

Paley's Argument Revisited

Abstract: *In Oppy (2002), I argued for the view that, contrary to received opinion, Paley's argument for design is a deductive argument that is subject to decisive objections. Schupbach (2005) argues that I fail to show that Paley's argument for design is a deductive argument, whence it surely follows that the objections that I raised are irrelevant. While I think that Schupbach overstates the case against the view that Paley's argument for design is a deductive argument, I am persuaded that, at best, it is unclear whether or not we should hold that Paley's argument is deductive. However, I insist that it doesn't matter whether Paley's argument is deductive or inductive: what matters is that the kinds of objections that I raised in Oppy (2002) serve to defeat Paley's argument even if it is properly taken to be an inductive argument.*

Word Count: 3556 words

In Oppy (2002), I suggest that Paley's argument for design—i.e., the argument that he sets out in the first couple of chapters or so of his *Natural Theology*—is best interpreted as a deductive argument with something like the following form:

1. In the case of non-natural objects, the presence of function and suitability of constitution to function in these objects makes the inference that these objects are the products of intelligent design *inevitable*—i.e. correct and not capable of being resisted on rational grounds. (Premise)
2. If the inference, from the presence of function and suitability of constitution to function, to the conclusion that non-natural objects are products of intelligent design, is inevitable, then, in all cases, an inference, from the presence in objects of function and suitability of constitution to function, to the conclusion that those objects are the products of intelligent design, is correct and not capable of being resisted on rational grounds. (Premise)
3. There is function and suitability of constitution to function in the natural world. (Premise)
4. Hence, natural objects—the denizens of the natural world—are products of intelligent design. (From 1, 2, and 3)

While I noted that there is considerable murkiness in the understanding of what it takes for inferences to be 'inevitable', I opted for an interpretation on which the irresistibility of the inference points towards the presumption of a necessary connection between, on the one hand, the presence of function and suitability of constitution to function, and, on the other hand, standing as product of intelligent design. However, as Schupbach points out, a competing interpretation of the irresistibility of the inference might point instead to a presumption of a very strong inductive connection between, on the one hand, the presence of function and suitability of constitution to function, and, on the other hand, standing as product of intelligent design. When confronted with Paley's watch, one might 'inevitably' infer that the watch is the product of intelligent design, based on one's observation of function and suitability of constitution to function in the watch, not because one properly holds that there is a necessary connection between, on the one hand, the presence of function and suitability of constitution to function, and, on the other hand,

standing as product of intelligent design, but rather because inference to the best explanation properly takes one from observation of the presence of function and suitability of constitution to function to the conclusion that one is in the presence of a product of intelligent design.

Schupbach adduces a range of considerations that he takes to support the suggestion that Paley understands the inevitability of inference in terms of strong inference to the best explanation rather than in terms of necessary connection. In particular, he notes:

1. that Paley insists on beginning an investigation through observation of nature and accumulation of evidence, which is the first step required in any inference to the best explanation;
2. that Paley regularly compares the explanatory power of hypotheses when assessing the conclusion that should be drawn on the basis of observation of evidence, which is another key step in inference to the best explanation;
3. that, in keeping with the standards of his day, Paley used words like ‘proof’ and ‘certainty’ to refer to strong inductive arguments and conclusions;
4. that the most plausible account of the global structure of Paley’s *Natural Theology* takes it to be ‘one long inference to the best explanation’; and
5. that it would be a failure of ‘interpretative charity’ to suppose that Paley did understand the inevitability of inference in terms of necessary connection.

We shall take up these considerations in turn.

First, while it is clearly true that one important step required in inference to the best explanation is something like observation of nature and accumulation of evidence, it is also clearly true that this same step is required in order to make an inference that is underwritten by necessary connection. So, as far as I can see, this first consideration does not speak clearly in favour of either view about the nature of the ‘inevitability’ of the inference that Paley examines.

Second, while it is clearly true that comparison of the explanatory power of hypotheses when assessing the conclusion that should be drawn on the basis of observation of evidence is an important step required in inference to the best explanation, it is also clearly true that examination of the merits of alternative theories is an important step in the justification of the claim that there is a necessary connection that underwrites a particular kind of inference. In particular, in order to argue that we are justified in holding that there is a necessary connection between, say, suitability of constitution to function and intelligent design, we need to argue that there is no other *possible* account of the presence of suitability of constitution to function. Again, as far as I can see, this second consideration does not speak clearly in favour of either view about the nature of the ‘inevitability’ of the inference that Paley examines.

Third, while it is true that contemporary readers might be deceived by Paley’s use of the terms ‘certainty’ and ‘proof’, it is not clear that this speaks very strongly in favour of the understanding of ‘inevitability’ in terms of inference to the best explanation. Schupbach claims that, in the light of the ‘hermeneutical key’ afforded by knowledge of the seventeenth and eighteenth century use of words like ‘certainty’ and ‘proof’, we can see that the following passage clearly illustrates his case:

We see intelligence constantly producing effects, marked and distinguished by certain properties ... such as relation to an end, relation of parts to one another, and to a common purpose. We see ... nothing except intelligence producing effects so marked and distinguished. Furnished with this experience, we view the products of nature. We observe them also marked and distinguished in the same manner. We wish to account for their origin. Our experience suggests a cause perfectly adequate to this account. No experience, no single instance or example, can be offered in favour of any other. (498)

However, as far as I can see, this passage is neutral between the competing understandings of ‘inevitability’: our universal experience could be taken to support an inference to the best explanation, or it could be taken to support a judgment about what is necessarily the case.

Fourth, it seems to me that it is actually more problematic than Schupbach thinks to take Paley’s *Natural Theology* as ‘one long inference to the best explanation’. Schupbach thinks that it is a straightforward matter to outline the argument that Paley defends:

The first two chapters ... offer an example of what types of indicators often lead us to infer that an object is designed [and] ... they demonstrate the general efficacy of the adopted inductive argument. ... In the remainder of the book, Paley inspects nature and finds certain evidences in this realm. Moving briskly through a massive amount of information, Paley attempts to add evidence upon evidence for various objects in nature for which any adequate hypothesis must be able to account. Programmatically, he evaluates the explanatory powers of various hypotheses and concludes that in each case, the intelligent design hypothesis best explains the evidence. Thus, throughout the book Paley is using inference to the best explanation to argue for design.

I must confess that this account does not make sense to me. As far as I can see, it would make no difference to the strength of the case for *design* that Paley develops in his *Natural Theology* if he considered only one case from the natural world: say, the mammalian eye. Moreover, as far as I can see, it would make no difference to the strength of his case for *design* if it were based only on a relatively superficial examination of the properties of the mammalian eye. Those who think that the argument of the book is ‘one long inference to the best explanation’ owe us an account of how one could possibly think that the multiplication of cases and the multiplication of details adds to the strength of that alleged argument.

By contrast, it seems to me to be much more plausible to think that the vast majority of Paley’s *Natural Theology* makes no contribution to the argument *for design* that he develops, and hence that it serves other purposes. As Paley himself says, his argument for *design* is stated in the first couple of chapters of the book, and then ‘applied’—perhaps he might have said ‘illustrated’—in the next couple of chapters. Given the statement of the argument in the first two chapters, all he really needs to do is to establish that there are marks of design—such things as suitability of constitution to function—in nature: given that much, and given the stated argument, the conclusion of the stated argument follows.

Plainly, if this account of the general structure of Paley's *Natural Theology* is correct, then we should be able to point to other purposes that Paley intended for his text, particularly for those parts that follow the 'application' of the 'stated' argument. This does not seem hard. For one example, Paley wants to establish more than intelligent design: he wants to make a plausible identification of the designer with the Christian God. An examination of the details of creation may well make that identification more plausible. For another example, the opening to chapter three suggests—to me, at any rate—that Paley also thought that the kind of detailed examination of the natural world that he goes on to provide underscores the absurdity of atheism. (Schupbach thinks that this suggestion is 'extremely uncharitable'; I say that it has textual support.) Furthermore, we are free to allow that, in the pursuit of these and other purposes, Paley does make extensive use of arguments that rely upon inference to the best explanation: the question about how to understand the 'inevitability' of the inference that figures in the first two chapters or so of Paley's *Natural Theology* need have no significance for the interpretation of arguments in other parts of that work.

Fifth, it seems to me that Schupbach misunderstands one key part of the argument of Oppy (2002). In that work, I contrast the argument that arises from my reading of the first two chapters of Paley's *Natural Theology* with the kind of argument that is standardly attributed to Paley in writings on the argument from design. That kind of argument looks something like this:

1. The natural world contains function and suitability of constitution to function.
2. This fact is well-explained if we and the world are the product of intelligent design.
3. There is no other explanation of this fact that is anywhere near as good.
4. (Hence) Probably we and the world are the product of intelligent design.

I argued, first, that the first two chapters of Paley's *Natural Theology* provide much more support for my reading than for the attribution of this standard argument; and, second, that we can't properly claim to be more interested in the second reading on the grounds that we can *now* recognise that it yields a stronger argument. Schupbach objects to the fact that the defence of my second claim turns crucially on appeals to considerations that were not available to Paley; but that point is irrelevant to the claim that I aimed to defend. In particular, it should be noted that we do not need to reformulate the argument that I initially presented in order to accommodate the point that 'inevitability' could be cashed out in terms of inference to the best explanation: arguments that are not resistible on rational grounds might just be arguments that appeal to inference to the best explanation.

In sum, then, taking all of Schupbach's critical points into account, it seems to me that it is not entirely clear whether we should cash out Paley's appeal to the 'inevitability' of inference in terms of necessity or in terms of best explanation. However, since it seems fair to concede that Schupbach might well be correct in claiming that Paley's appeal to the 'inevitability' of inference is properly understood in terms of best explanation, we would do well to consider the standing of Paley's argument on that understanding of 'inevitability'.

Recall that the argument that we are now attributing to Paley runs like this:

1. In the case of non-natural objects, the presence of function and suitability of constitution to function in these objects makes the inference [by way of appeal to the principle of inference to the best explanation] that these objects are the products of intelligent design *inevitable*—i.e. correct and not capable of being resisted on rational grounds. (Premise)
2. If the inference [by way of appeal to the principle of inference to the best explanation], from the presence of function and suitability of constitution to function, to the conclusion that non-natural objects are products of intelligent design, is inevitable, then, in all cases, an inference [by way of appeal to the principle of inference to the best explanation], from the presence in objects of function and suitability of constitution to function, to the conclusion that those objects are the products of intelligent design, is correct and not capable of being resisted on rational grounds. (Premise)
3. There is function and suitability of constitution to function in the natural world. (Premise)
4. Hence, natural objects—the denizens of the natural world—are products of intelligent design. (From 1, 2, and 3)

This argument is taken quite directly from Paley’s text:

When we come to inspect the watch, we perceive that its several parts are framed and put together for a purpose ... This mechanism being observed ... the inference, we think, is inevitable, that the watch must have had a maker. ... Every manifestation of design, which existed in the watch, exists in the works of nature; with the difference, on the side of nature, of being greater and more, and that in a degree that exceeds all computation. I mean that the contrivances of nature surpass the contrivances of art and ... yet in a multitude of cases are no less evidently mechanical.

At the risk of repeating what I said in Oppy (2002), I shall now point out what I take to be the major difficulty that confronts this argument.

In order to frame the argument at all, we need to suppose that we have some way of distinguishing between natural and non-natural objects, i.e. between the denizens of the natural world and those things that do not belong to the natural world. If we do not have some way of making out this distinction, then we can hardly suppose that it makes sense to transfer considerations developed in connection with non-natural objects to ‘the works of nature’. But the obvious way to make out the distinction requires a contrast between things that are intended or unintended products of (human) intelligent design and things that are neither intended nor unintended products of (human) intelligent design. Moreover, whatever we suppose are the markers that enable us to identify products of (human) intelligent design in the absence of knowledge concerning their origins—as in the case of Paley’s example involving the watch—the features to which we appeal cannot, in the nature of the case, be features that are shared with denizens of the natural world. That is, we can’t use Paley’s considerations about the watch as a lever to infer to intelligent design in the case of denizens of the natural world unless there are features of the watch in virtue of which

it belongs to the non-natural world but that it does not share with denizens of the natural world. But, if that's right, then those features of the watch in virtue of which it belongs to the non-natural world but that it does not share with denizens of the natural world are alone sufficient to underwrite the inference to intelligent design in its case.

This is the core of the objection that I developed in Oppy (2002). It cannot be true that features like the presence of function and suitability of constitution to function are the features that we use when we identify that things are products of (human) intelligent design, since those features are present in entities that we know are not products of (human) intelligent design. In other words, the first premise of the argument is simply false. In fact, we *know* that we identify the watch as the product of (human) intelligent design on the basis of our background knowledge about the natural world, and the distribution of materials within it: pure brass and transparent films of glass are only produced in human factories, cogwheels do not grow on trees, etc. Moreover, we *know* that we do not identify the watch as the product of (human) intelligent design on the basis of our observation of such things as the presence of function and suitability of constitution to function, since we—or, at any rate, those of us not tainted by prior theory—do not simply identify animal parts as the products of intelligent design on the basis of our observation of those same things. Paley is just wrong about the grounds of our inference to the conclusion that the watch is the product of intelligent design—and this is so even if we suppose that that inference is grounded in an appeal to inference to the best explanation. The best explanation of why this thing has cogwheels as parts—or why this thing has a transparent glass face, or why this thing has a brass casing—is that it is the product of (human) intelligent design: who could dispute it? But nothing in the natural world has cogwheels as parts—or a transparent glass face, or a brass casing—and so, of course, the 'inevitable' inference simply doesn't carry over to the works of nature.

Perhaps it is worth noting that nothing in my argument here turns on the particular markers of design that I have identified in my formulation of Paley's argument. The words 'the presence of function and suitability of constitution to function' are my best attempt at summarising the considerations that Paley sets out in his discussion of the examination of the watch, but they may well fail to do justice to those considerations. However, if these words do fail to do justice to those considerations, it doesn't matter: they can be treated as a stand-in for whatever Paley thought to be the relevant considerations. As I have already noted, it can't be that Paley supposed that the things that actually form the basis of our 'inevitable' inference—having cogwheels as parts, having a transparent glass face, having a brass casing—number among his favoured considerations, since it is obvious that these things are not to be found among 'the works of nature' (contrary to Paley's claim that 'every manifestation of design, which existed in the watch, exists in the works of nature').

The only remaining item of business, I think, is to discuss the standing of the second premise in the argument as I have here formulated it. I take it that Paley displays a clear commitment to this premise in the paragraph that begins the third chapter of his book. ('Every manifestation of design, which existed in the watch, exists in the works of nature; with the difference, on the side of nature, of being greater and more, and that in a degree that exceeds all computation. I mean that the contrivances of nature surpass the contrivances of art and ... yet in a multitude of cases are no less evidently mechanical.') Given that this is right, it seems to me both that we have a proper

rendering of the argument in the first two chapters (plus one paragraph) of Paley's book and that we have good grounds for claiming that the argument is no good. Each of the premises of the argument has solid textual support, and the full text strongly supports the suggestion that Paley means to infer the proposed conclusion from the suggested premises. And yet the first premise is plainly false.

References

- Oppy, G. (2002) 'Paley's Argument for Design' *Philo* 5, 161-73
Schupbach, J. (2005) 'Paley's Inductive Inference to Design: A Response to Graham Oppy' *Philosophia Christi* 7, 2, 491-502