the power that makes it possible for noumenal man to be, an phenomenal man, a moral being. Further, it is partly through his being 'the plaything of hazard and the prey of hardship' that man's moral virtues are acquired. The world is thus instrumental to the emergence, maintenance, and progressiveness, of morality."¹² Thus, both the place of human beings in nature and their mutual relationship to each other have been based on intellectual, moral and spiritual values.

3. *Why should we treat nature with respect and gentleness?* In terms of the teleological argument there seem to be various reasons for respectful treatment of nature caused by both the instrumental and the intrinsic values of nature. First, nature is the only source of our material or mundane benefits that we need to survive. Second, nature has been instrumental to the emergence and progressiveness of moral personalities and ethical values. Third, nature and natural laws can help to construct and maintain a sound belief in the existence of God either in a rational or in a religiously experimental way. Fourth, they can help to make clear the idea of god for all people, believers or non-believers. Briefly, nature, as understood teleologically and theologically, transports us beyond the material, mechanistic and physical limits, up to spiritual, teleological and metaphysical values.

As a result, it seems that rediscovery of the teleological view of the environment is one of the most essential steps to save the natural environment before it is too late. To understand nature teleologically and to treat her with a greater respect is crucial for a more sustainable world. In addition, the teleological understanding of nature can also help to bring closer together theology, science, philosophy, ethics, and different religions of the world for the aim of the conservation of nature. For the concept of teleology is really a very pervasive concept used in all these areas. Consequently, one may suggest that this sort of approach to nature supplies one of the best ways of looking at nature to protect the

¹²Tennant, *ibid.*, p. 102.

environment, in which all nature is considered as completely beautiful, meaningful, instrumentally and intrinsically very valuable as the sacred creation and the evident sign of God.

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