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William Paley

William Paley (1743-1805) was a prominent British philosopher and Anglican clergyman. He was educated at Christ’s College, Cambridge where he later taught. While he is primarily remembered as a paragon of British natural theology and the author of *Natural Theology* (1802), Paley wrote several other well-received books including a work of utilitarian ethics in 1785 (*The Principles of Moral and Political Philosophy*), a book defending the historicity and Pauline authorship of Paul’s epistles in 1790 (*Horae Paulinae*), and an apologetic for Christianity in 1794 (*A View of the Evidences of Christianity*).

Natural Theology begins with a famous thought experiment. Paley noticed that if a man walking across a heath were to stumble across a stone he would not necessarily attribute it to design. But if a man stumbled across a watch he would. Paley attributes the difference to the purposeful arrangement of parts that the watch displays. Unlike the stone, it contains several parts ordered toward an end or function. Paley argues that because the natural world itself contains even more complex arrangements of parts for purposes—a fact he details with copious examples—we should likewise attribute these features of the natural world to a designer.

Readers have typically seen Paley as offering an analogical argument. An eye has parts arranged like a telescope; so the eye, like the telescope, probably also has a designer. This reading has led to the charge that David Hume (1711-1776) demolished Paley’s reasoning before Paley ever wrote. In *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* (1779), Hume argued that analogical arguments are only as strong as the analogy. Yet surely there are many differences between a telescope and an eye (their material composition, their ability to reproduce, etc.).

But more recently, philosopher of biology Elliott Sober (2000) has argued that Paley’s argument is an inference to the best explanation (an argument-type common in the historical sciences). Paley considers the phenomenon of parts arranged for an adaptive purpose. He gathers various explanations (chance and design) and concludes that design is the best available explanation. Nowadays, of course, Paley would have to also consider Darwin’s explanation—the explanation Sober favors.

However, it should also be noted that Paley’s argument can also be given a deductive reading (e.g., Oppy 2002). Several features of Paley’s argument make a deductive reading plausible. Paley uses the language of ‘proof,’ ‘demonstration,’ and ‘implication.’ His conclusions do not seem to be probabilistic or tentative but use language like ‘certain,’ ‘inevitable,’ and ‘invincible.’ Furthermore, Paley seems at pains to show that his argument avoids Hume’s criticisms of analogical arguments. For instance, Paley (2006: 35-37) claims that the presence of useless organs in an organism does not weaken the case for design from the parts that are purposefully arranged (as it clearly would weaken the case for design if Paley’s argument were analogical). Given these features, perhaps the default construal of Paley’s argument should be deductive.

Paley’s works continued to be required reading for educated Englishmen for decades after he was laid to rest in Carlisle Cathedral in 1805.

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CITATIONS

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