Issues with the Teleological (design) Argument

What you need to know:

Issues that may arise for the design arguments, including:

Hume's objections to the design argument from analogy
the problem of spatial disorder (as posed by Hume and Paley)
the design argument fails as it is an argument from a unique case (Hume)
whether God is the best or only explanation.

Possible Exam Questions

Outline Hume's objections to the design argument from analogy. (5 or 12 marks)
Outline the problem of spatial disorder, as posed by Hume and Paley. (5 or 12 marks)
Outline Hume's argument from a unique case (5 marks)

Does the argument from design prove that God exists? (25 marks)

The design argument fails as it is an argument from a unique case (Hume)

If you experience two events as conjoined, this does not give us grounds for believing one event caused the other. It is only when two events are constantly conjoined that we can infer one from the other. However, the universe is a unique case and so it is not possible to infer anything about the causes of universes.

P1: Design arguments make the inference that this universe and its properties were caused by a designer.
P2: We can make an inference that 'X caused Y' only if we have repeatedly observed event X conjoined to event Y.
P3: We have observed only one universe – this universe – and its properties are a unique case.
P4: We have never observed the origins of any universe.
C1: We cannot make any inference about the cause (and origins) of this universe and its properties.
C2: Design arguments are based on invalid inference.

The problem of spatial disorder (as posed by Hume and Paley)

Hume

The design arguments ignores all the spatial disorders, faults and flaws of the universe. The universe contains too much 'vice and misery and disorder' to justify belief in such a God. In particular:
- Large areas of the universe are empty: not all the universe appears to have been created with any purpose. If 'lacking purpose/order' is the norm, then perhaps the order in our tiny part of the universe if just coincidental and temporary.
- Some parts of the world frequently and unexpectedly go wrong, and cause chaos (volcanoes, earthquakes, hurricanes etc). Philo (Hume) suggests this is the result of shoddy workmanship.
- Animals have been given bodies that become ill, that suffer and feel pain: creatures could have been motivated by varying degrees of pleasure, rather than pain.
- Animals are not as good at survival as they could be – they would be better if they had better functioning parts.

Perhaps the universe was created by an infant or senile God, or by a being who is entirely indifferent to our suffering.

Paley: Paley is aware of the spatial disorder problem, but doesn't think it is fatal to the design argument. Paley argues that whether or not a watch actually works well is irrelevant: what is important is that the watch has qualities that indicate that it has been designed. The same goes for the universe – spatial disorder does not matter if there is evidence of an arrangement of parts functioning together for a purpose.

Issues with the Teleological (design) Argument

Whether God is the best or only explanation.

Design arguments conclude that the best explanation of the appearance of design in the universe is the existence of a designer, with attributes such as omnipotence and omni-benevolence. But there are alternative theories that may provide better explanations for the appearance of design in the universe:

1. The appearance of design may be explained by natural or random processes (Hume)

Epicurean hypothesis: There is a very high probability that a random system, over a very long/infinite period of time, will have periods of order and stability. This universe could currently be in that period of stability and appear to us as if it were designed.

2. The appearance of design may be explained by a 'worldly architect' (Kant)

The most the design argument demonstrates is a designer, not a creator. A watch-maker doesn't make the glass or the cogs, simply designs them. Equally, there is no justification to conclude that the attributes of this worldly architect are the perfections normally ascribed to God. (e.g. omnipotence)

3. The appearance of design may be explained by evolution (Darwin)

Darwin demonstrated that the appearance of design can be explained by the process of natural selection. Random genetic mutations mean that a plant/animal is better adapted to its environment and so has a better chance to passing its genes to the next generation. Over millions of generations, and further mutations, simple features become complex with parts working together for the survival of the organism. In this way, evolution is able to explain the appearance of design without any reference to a designer.

Hume's objections to the design argument from analogy

1. The analogy is weak and remote

Analogies are at their strongest when the two things being compared resemble each other in numerous ways. Conversely, an analogy is weak if the number of ways in which the two things are like is very small, or if the ways in which they are *not* alike is very high.

Hume argues that there are very few similarities and a large number of differences between a universe and a machine. Moreover, one has to infer from a tiny part of the universe (the part we can observe) to the universe as a whole, which weakens the analogy still further. Because the analogy is so weak, there is very little we can conclude about what, if anything, designed the universe.

2. There are counter analogies

The universe resembles something organic rather than machine-like, more like a plant than a watch. If there is any appearance of functioning parts working towards a goal that this is caused by 'generation or vegetation' rather than by 'reason or design.' Plants do not have a designer, but are simply the result of natural processes. In the same way, the ordered and regular universe need not have any designer but may just be the result of natural processes.

3. The similarities are cherry-picked

The design argument from analogy cherry-picks the similarities, choosing only those parts of the analogy that support its conclusion and ignoring the parts that undermine it. For example:
- Machines are the result of trial and error, so perhaps many worlds have been 'botched and bungled' before this one was created. Or perhaps this world is just an imperfect early draft.
- Machines are usually the product of groups of designers – so perhaps this universe was designed by many gods, not one!
- People who design machines are flawed, sometimes foolish, sometimes morally weak. Should we apply all these attributes to the designer of the universe?