

William Paley (1743-1805)

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Biography

William Paley, theologian and moral philosopher, expressed and codified the views and arguments of orthodox Christianity and the conservative moral and political thought of eighteenth-century England. Paley says that his works form a unified system based on natural religion. Like others during this period, Paley thought that reason alone, unaided by revelation, would establish many Christian theses. He is confident that a scientific understanding of nature will support the claim that God is the author of nature. Paley belongs to the anti-deist tradition that holds that revelation supplements natural religion. The most important revelation is God's assurance of an afterlife in which the virtuous are rewarded and the vicious are punished. Natural and revealed religion, in turn, provide the foundation for morality. God's will determines what is right and his power to reward and punish us in the afterlife provide the moral sanctions. On the whole, Paley is concerned with sustaining Christian faith, and ensuring that people know what their duties are and do them.

1. Life and writings

Paley was born in Peterborough, England. He entered Christ's College Cambridge in 1759 and graduated in 1763 with highest distinction. After teaching for a few years in a small school, he returned to Cambridge where he taught moral philosophy, divinity and Greek testament for nine years. His lectures were noted for their clarity and lucid organization. He left Cambridge when he married, obtaining the first of various positions in the Church of England, the highest as archdeacon of Carlisle.

Paley wrote four books. In the first, *The Principles of Moral and Political Philosophy* (1785), he defends theological utilitarianism. In his *Horae Paulinae: Or The Truth of the Scripture History of St Paul Evinc'd* (1790), he defends the authenticity of the New Testament writings, in particular the scriptural history of St Paul. In *A View of the Evidences of Christianity* (1794), he defends revelation and argues for the veracity of Christian miracles. In *Natural Theology* (1802), his best known work today, Paley develops a detailed statement of the argument from design. Except for his *Horae Pauline*, his writings enjoyed a huge success and went through numerous reprintings. His *Principles* was adopted as a textbook at Cambridge in 1786 and his *Evidences* in 1822, and both were used as textbooks in England and the United States until well into the mid-1800s. His portrait hangs in Christ's College along with those of Milton and Darwin. His works, however, have by and large faded into obscurity.

2. Theological and apologetical writings

Paley addresses his *Natural Theology* to Christian readers with the hope that it may help to sustain their belief in God in times of doubt and that they may come to see the world as a 'temple' and life as 'an act of adoration'. The argument of the *Natural Theology* has two parts. In

both parts he defends the argument from design against some traditional objections (see God, arguments for the existence of). First, Paley wants to establish that there are strong rational grounds for belief in the existence of God. He argues that the natural order, like a watch, was clearly designed for a purpose. As in the case of the watch, we should infer that the universe had an intelligent creator. Because each example alone is sufficient to support the conclusion that there is an intelligent author of nature, Paley says that by enumerating examples he is adding to the proof. He offers many detailed examples to support the claim that the various parts of nature are like machines exhibiting design and purpose. Most of his examples are from anatomy, and his favourite is the eye. Its intricate structure parallels that of a telescope and both obviously serve a purpose. Paley considers but dismisses a number of alternative explanations for the purposefulness of the natural world. For example, he argues that nature's intricate structure is so striking that it could not be a product of the chance coming together of atoms.

Second, Paley argues that a scientific understanding of nature helps to establish the traditional attributes of a Christian God. God is a person, since, as a contriver, he must have a mind. The fact that nature exhibits a uniform plan suggests his unity, although Paley acknowledges that this only shows a 'unity of counsel'. As cause of nature, God's power and intelligence must be adequate to their effect, yet the terms 'omniscient' and 'omnipotent', he admits, are only convenient superlatives. Paley devotes considerable effort to attempting to establish God's benevolence, arguing that the contrivances of nature are beneficial and that it is 'a happy world after all'. In addition, God gave us and other animals the capacity to experience pleasure, even though, he assumed, pleasure is biologically unnecessary. But Paley concedes that natural religion cannot by itself solve the problem of evil (see Evil, problem of).

Paley addresses the credibility of christian revelation in his Evidences. He assumes that God chose to reveal his will to the early Christians by performing miracles. The credibility of revelation thus turns on whether there are good reasons for believing that these miracles occurred. But David Hume (1777) had argued that it is contrary to experience that miracles should be true, but consistent with experience that testimony should be false (see Hume, D. §2; Miracles). So there are two issues: should we believe in the occurrence of miracles, and is the testimony of the witnesses credible? Paley takes up these issues one by one. What tells against miracles, Hume thought, is the fact that the laws of nature work uniformly. Paley counters that if we have independent proof that there is a God who created the universe – including the laws of nature – for special purposes, it is not improbable that God may have occasionally intervened in the natural order. In response to Hume's charge that the witnesses to miracles are not credible, Paley replies that the suffering of the early converts demonstrates their sincerity. Both Christian and non-Christian sources attest to their ordeals. Moreover, the New Testament writings are authentic, neither forged nor altered during their transmission. Further support for their authenticity is given in Horae Paulinae. The many undesigned coincidences between the Acts of the Apostles and Paul's letters, Paley argues, show that neither is fraudulent. In the Evidences Paley also responds to Hume's complaint that the miracle stories of various religions undermine each other's credibility, arguing that those of other religions may be dismissed on a number of grounds, including delusion and exaggeration.

3. Ethical and political writings

Paley insists that natural and revealed religion are the true foundation for morality, chastising those moralists who decline to bring in scriptural authorities. He also complains that most earlier theorists did not pay sufficient attention to working out what in specific instances our duties are, and getting people to do them. The key elements of Paley's theory are summed up in his three-part definition of virtue: 'the doing of good to mankind, in obedience to the will of God, and for the sake of everlasting happiness' (1785: 47). Paley is a theological voluntarist: God's will ultimately determines what is right (see Voluntarism). Since God is benevolent and wills our happiness, the rule we should use in deciding what to do is the utility principle. Right actions are those which promote the general happiness. Although we are basically self-interested creatures, God's power to reward and punish us in an afterlife make it in our interest to promote the happiness of others. Paley thinks that moral obligation is an unproblematic notion. It is like the obligation of a soldier to obey his officer or a servant his master, namely, being 'urged by a violent motive resulting from the command of another' (1785: 66). As Paley acknowledges, the only difference between prudential and moral obligation on this view is that the sanctions attaching to prudence are confined to this world whereas moral sanctions look to the 'world to come' (1785: 71).

Most of the Principles consists in a detailed discussion of our duties to God, others and ourselves. The last section contains his political theory. In most cases Paley defends the status quo. He does not use the utility principle as a tool of reform as did the later utilitarians. He argues that it is consistent with God's will that people own property and that the positive law of each country should regulate its distribution. He also argues that inequalities in wealth are advantageous to society, increasing productivity, and hence the general happiness. Like other utilitarians, Paley objects to the social contract theory. He traces the origin of government to paternal authority and the need for strong leaders in times of war. Citizens continue to obey out of habit and self-interest. The reason people ought to obey government is that God wills the general happiness and civil society promotes that end. In his discussion of more topical issues, Paley, as might be expected, defends the status quo; even so, throughout his adult life he vehemently opposed the slave trade and actively sought to end it.

List of works

There is no modern edition of Paley's works, but his works are readily available in many libraries. Selections from his *Natural Theology* are to be found in numerous introductory philosophy textbooks and in anthologies of classical readings in philosophy of religion.

Paley, W. (1785) *The Principles of Moral and Political Philosophy*, Dublin: Exshaw, White.

(Based on lectures Paley gave while teaching at Cambridge, its success is said to have moved Bentham to publish his *Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*. The opening sections contain his objections to the moral sense theory and a defence of theological utilitarianism. The rest of the book consists in a detailed discussion of our particular duties to God, others and ourselves, as well as Paley's political theory.)

Paley, W. (1790) *Horae Paulinae: Or The Truth of the Scripture History of St Paul, Evinc'd by a Comparison of the Epistles which bear his Name with the Acts of the Apostles, and with one another*, London and Dublin.

(This is a work in Christian apologetics and is the least philosophically interesting of Paley's writings. He defends the authenticity of both the Acts of the Apostles and Paul's thirteen letters.)

Paley, W. (1794) *A View of the Evidences of Christianity*. In three parts, London and Dublin.

(A work in Christian apologetics, Paley defends the credibility of Christian miracles and so Christian revelation against Hume's objections. He thinks this task is important because revelation is our only assurance of an afterlife in which the good are rewarded and the evil are punished.)

Paley, W. (1802) *Natural Theology: Or, Evidences of the Existence and Attributes of the Deity, collected from the Appearances of Nature*, London: Faulder and Philadelphia, PA: John Morgan.

(The most widely read of Paley's works, it contains a detailed restatement of the argument from design. Although Hume's *Dialogues on Natural Religion* (1779) consists in a sustained and devastating attack on the argument from design, Paley does not reply to these objections.)

References and further reading

Barker, E. (1948) 'Paley and His Political Philosophy', in *Traditions of Civility*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

(A sympathetic discussion of Paley's political theory.)

Clark, M. (1974) *Paley*, Toronto, Ont.: University of Toronto Press.

(A general introduction to Paley's thought with a detailed biography.)

Hume, D. (1777) 'Of Miracles', in *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. L.A. Selby-Bigge, revised P.H. Nidditch, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988.

(Argues that the power of testimony to establish the credibility of miracles and thereby to establish the authority of a religious system.)

LeMahieu, D. (1976) *The Mind of William Paley*, Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press.

(A general, thematic study of Paley's theology and philosophy.)

Raphael, D. (1991) *British Moralists: 1650–1800*, Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, vol. 2.

(Contains selections of the works of many of the British Moralists of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Includes a short selection of some of the theoretically more interesting parts of Paley's moral theory.)

Schneewind, J. (1977) 'The Early Utilitarians', in *Sidgwick's Ethics and Victorian Moral Philosophy*, Oxford: Clarendon Press.

(A clear summary of Paley's utilitarianism which places it in the context of other utilitarian writers of the period.)

Schneewind, J. (1990) *Moral Philosophy from Montaigne to Kant*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, vol. 2.

(Contains selections of the works of many seventeenth- and eighteenth-century moral philosophers from both sides of the British Channel. In addition to an informative general introduction, each individual selection has a separate introduction, annotation and bibliography. Contains a slightly more comprehensive selection of the theoretically interesting parts of Paley's moral theory, including his objections to the moral sense theory and his account of rights.)

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