

William paley and the "argument from design"



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William Paley begins his “ Argument from Design” by enumerating key differences between two obviously dissimilar objects—a stone and a watch. For the sake of meaningful contrast, Paley emphasizes three distinguishing properties lacked by the former and possessed by the latter. In this paper I will introduce these properties and explain how Paley uses one of them to argue that the watch necessitates an intelligent designer. From there I will explain how he ultimately formulates his argument for the existence of God. Paley observes the first distinguishing feature of the watch to be its possession of complex, moveable parts. He lists some of these parts—a cylindrical box, an elastic spring, a flexible chain, a series of wheels, an index, and a glass face—and explains how they work in concert to provide the watch with motion. Paley also observes that there is something special about the motion of the parts themselves; the “ equable measured progression,” or regularity, of which the index moves about the watch face also signifies a major distinction between the watch and the stone. These differences indeed give the watch a special distinction; however, it is the concept of functionality that serves as the crux for Paley’s “ Argument from Design”. The watch completes a task which can be monitored and assessed for effectiveness. In the case of the stone, there is no functionality to access. Thusly, the watch has the property of teleology whereas the stone does not. Paley builds the remainder of his argument from this premise. The “ Argument from Design” is comprehended best when split into two phases. In Phase I of his argument, Paley asserts—via syllogism—that an object, such as a watch, must entail an intelligent designer. To do this he employs an inference to the best explanation, or a “ best-fit” reason assigned to the seemingly inexplicable phenomenon. Phase II is an argument by analogy, or <https://assignbuster.com/william-paley-and-the-argument-from-design/>

an argument made by assuming that because two things share similar qualities, they likely share other qualities as well. Here, Paley seeks to prove that because a watch and the Universe share notable common characteristics, they also share the characteristic of having an intelligent designer. He expands this theory to infer that the creator of the Universe is God. Let us look more closely at Phase I of Paley's argument. By utilizing a somewhat simple syllogism, Paley is able to link the possession of teleology to an intelligent designer. His chain of reasoning consists of two crucial premises—1) that functionality implies purposefulness and 2) that this purposefulness in turn leads to an intelligent designer. From these statements, Paley is able to deduce that functionality must point to some sort of intelligent designer. I will now expand on each of these premises and elucidate their respective concepts. The complex parts and orderly nature of the watch are integral elements of its function. Because the watch has a specific use, we are able to in turn assess its functionality: it either works or it doesn't. In saying that something does or does not "work," we are implying that some sort of goal has or has not been met. This goal is the purpose of the watch's construction. Paley points out that if the individual parts of a watch were assembled in any other way, the object would lose overall usefulness. The specificity in which parts must be assembled leads us to assume that the watch likely did not arise accidentally. The fact that the watch indeed has a purpose implies that there must be someone or something behind that purpose, for you cannot have intent without intentions. It does no good to inquire about the specific history of a stone because it lacks a well-defined purpose. The watch however, entails an aim of some sort. Therefore, asking how a watch came to be is not frivolous

because we can assert that the watch indeed has a purpose, and therefore an intelligent designer. In contending that a watch demands an intelligent designer of some form, Paley has completed the first phase of his argument. In Phase II, Paley introduces us to an analogy, and then expands on this analogy to argue the existence of God. A simplified form of his analogy is as follows: watch is to a watchmaker is as Universe is to God. This analogy has invoked much criticism. For critics say that even if Paley's argument proves the existence of an intelligent designer behind the Universe, it fails to prove that this ultimate creator is God. Nevertheless, Paley does give some reasoning as to why he is able to make the leap from creator of the Universe to God. In his argument, Paley invites us to imagine a watch possessing the ability to self-replicate. He then states that given this property our "admiration for contrivance and the skill of the contriver" would increase. It can be inferred from this reasoning that Paley would argue that as the complexity, functionality and purposefulness of an object increases, so does the overall skill of its creator. This logic shows us how Paley completes his analogy. In buying into "The Argument from Design," proponents of Paley would agree that objects which are complex, functional, and purposeful require an intelligent designer. They may then argue that the Universe represents the greatest possible form of complexity, functionality and purposefulness. Therefore, they would conclude that the Universe requires the greatest possible form of intelligent designer. This designer is God. Paley supports his affirmation of God's existence by conceding that the world we live in may indeed have irregularities and imperfections; however, this fact does not preclude the existence of a creator. Furthermore, Paley asserts that intelligent designers should not be judged solely on their "blemishes," but

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also on their “ plurality of successes.” The evidence of the vastly complex and teleological nature of our world, Paley infers, is reason enough to attribute the creation of the Universe to God.