Paley, William

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William Paley (1743–1805) was a Cambridge-educated English clergyman, moral philosopher, and Christian apologist. In con temporary philosophy of religion, Paley is most famously remembered for his careful elaboration of the TELEOLOGICAL ARGUMENT for the existence of God. Historically, he is at least as well known for other work also relevant to philosophy of religion, both as a moral philosopher and defender of CHRISTIANITY specifically.

Paley's life and work were unified by his insatiable curiosity, especially in all things biological and mechanical. His intellect was equally taken by long, complicated lines of argument for the reliability of the Gospel accounts as by quiet observations in his garden, fishing excursions, conversations with craftsmen, and "common-place subjects" in general (Paley 1825, 27). This spirit undergirds Paley's work, as for example when he argues for the apparent design of a hare's backbone by likening it in detail to the design of a bridge (*Natural Theology*, chapter VIII, "Of the Bones," III). Paley had taken the bones of a hare from the dinner table for careful inspection, and he had learned the mechanical details of "every pin and screw" of the nearby bridge during its construction through conversations he enjoyed with the bridge's workmen and architect (Clarke 1974, 50–52).

Paley's written work includes four monographs: *The Principles of Moral and Political Philosophy* (1785), *Horae Paulinae* (1790), *View of the Evidences of Christianity* (1794), and the *Natural Theology* (1802). Each of these works is devoted, in one way or another, to justifying the supreme rationality of Paley's Protestant ethic and Christian worldview. The order in which Paley contemplated these works (Paley 1825, 14), progressing logically from a defense of the most general conclusions to the more specific, is the reverse of the order in which they were written and published.

In the *Natural Theology*, Paley seeks to justify the existence and characteristics of an intelligent creator purely from observations of the natural (mostly biological) world (see NATURAL THEOLOGY). The book expands upon an ancient version of the design argument, dating back at least to 45 BCE with Cicero's *De natura Deorum* (see CICERO, MARCUS TULLIUS). Paley famously uses the analogy of a watch to illustrate the key inference to design. He asks his reader to imagine chancing upon a watch when crossing a heath. Even if initially unaware of the function of a watch, "when we come to inspect the watch, we perceive ... that its several parts are framed and put together for a purpose." From such considerations, we rationally infer "that the watch must have had a maker; that there must have existed, at some time and at some place or other, an artificer or artificers, who formed it for the purpose which we find it actually to answer; who comprehended its construction, and designed its

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use." The exact logic of this design inference is a matter of some debate (Oppy 2002; Schupbach 2005), but Paley himself describes it in causal-explanatory terms: given that something is framed and constituted for a purpose, we should infer the only satisfying causal-explanation of this, that an intelligence designed and created that thing for just this purpose.

Paley wants to show that, by the same token, we should conclude that there exists a divine intelligence responsible for the functional constitution of natural objects. The vast majority of the *Natural Theology* discusses detailed observations from nature, highlighting in each case ways in which these things are elegantly composed and related so as to function effectively. In our experience, Paley notes, such marks are a sure sign that intelligence has produced the perceived effects; thus, the only plausible explanation of effectively functioning natural objects is that an intelligence has designed and produced them.

Paley's *View of the Evidences of Christianity* was in his own time and remains to this day his most popular work. The book begins with some "Preparatory Considerations" on "the antecedent credibility of miracles," in which Paley argues that we are rationally obliged to look into the evidence for MIRACLES and Christian revelation. We are the sorts of creatures, in the sort of situation, such that divine revelation should be expected in the case that a divinity exists. Such revelation would furthermore be expected to come by way of miracles. Accordingly, unless one has already decided that the existence of a divinity is so improbable as to discredit theism whatever the evidence, reason compels us to examine the evidence for miracles.

Paley then discusses what a just assessment of such evidence should look like. Contra Hume (see HUME, DAVID), we cannot look simply to the frequency of miracles in the normal course of experience in determining their probabilities: "To expect concerning a miracle, that it should succeed upon a repetition, is to expect that which would make it cease to be a miracle, which is contrary to its nature as such, and would totally destroy the use and purpose for which it was wrought" (*View of the Evidences of Christianity*, Preparatory Considerations). Hume's dismissal of miracles unjustly ignores the peculiar "strength [and] circumstances of the Christian evidence." This preliminary discussion frames the entire remainder of the *Evidences*, which details "the Christian evidence." Paley offers arguments for the historicity of the Gospel accounts, distinguishes the evidence for Christian scripture from that "alleged for other miracles" (including those offered by other religious traditions), and responds to some well-known objections to the arguments on offer and Christian belief generally – including versions of the problems of evil and divine hiddenness.

The *Horae Paulinae* contains Paley's most original contribution to his broader defense of Christianity. In it, he draws upon his interest in law and experience as the church's "chancellor, responsible for the conduct of the ecclesiastical courts" (Clarke 1974, 33) to argue simultaneously for the authenticity of the Pauline epistles and the historical accuracy of the Acts of the Apostles (Paley briefly makes a similar case for the Gospels in *Evidences*). The argument proceeds by uncovering "undesigned coincidences" between the writings, details of the various accounts that cohere nicely with one another but in a way that is very likely unintended. As evidence of

undesignedness, Paley emphasizes the efforts one must put in just to notice that the accounts are coherent at all; the more difficult it is to unearth a coincidence between sources, the less likely that these were included to feign authenticity. By observing "the usual character of human testimony" ("substantial truth under circumstantial variety"), Paley effectively turns arguments *against* the reliability of the scriptures on their heads, pointing out that differences and even inconsistencies between sources can bolster the case for their being distinct, if not entirely independent, accounts of historic facts. The *Horae Paulinae* has received relatively little attention compared to Paley's other works. However, this work bears relevance not just for Christian apologists today (McGrew 2017), but also in areas such as the logic and epistemology of testimony, coherence, and historical science.

Paley's first monograph, *Principles of Moral and Political Philosophy*, attempts to establish a Christian utilitarianism. For Paley, to be moral is to obey God's will because doing so gains us happiness; and utilitarianism is defended with the affirmation that it is God's will that mankind be happy. One should pursue the greatest happiness because that is God's will, and one should always follow God's will because of the happiness that will bring. Paley's notion of happiness is predictably distinct from what one might find in Bentham, Mill (see MILL, JOHN STUART), and other utilitarians. Paley has in mind "eternal happiness," as opposed to "fleeting" pleasures which lose their enjoyment in repetition. These eternally lasting pleasures include serving others (i.e. promoting their eternal happiness), healthy living, engaging in fruitful work, etc. The argument, in short, is that the truest utilitarianism aligns perfectly with Paley's own Protestant ethic. Though this work was criticized increasingly in the century after its publication, it remains at least a fascinating attempt to marry Christian and consequentialist ethics.

Paley's work has had a significant influence on Western thought, religious and otherwise. To take one notable example, Darwin (who attended Cambridge at a time when several of Paley's books were assigned) expressed his delight in studying the *Evidences* and the *Natural Theology*, admiring Paley's "long line of argumentation" (see DARWIN, CHARLES; EVOLUTIONARY THEORY AND THEISM). This admiration arguably helped shape the structure and logic of the *Origin of Species*, which bears a striking resemblance to that of Paley's *Natural Theology*. Both works begin by illustrating the key principles of their larger arguments in familiar, human contexts – Paley's watch, and the effect of human selection on domesticated plants and animals in Darwin's case. Both proceed by applying the arguments and principles to a compendium of examples from the natural world. And both build a larger cumulative case from these examples to their proposed best explanation, be it design or natural selection.

***See also*:** CHRISTIANITY; CICERO, MARCUS TULLIUS; DARWIN, CHARLES; EVOLUTIONARY THEORY AND THEISM; HUME, DAVID; MILL, JOHN STUART; MIRACLES; NATURAL THEOLOGY; TELEOLOGICAL ARGUMENT

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