

Chapter III

WILLIAM PALEY : ARGUMENT FROM BIOLOGICAL AUTONOMY

William Paley is best known for his writings in defence of the credibility of natural religion and of natural religion and of Christianity, especially for his *Views of the Evidence of Christianity* (1794) and his *Natural Theology, or Evidences of the Existence and Attributes of the Deity Collected from the Appearances of Nature* (1802). In the last-named work he presented his development of the argument from design. He does not base his argument upon the phenomena of the heavens. Astronomy, he held, "is not the best medium through which to prove the agency of an intelligent creator".¹ Paley takes his stand instead on autonomy, as he puts it; that is, an evidence of design in the animal organism, particularly in the human organism. He argues that the data are inexplicable without reference to a designing mind. "Were there no example in the world contrivance except that of the eye, it would be alone sufficient to support the conclusion which we draw from it as to the necessity of an intelligent creator".² Paley shows considerable skill and ability in his argument and in the development of his argument.

I

Paley opens his argument with an analogy of the watch. While walking in a desert place if and when I see a rock lying on the ground I may ask myself how did this object come to exist. I may attribute its presence to chance, or the operation of such natural forces as wind rain, heat, frost or volcanic action. But if I see a watch lying on the ground I cannot reasonably account for it in a similar way. A watch consists of a complex arrangement of wheels, cogs, axles, springs and balances, all operating accurately together to provide a regular measurement of the lapse of time. It would be utterly implausible to attribute the formation and assembling of these metal parts into a functioning machine to the chance operation of such factors as wind and rain. We are obliged to postulate an intelligent mind which is responsible for the phenomenon.

Paley's watch is an analogue of the world. It may be the case that we have never seen a watch before. But this would not weaken our inference, since we have never seen a world other than this one. Secondly, it would not invalidate our inference from the watch to the watch maker even if the mechanism did not always work perfectly. Even the mechanism of the world too sometimes goes wrong. However, we would be obliged to postulate a watchmaker. It could be the case that we are not able to discover the function of some of the parts of the machine. Even then our inference would not be undermined. We do not know nature in her entirety.

Having postulated the analogy, Paley argued that the natural world is as complex a mechanism as any watch. It is manifestly designed. The rotation of the planets in the solar system, and on earth, the regular procession of the seasons and the complex structure and mutual adaptation of the parts of a living organism, all suggest design. There are thousands of millions of cells in the human brain. They function together in a coordinated system. The eye is a superb movie camera, with self-adjusting lenses, a high degree of accuracy, colour sensitivity, and the capacity to operate continuously for many hours at a time. Can, Paley asks, such complex and efficient mechanisms have come about by chance, as a stone might be formed by the random operation of natural forces ?

Paley was typical of the religious apologetics in the eighteenth century. He develops a long cumulative argument drawing upon virtually all the sciences of his day. As examples of divine arrangement he points to the characteristics and instincts of animals, which enable them to survive. For example, the suitability of a bird's wings to the air and of a fish's fins to the water. Even a modern aircraft is modelled on these features. Paley is impressed by the way the alternation of day and night conveniently enables us to sleep after a day's activity. A modern writer, Arthur I. Brown appears to endorse Paley's contention when he writes that the Ozone gas layer is a mighty proof of the Creator's forethought. Can anyone attribute this device to a chance evolutionary process ? The gas layer prevents death to every living thing. Its right thickness and the correct defence gives an evidence of plan.³

We have already taken note of the classic critique of the design argument offered in David Hume's *Dialogues*. It was published in 1779, twenty three years earlier than Paley's. But Paley took no apparent account of Hume's criticism. Perhaps such has been the lack of communication between theologians and their philosophical critics.

II

The argument from design may now be summarized by way of recapitulation before we proceed further. The argument seeks to establish, that there is in the world a remarkable order and arrangement of detail, fit to excite wonder and for excelling the best efforts of human craftsmanship. Everything falls beautifully into place, at any rate *as if* it had been disposed by a master planner. It is a common impression that the reference is to the mathematical perfection of the planetary orbits. But Paley was more interested in biology than astronomy. He thought astronomy was an unsuitable introduction to Theism. Even Hume made Cleanthes' general statement of the issue right enough. "The curious adapting of means to ends, throughout all nature, resembles exactly, though if much exceeds, the productions of human contrivance; of human design, thought, wisdom and intelligence ... the Author of nature is somewhat similar to the mind of man of much larger faculties proportioned to the grandeur of the work, which he has executed".⁴ Cleanthes and Philo agree that this is a fair statement, and perhaps so it is. As far as Paley is concerned this was his main intention. It could be said that he is appealing to some supposed synthetic *a priori* principle of causation, guaranteeing that things of such and such a sort either must be or cannot be caused in this or that way.

Comments upon Paley's version of the argument from design has been continuous, and mostly critical. But it has been generally assumed that the argument is to be taken as demonstrative. If it is *a posteriori*, as Cleanthes in Hume's *Dialogues* is made to affirm, it cannot be demonstrative. A recent commentator on Paley, T. McPherson⁵ comments that the argument is intended to reinforce the believer and not to convince the sceptic. Granted that a man believes in God already, it will be of great benefit to him to reflect upon the evidences of contrivance in the world. As far as Paley is concerned this was his main concern, though,

we may add, there is a subsidiary intention to speak outside the circle of faith to the world at large. This thesis is denied by another modern philosopher of religion, namely A. Boyce Gibson.⁶ The thesis, he says, is a religious version of the doctrine that philosophy is no more than clarification. If philosophy is to be metaphysical, i.e., concerned with what is in the last resort the case, it must forego this advantage, which a philosopher concerned about religion is constantly tempted to claim, and set out from scratch. If it does so, it cannot demonstrate, and this is what Hume and Kant between them succeeded in showing.

However, we may take it for granted that there is in the world a very remarkable degree of order and adaptation, and that the natural wonder which it elicits is increased by the discoveries of scientists. The analogy of the architect, prominent in Paley than that of the watchmaker, is, admitted as an analogy. Now an analogy is useful as a suggestion, and it should prevent unprejudiced people from concluding to a direct negative without closer argument. It may prove to be a lead to an important discovery. But if it is put forward as a demonstration, it is bound to disappoint. That is why, Gibson suggests, it is tempting to treat the argument as a clarification. That way it makes sense. He prefers to take it as a hint, to be collected with other hints in exploring the balance of probabilities. Nothing in either Hume or Kant is inconsistent with this policy, and it prevents the failure of the argument as a demonstration from being used to support its negative.

The problem with the argument from design is that it is based on analogy, and it could as well be said, if the analogy is pressed too hard, the result is anthropomorphism, and if, for this very reason, it is relaxed, it leads to an agnosticism within which there is any amount of room for uncertainty and error. This predicament besets most of arguments for divine existence based on analogies. All analogies waver in this fashion. It could be said that the argument from design is a device for stabilizing the imagination, and not for producing certainties. But in lieu of certainty, we may be grateful for incidental illumination. The argument may be said to have its own worth, even without giving us certainty. Following McPherson, we may say that it implies that empirical evidence is

somehow relevant to the question of proof of God. Kant himself had suggested this point. "The physico-theological argument" as he calls it, "can lead us to the point of admiring the greatness, wisdom, power etc., of the Author of the world, but can take us no further."⁷ That is all we ask of it.

It must not be forgotten that Paley worked in the eighteenth century environment of deism. The frequent conjunction was 'God and Nature'. Paley's version of the argument was too firmly rooted in the deism of his age in discerning imperfection in Nature. There might have been the atheistic intimation : why does order need to be explained at all ? The argument of design supposes that order is quite ubiquitous, free from interruption. Is the order in the world wholly established in the world ? Is its perfection so evident ? If the answer is 'yes', then there should be no reason for looking for an order beyond it. Paley appears to argue that the *perfection* of the world-order is a reason for believing in God. If so, it is a chance reason, as any imperfection, would by the same token, be a reason for not believing in God, and the imperfections are for all to see. It is the need for order, and its imperfect hold for order, and its imperfect hold on the world, which together point to a centre for it which is not the world, the argument to design is too much wedded to order, and it is necessary to go beyond it to meet the objections against it. For example, there are other excellences of the world other than order, e.g. the creative impetus which the world can display, and in virtue of which a failure of order is not necessarily a calamity.

References

- 1 *Natural Theology*. 22 ; *Works*, IV, p.297.
- 2 *Ibid.*, 22; IV, p.59.
- 3 *Footprint of God*, Findley, Ohio, 1943, p.102.
- 4 *Dialogues*, Part II, ed. Kamp Smith, p.176.
- 5 *The Philosophy of Religion*, p.77.
- 6 *Theism and Eurpiricism*, SCM Press, London, 1970, p.148.
- 7 *Critique of Pure Reason*, tr. Kamp Smith, A629, B657, p.523.

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