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# Meta-Argumentation in Hume's Critique of the Design Argument

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**ABSTRACT:** Although Hume's critique of the design argument is a powerful non-inductive meta-argument, the main line of critical reasoning is not analogical but rather a complex meta-argument. It consists of two parts, one interpretive, the other evaluative. The critical meta-argument advances twelve criticisms: that the design argument is weak because two of its three premises are justified by inadequate subarguments; because its main inference embodies four flaws; and because the conclusion is in itself problematic for four reasons. Such complexity is quite manageable in a meta-argumentation approach.

**KEYWORDS:** analogy, complex arguments, God's existence, ground-level argumentation, Hume, intelligent design, meta-argumentation, Stephen Barker

## 1. INTRODUCTION: THE META-ARGUMENTATION APPROACH

Among the various cultures of theorizing about arguments and argumentation, there is one which may be called the meta-argumentation approach and which I would like to pursue further here. This approach stresses meta-arguments, as distinct from ground-level arguments. A meta-argument may be defined as an argument about one or more arguments, and a ground-level argument as one which is not a meta-argument (or which in a particular discussion is at a lower level as compared to some other higher-level meta-argument).<sup>1</sup>

This approach—this “argument culture”—is far from being widespread, nevertheless it is of some significance and growing. These facts may be glimpsed at by highlighting some explicit or implicit aspects of this literature.

The most obvious point is perhaps the fact that meta-arguments occur commonly when *evaluating* ground-level arguments. For example, we can easily reconstruct as meta-argumentation (cf. Finocchiaro 2007a; 2007c) what goes on when one uses what Krabbe (1995; 2003) has called the methods of “counterexample-situation” and of “formal paraphrase” to show formal invalidity; and when one employs what Govier (1985) has called the technique of “refutation by logical analogy” to show some flaw in an argument; and when one is engaged in considerations of what Woods and Hudak (1989) have called “parity of reasoning” to show that an argument is as bad or as good as another.

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<sup>1</sup> Here, my definition of meta-argument paraphrases Krabbe's (2003) definition of a metadialogue.

Less obviously and more controversially, there is the question whether meta-argumentation should be regarded as an aspect of all argumentation, instead of or in addition to being regarded as a special type of argumentation. It may be argued that meta-argumentation is a tier like the illative and the dialectical tiers of argument, always potentially present, but not necessarily actually exhibited (Finocchiaro 2007b).

One area which is implicitly suffused with meta-arguments is the cluster of cognitive phenomena that have been discussed under various labels: Fogelin's "deep disagreements" (Fogelin 1985; 2005; cf. Adams 2005; Campolo 2005; Davson-Galle 1992; Feldman 2005; Friemann 2005; Lugg 1986; Turner and Wright 2005); Woods's "standoffs of force five" (1992; 1996); Friemann's "intractable quarrels" (2003); and Johnstone's philosophical disagreements, in the sense of "first philosophy" (1952; 1959; 1978, pp. 18-21; 1989). This claim strikes me as inherently plausible, but it is really a working hypothesis or an item for a future research project rather than a summary of an analysis that has already been carried out.

Similarly, there are other topics that such a research agenda could include. One would be the exploration of the general relationship between meta-argumentation and the theory of argumentation, for one might ask whether a theorist of argumentation does or can do anything above and beyond arguing about arguments (cf. Finocchiaro 1980, pp. 299-302; 2005, pp. 92-108).

Additionally, one could survey contributions to the study of meta-arguments from other fields. For example, there is a branch of computer science that focuses on the meta-cognitive aspects of argumentation and reasoning, and the potential relevance of this work may be seen from the fact that some authors have developed a formalization of meta-arguments which takes as its "starting point the view that arguments and dialogues are inherently meta-logical processes. By this we mean that the arguments made by protagonists in a debate must refer to each other" (Wooldridge, McBurney, and Parsons 2005, section 1; cf. Perlis 1988 and Costantini 2002).

Finally, one could study *famous* meta-arguments, by which I mean arguments such as the following. One of these is Socrates's argument about misology in Plato's *Phaedo* (88A-91D), replying to those who despair of the value of reason and argument in determining whether or not the soul is immortal. Another famous meta-argument is found in Galileo's "Considerations on the Copernican Opinion" (translated in Finocchiaro 1989, pp. 70-86), where Galileo, before discussing particular arguments for and against the earth's motion, criticizes some meta-argumentative claims, i.e., argues for their falsity; the first pair of these is that the earth's rest has been *conclusively proved* true and that the earth's motion is *indemonstrable*. A third famous meta-argument occurs in Mill's *Subjection of Women*: most of this work consists of an illative tier of reasons against the subjection of women, namely for Mill's conclusion that the principle and practice of the subordination of women should be replaced by that of equality; a shorter part amounts to a dialectical tier of criticizing objections to this conclusion; and another short part is best seen as the meta-argument that women's liberation should be argued on its merits (supporting it with reasons and defending it from objections) because the universality of subjection derives from the law of force (which is logically and morally questionable) and hence provides no presumption favoring its correctness (cf. Finocchiaro 2007b).

## 2. BARKER'S META-ARGUMENTATIVE ANALYSIS OF HUME'S *DIALOGUES*

In this paper, I focus on the critique in Hume's *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion* of the theological design argument. I find this very promising partly because Hume's critique is one of the most obvious and famous cases of meta-argumentation in the history of thought, and partly because the subject matter continues to be especially important and relevant (as the recent controversy about "intelligent design" indicates). More importantly, it so happens that Stephen Barker has already addressed this topic in an article entitled "Reasoning by Analogy in Hume's *Dialogues*" published in *Informal Logic* in 1989; and I find Barker's article so relevant and insightful that I plan to structure my analysis as a follow-up on his.<sup>2</sup> Accordingly, I shall first reconstruct Barker's account from the point of view of meta-argumentation; then I shall examine Hume's *Dialogues* to test that account, i.e., to confirm, disconfirm, revise, or amplify it.

In what follows in this section, whether or not I reproduce a direct quotation, it is to be understood that the views being expressed and stated are those in Barker's article, unless I indicate otherwise.

The logic of argumentation in Hume's *Dialogues* has not been adequately appreciated. Although Kant's criticism of the teleological argument for the existence of God may have been more influential than Hume's, Hume did it first, and in any case, "the incisiveness of Hume's treatment far outshines that of Kant on this matter" (Barker 1989, p. 173). Although the argument for design can be formulated as a deductive argument, for example Aquinas's "fifth way," such formulations are ultimately question-begging. "It is a distinctive merit of Hume's approach to the argument from design that he carefully avoids having Cleanthes formulate it as a deductive argument" (Barker 1989, p. 174).

Hume has Cleanthes formulate the argument as follows:

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. (Hume, *Dialogues*, II-5)<sup>3</sup>

First, note that this is an *inductive* argument, in the following sense:

(I) ... such an argument is not deductively valid, and the person advancing it does not claim that it

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<sup>2</sup> I have consulted a few other accounts of Hume's argument (e.g., Aiken 1948; Smith 1947, pp. 57-76, 97-123), but found them unhelpful.

<sup>3</sup> As done here, references to Hume's *Dialogues* will be given, within square brackets, by a sequence of a roman numeral and an arabic numeral, the first indicating the part number (as designated by Hume himself) and the second indicating the paragraph number within a given part. This particular passage corresponds to Hume 1948, p. 17, and Hume 1947, p. 143.

is so; the arguer claims merely that the premises increase significantly the probability of the conclusion. (II) The argument takes as its premises empirical propositions which are to be known by observation. (III) The conclusion is a proposition whose empirical content goes beyond that of the premises. [Barker 1989, p. 176]

Moreover, it is an argument *by analogy*, in the sense that it has the following structure: a, b, c, etc., have the property F and the property G; n has the property F; so, probably n has property G. Here, a, b, c, etc., are the known cases, of which there could be only one; n is the new case analogous to them and sharing the property F; the conclusion infers that n also shares the property G; and the word ‘probably’ indicates that what is being claimed is that the premises increase the reasonableness of believing the conclusion. In short, “Cleanthes presents this as an inductive argument by analogy” (Barker 1989, p. 175).

In this type of argument, “its strength does not just depend upon its logical form” (Barker 1989, p. 176). Moreover, “we do not have available any ‘decision procedure’ to guide us [...] judgments about the strength of an inductive argument by analogy cannot be made in that mechanical way” (Barker 1989, p. 177). However, that does not mean that we are “falling back here upon the idea that it is by dogmatic appeal to untestable intuitions that we decide” (Barker 1989, p. 178). Rather, we must take into account evaluative factors such as the following: the similarities among the known cases; the dissimilarities among them; the similarities between the known cases and the new case; the dissimilarities between them; and the scope of the conclusion. And then we must engage in “reasoning about arguments by analogy” (Barker 1989, p. 178).

Hume’s *Dialogues* is highly instructive for this purpose because Cleanthes and his opponent Philo do engage in “a fruitful exchange” (Barker 1989, p. 178) that makes some “genuine intellectual progress” (Barker 1989, p. 178). But they do this not by allegedly deductive appeals to logical form, decision procedures, or infallible intuitions. “Cleanthes and Philo carry out their discussion in the *Dialogues* in another manner. Throughout, they employ reasoning by analogy” (Barker 1989, p. 179).

For example, consider what Cleanthes is doing when he defends his argument by mentioning that the “steps of a stair are plainly contrived, that human legs may use them in mounting ... [and] human legs are also contrived for walking and mounting” (Hume, *Dialogues*, II-9).

What Cleanthes is doing is to urge that there is an important analogy between two specimen arguments; let us call them A and B. A is the argument about the stairs [...] the other argument (argument B) [...] is a special case of the argument from design [...] Cleanthes, in this part of his discussion, is putting forth an argument by analogy (we may call it argument C) [...] which [...] affirms that B must be a good argument because of its strong analogy to A, which we already recognize to be good. [Barker 1989, pp. 179-80]

This analysis is just an interpretation and should not be regarded as an evaluation. Barker is clear that this interpretation does not amount to “endorsing Cleanthes’ meta-argument concerning the status of his initial argument. Actually, Cleanthes’ meta-argument is quite a bad argument, because B is not similar enough to A. Thus argument C does not succeed in defending argument A against the charge of being bad” (Barker 1989, p. 180). In fact, Hume has Philo undertake a lengthy attempt to arrive at such a negative assessment, along the following lines:

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Through the central portions of the *Dialogues* it is Philo who most extensively uses reasoning by analogy in order to reason about how Cleanthes' argument is to be evaluated. Philo compares Cleanthes' argument from design to a wide variety of other inductive arguments by analogy [...] both strong and weak. Of course, his conclusion is [...] that Cleanthes' argument is very weak. On the one hand, Philo cites examples of strong arguments [...] However, he urges, there is little analogy between Cleanthes' argument and these strong arguments [...] Furthermore, Philo cites a rich variety of other possible inductive arguments by analogy that we can recognize as very weak [...] Philo claims that Cleanthes' argument is very like [these], and therefore is weak too. [Barker 1989, p. 180]

Finally, let us ask, "what kind of reasoning by analogy is it that Cleanthes and Philo are employing in their meta-arguments?" (Barker 1989, p. 181). Such meta-arguments by analogy are non-inductive because some of their premises, as well as their conclusion, are non-empirical. That is, when we are evaluating an

argument like C, insofar as it deals with cases that are merely possible rather than actual, the similarities and differences referred to in [the evaluative factors] will not be empirically observed; they will be discerned by reflection. A second aspect in which argument C is less empirical than A and B concerns the empirical content of the conclusion. In A and B the empirical content of the conclusion does go beyond that of the premises, giving the conclusion a predictive aspect; while in C this is not the case, for its conclusion is a proposition about logical force and has no empirical content. [Barker 1989, p. 182]

In short, Barker's thesis is that Hume's *Dialogues* is a (1) powerful (2) non-inductive (3) meta-argument (4) by analogy, claiming that the design argument is an (5) inductive ground-level argument by analogy, which is (6) weak because (7) it is similar to many other arguments by analogy that are obviously weak and (8) it is dissimilar from many other arguments by analogy that are obviously strong. And the theoretical and methodological lesson is that one can and should employ non-inductive meta-arguments by analogy in evaluating inductive ground-level arguments by analogy.

### 3. MULTIPLICITY OF BARKER'S CLAIMS AND OF HUME'S META-ARGUMENTS

As previously mentioned, my reconstruction of Barker's reconstruction of Hume's *Dialogues* will now be tested by actually examining this work. To this we now turn.

Let me begin by saying that I obviously agree that Philo's critique of Cleanthes' design argument is a meta-argument (Barker's claim no. 3). I also agree that Philo's meta-argument is powerful (claim no. 1) and non-inductive (claim 2). However, I reserve judgment on whether Philo's meta-argument is (primarily) an argument *by analogy* (claim 4). Similarly, there is no question that Cleanthes' design argument is inductive and ground-level (which are the first two parts of claim 5), but I am not sure that it really is an argument *by analogy* (the third part of claim 5). Finally, Barker is partly right in claiming (nos. 6, 7, and 8) that the content of Philo's meta-argument is that the design argument is weak because of its similarity to many other weak arguments and its dissimilarity to many other strong arguments; but there are other important parts of Philo's critique which argue for different flaws.

In other words, Barker has reconstructed only one strand of Philo's meta-argument, the strand relating to arguments by analogy. In the context of a study of such

arguments, such a choice is of course justified. However, my stress is on meta-argumentation, and from this point of view much more needs to be done. Nevertheless, to make my task more manageable, as well as more focused, I too will need to delimit my task and make some simplifying assumptions.

That is, a complete analysis of the meta-argumentation in Hume's *Dialogues* would have to include several other meta-arguments: the introductory discussion of the meaning of scepticism and its connection with natural religion (part I); Cleanthes' defense of the design argument (part III); Cleanthes' criticism of Demea's *a priori* argument for the existence of God (part IX); Philo's criticism of Demea's same argument (part IX); Philo's argument that the controversy over the nature of God is a "verbal dispute" (part XII); and Philo's criticism of the argument that theism provides the only foundation of morality (part XII). However, these meta-arguments are beyond the scope of this essay, and instead I shall focus only on what I call Philo's critique of Cleanthes' design argument. My choice is motivated by the fact that this is the most inclusive, comprehensive, complex, and instructive meta-argument in the *Dialogues*.

#### 4. CLEANTHES'S VS. PHILO'S GROUND-LEVEL ARGUMENT

Before criticizing the design argument, Philo finds the occasion to amplify and reformulate Cleanthes's statement of it. The context is provided by Demea's objection that only *a priori* arguments are proper, and it is "extravagant" that "the proofs of a Deity fall short of perfect evidence" (II-10), as is the case with Cleanthes's *a posteriori* argument.

Philo replies (II-12-13) that the only thing we could know *a priori* about the universe is that it must be free of contradictions. However, only experience tells us what particular properties the universe has and which causes produce which effects. Then he elaborates Cleanthes's argument as follows:

Order, arrangement, or the adjustment of final causes, is not of itself any proof of design, but only so far as it has been experienced to proceed from that principle. For aught we can know *a priori*, matter may contain the source or spring of order originally within itself, as well as mind does; and there is no more difficulty in conceiving that the several elements, from an internal unknown cause, may fall into the most exquisite arrangement, than to conceive that their ideas, in the great universal mind, from a like internal unknown cause, fall into that arrangement. The equal possibility of both suppositions is allowed. But, by experience, we find (according to Cleanthes) that there is a difference between them. Throw several pieces of steel together, without shape or form, they will never arrange themselves to compose a watch. Stone and mortar and wood, without an architect, never erect a house. But the ideas in a human mind, we see, by an unknown, inexplicable economy, arrange themselves so as to form the plan of a watch or house. Experience, therefore, proves that there is an original principle of order in mind, not in matter. From similar effects we infer similar causes. The adjustment of means to ends is alike in the universe, as in a machine of human contrivance. The causes, therefore, must be resembling. (II-14)

Cleanthes's original argument may be reconstructed as follows:<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> The numbering system for the propositions in my argument reconstructions is a variation of the system presented by various authors when they discuss the representation of complex argument by means of structure diagrams in the shape of either tree branches or tree roots (e.g., Angell 1964, pp. 369-93; Scriven 1976, pp. 41-43; Finocchiaro 1980, pp. 311-31; 2005, pp. 39-41; Eemeren and Grootendorst 1984, pp. 87-93; Eemeren, Grootendorst, and Kruijer 1984, pp. 17-36; Freeman 1991). The key idea is that if a given

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11. the universe is similar to a machine;
12. machines are produced by human intelligent design (HID);
1. so, the universe was produced by a cause similar to HID.

On the other hand, Philo's elaboration amounts to the following:

211. when material things are ordered and organized (OO), they are produced by HID;
212. similar effects have similar causes;
21. (so, when material things are similar to OO, they are produced by causes similar to HID);
22. the universe is similar to an OO material thing;
2. so, the universe was produced by a cause similar to HID.

Here proposition 21 is placed in parenthesis because it is an intermediate conclusion not explicitly stated in the passage.

Let us compare and contrast these two versions. It is obvious that the two formulations have identical conclusions. Moreover, premise 11 corresponds to premise 22, with the difference that the latter is more general than the former. Similarly, premise 211 is a generalization of premise 12.

Next, the principle of similarity of effects and causes is explicitly stated in Philo's version (proposition 212), but is merely mentioned and implicitly used in Cleanthes's formulation. I have omitted it from my reconstruction of Cleanthes's argument in order to make his version look like an argument by analogy, as it is interpreted by Barker and as suggested explicitly by Cleanthes himself. Despite such talk of analogy and all the talk of similarity, however, it seems to me that Cleanthes's argument is not really an argument by analogy. The reason is that although Cleanthes bases his conclusion on the similarity between the two analogues and on the fact that one of the analogues (machines) is known to have a special property, what he concludes is not that the other analogue (the universe) has the *same* property, but rather that it has a *similar* property. In other words, in arguments by analogy one reasons from the fact that two things are known to be similar in certain respects to infer that they are probably also similar in another additional special respect, where similarity means sharing the *same* properties, not *similar* ones; here the similarity is a relationship applying to the individual entities and consists of their sharing some properties, it is not a relationship applying to the properties. A third way of saying this is to point out that in reasoning by analogy one is arguing from the fact that two things share some properties to the conclusion that they share another special property, not to the conclusion that they possess two additional similar properties.

Philo's version of the argument makes all this clear, since it does not even look like an argument by analogy. Instead, it seems to be an argument from generalizations to a particular case. However, it is not a deductive universal instantiation because the generalizations (propositions 211, 212, and 21) are not meant to be strict universal generalizations, but empirical claims advanced as being true for the most part, or in

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claim is labeled *n*, then the premises that directly support it are labeled *n1*, *n2*, *n3*, etc.; and if *nm* is also part of another subargument, then the premises directly supporting it are labeled *nm1*, *nm2*, *nm3*, etc.

typical cases, or as a matter of likelihood; and so the conclusion is not meant to follow necessarily but with some probability. This type of argument corresponds to what Toulmin (1958, pp. 109, 131) has labelled "quasi-syllogism." Other philosophers (Barker 1957, p. 70; Hempel 1965, p. 55; W. Salmon 1984, pp. 94-97; M. Salmon 2002, pp. 112-15) have called this type of argument "statistical syllogism," a term that may be adopted as long as one is not misled by the word "statistical" or the word "syllogism."<sup>5</sup> The simplest case of such an argument has the form: a high percentage of F's are G's; a is F; so, a is G. The last step of Philo's argument (from 21 and 22 to 2) is a variant of this form. On the other hand, the first step of that argument (from 211 and 212 to 21) is obviously not of that form, but rather is a type of inductive argument from empirical generalizations to empirical generalizations.

## 5. PHILO'S CONSTRUCTIVE META-ARGUMENTS

Philo's design argument (argument 2), as it stands, is of course a ground-level argument and not a meta-argument. However, he makes two initial claims about argument 2, and that is how some meta-argumentation arises in this context. First, Philo claims that (M1) argument 2 makes explicit the empirical and inductive credentials of argument 1, and the justification of this claim is that (M11) argument 1 can be amplified and strengthened in the manner done in the last several paragraphs above. Thus my reconstruction there is the first meta-argument that may be attributed to Philo.

Second, Philo also claims that (M2) the design argument (argument 2 or some variant of it) is the only serious argument that can be advanced to try to support the existence or nature of God. The reason for this is that (M21) assertions of God's existence and of his intelligent nature are statements of fact, but (M22)

all inferences [...] concerning fact are founded on experience, and [M23] all experimental reasonings are founded on the supposition that similar causes prove similar effects, and similar effects similar causes" (II-17).

And here we have a meta-argument, which appears to be deductively valid and deductive, but which could be questioned by questioning the truth of the epistemological principles asserted in its final premises.<sup>6</sup>

Despite the presence of these two constructive and appreciative meta-arguments, the main point of this passage of the *Dialogues* (II-11-17) is to formulate ground-level argument 2, so that it can be the focus of the main thread of critical meta-argumentation in the rest of the book. To this we now turn.

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<sup>5</sup> Scriven (1976, p. 205) discusses this type of argument at some length, but does not coin a term for it, describing it as "reasoning from facts about a whole population to conclusions about the individual members of the population."

<sup>6</sup> The textual presence of this meta-argument and its role in the main thread of the *Dialogues* is also confirmed by the fact that part VII contains a good recapitulation that begins with this meta-argument: "since no question of fact can be proved otherwise than by experience, the existence of a Deity admits not of proof from any other medium" (VII-3).

6. PHILO'S CRITICAL META-ARGUMENTS

There is no time here to discuss the details of Hume's criticisms. Suffice it to say that, as I reconstruct Philo's critique, he advances at least twelve distinct critical meta-arguments. In the approximate sequence in which they appear in the book, these critical meta-arguments involve the following points and are found in the following passages of the *Dialogues*:

- M3 Hasty Generalization (part II-18-20)
- M4 Fallacy of Composition (part II-18)
- M5 Second Hasty Generalization (part II-21-23)
- M6 Misapplication of Generalization (part II-24-28)
- M7 Objection from Divine Simplicity (part IV-2-3)
- M8 Infinite Regress (part VI-4-14)
- M9 Occult-Quality Objection (part IV-12)
- M{10} Divine Infinity, Perfection, and Unity (part V)<sup>7</sup>
- M{11} The Organism Objection and the Fallacy of Incomplete Evidence (parts VI-VII)
- M{12} Necessity of Partial Order and Inference to the Best Explanation (part VIII)
- M{13} The Argument from Evil (part X)
- M{14} The Moral-Indifference Argument (part XI).

These critical meta-arguments can be summarized and grouped as follows.

Recall that design argument tries to justify (proposition 2) the existence of an intelligent human-like cause of the universe from the premises that (211) organized systems are produced by human intelligence, that (212) similar effects have similar causes, and that (22) the universe is similar to an organized system. The argument has at least two steps or subarguments: in the first, from the first two premises one infers the intermediate proposition that (21) things similar to organized systems are produced by causes similar to human intelligence; and in the second step, this proposition is combined with the third premise to arrive at the final conclusion.

Philo criticizes the first premise (proposition 211) when he objects (in meta-argument M3) that it is improperly justified by means of a hasty generalization. He faults the third premise (proposition 22) by objecting (in meta-argument 4) that its supporting argument commits the fallacy of composition. He questions the inference in the second, main subargument (from propositions 21 and 22 to 2) for several reasons: because it embodies a hasty generalization from the present to the remote past (meta-argument M5); because it misapplies a generalization, proposition 21, to an individual case, proposition 22 (meta-arguments M6); because it violates the requirement of complete evidence by overlooking the organism analogy (M{11}); and because it is an inadequate inference to the best explanation that overlooks the necessity of some partial and temporary order (M{12}). Hume criticizes the conclusion by arguing that its content contradicts the notion

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<sup>7</sup> Note that I am labeling M-ten through M-fourteen by using these numerals in braces to denote the number of the meta-argument and of its corresponding main conclusion, thus for example treating '14' as the fourteenth numeral rather than as a sequence of the two single digits '1' and '4'.

of divine simplicity (M7); that it generates an infinite regress of causes (M8); that it embodies an occult-quality pseudo-explanation (M9); and that it is basically inconsistent with the second premise (proposition 212), which plausibly implies that God is finite, imperfect, and multiple, whereas the conclusion presupposes the opposite (M{10}).

This is a long and varied list of objections to the design argument. However, if we keep in mind the content of the claims and the structure of the reasoning of the design argument, all those criticisms follow into a simple and elegant pattern. That is, while agreeing with one premise (proposition 212 about the similarity of causes and effects), Hume criticizes the argument by questioning the tenability of the other two premises, the inference to the conclusion, and the content of the conclusion, including its logical coherence with the uncontroversial premise.

Furthermore, we have to admit that the last two criticisms, pertaining to the moral attributes of God, do not really fit into this pattern. They are primarily arguments against divine benevolence: the argument from evil is against the existence of an infinite and benevolent God; the moral-indifference argument is against the existence of a finite morally-sensible God. And their corresponding meta-arguments are that no good inductive argument can justify the benevolence of an infinite God, and that no good inductive argument can justify the moral sensibility of a finite God. These affect the design argument only insofar as its proponents would also attribute benevolence or moral sensibility to God.

## 7. CONCLUSION

In short, Hume's critique of the design argument in the *Dialogues* is indeed, as Barker claimed, a powerful non-inductive meta-argument. However, the main line of argument is not a meta-argument by analogy but rather a complex meta-argument, consisting of two main parts, an interpretive constructive part and an evaluative critical part. The interpretive meta-argument claims that the design argument is an inductive ground-level complex argument; that it consists of at least three premises and two subarguments; and that most of these subarguments are inductive generalizations, while the last crucial one is a statistical syllogism. The critical meta-argument advances twelve criticisms, to the effect that the design argument is weak because two of its three premises are justified by inadequate subarguments; because its main inference embodies at least four flaws; and because the conclusion is in itself problematic for at least four reasons. Finally, the design argument is indirectly undermined by two powerful ground-level arguments justifying conclusions that are in probable or presumptive tension with the conclusion of the design argument, while admittedly not in strict contradiction with it. Such complexity is quite manageable in a meta-argumentation approach.

[Link to commentary](#)

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