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Paley, William

THOMAS PFAU

LIFE

William Paley was born in Peterborough, Northamptonshire, in July 1743 as the eldest of four children and the only son of William Paley (1711–99) and Elizabeth Clapham (1713–96). Having attended Christ's College at Cambridge on a fellowship, the elder Paley had gone on to assume the vicarage at Helpston, Northamptonshire, in 1735 and, in 1745, was appointed headmaster at the Giggleswick grammar school. It was there that the younger William Paley would receive his early instruction. A gifted student with a particular aptitude for mathematics, young William Paley was admitted as a sizar to Christ's College in 1758. Having received, in 1761, the prestigious Bunting scholarship for mathematical studies at Cambridge, Paley also began to take an interest in moral philosophy, famously succeeding in a public debate (in Latin) with John Frere about eternal punishment. Following a two-year interlude as Latin tutor at an academy in Greenwich, Paley in 1765 was awarded a Cambridge prize for the best dissertation in Latin prose by a senior bachelor. His choice of topic for that work (a comparison of Stoic and Epicurean philosophy), as well as his dismissal of the Stoics as mere 'Pharisees in philosophy' and his appraisal of Epicureanism as more conducive to virtue and happiness all presage Paley's later utilitarianism.

Having left Bracken's Academy the same year and accepted an appointment as an assistant curate in Greenwich, Paley was named a fellow of Christ's College only a year later (June 1766). He was to spend the next ten years at Cambridge, taking an M.A. (in 1767) and establishing himself as a highly successful lecturer. Among several important acquaintances was that of John Law, son of Edmund Law (the master of Peterhouse and Knightbridge professor of moral philosophy). Having been awarded the position of praelector at Christ's College, as well as junior dean, catechist, and preacher, Paley was ordained as a member of the Anglican clergy in December 1767. Renowned for his clarity of exposition and skill in avoiding arcane doctrinal disputes, Paley now taught Greek Testament – required for all undergraduates at the College – as well as metaphysics and ethics. The notes for his lectures on ethics in particular would later serve as the foundation for Paley's first major publication, his *Principles of Moral and Political Philosophy* (1785). The success of these lectures (particularly Paley's accounts of Locke, Samuel Clarke, and Joseph Butler) brought considerable renown to the college. As a result, Paley's career flourished with a series of new appointments: as chaplain to Edmund Law (by then bishop of Carlisle) in 1769; preacher at the Royal Chapel,

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Whitehall, in 1771; and senior dean at Christ's College in 1775.

At some point during his time at Cambridge, Paley began an affiliation with the Hyson Club, a group of charismatic young intellectuals that included John Law, John Jebb, and Richard Watson. By the late 1760s, members of the Hyson were embroiled in controversy over the subscription to the Thirty-Nine Articles. As a result of some five years of debate, members of the Anglican clergy petitioned Parliament early in 1772 to rescind the mandatory subscription to the articles known as the oath of subscription; Paley's flippant justification for not signing it ('I could not afford to keep a conscience') would later come back to haunt him. In the event, he did publish just two years later a pamphlet titled *Considerations on the propriety of requiring a subscription to articles of faith* (1774). Signed only by 'A friend of Religious Liberty', the pamphlet's style left little doubt about Paley's authorship, and it made a forceful case for religious toleration, free debate of all matters theological and moral, and for a latitudinarian view of Anglicanism. Another publication on *The character and example of Christ* (printed privately in 1776) had been bound together with a short work on the same topic by Edmund Law and was widely circulating at Cambridge. Paley's close friendship with Edmund and John Law continued to help his career and importantly shaped his personal life. He met his first wife, Jane Hewitt, at the home of John Law, who also officiated at their marriage in June of 1776. The couple was to have total of eight children. That same year he also received an appointment as rector of Musgrove in Westmoreland and, later that year, as vicar at Dalston, followed by the more highly regarded vicarage at Appleby, for which he resigned the Musgrove position. A 1777 publication (*Caution Recommended on the Use and Application of Scripture Language*) shows Paley arguing against the dogmatic use of scripture and for the clear articulation of historical context in all biblical interpretation.

It is in the early 1780s that Paley's moral philosophy comes into clear focus. Thus, in the first sermon that he preached since being named archdeacon of Carlisle in August 1782, Paley's utilitarian outlook is apparent. *A Distinction of Orders in the Church Defended upon Principles of Public Utility* was given in Dublin on 21 September 1782, and it prompted Paley finally to put together his copious materials as a lecturer on ethics and metaphysics at Christ's College. The resulting work, *Principles of Moral and Political Philosophy* was published in 1785. Besides earning Paley an impressive £1000 by his publisher (Robert Faulder) and copious royalties for successive editions, the book also established him as a major presence on Cambridge University's undergraduate curriculum where *Principles* and Paley's 1794 *A View of the Evidences of Christianity* would be adopted as required reading. Indeed, *Principles* remained part of the Cambridge curriculum until 1920. By 1814 there had been some 20 editions of *Principles* within the UK alone, and a total of ten more editions had accumulated in the United States by 1821.

Paley's next major works were *Horae Paulinae; or, The Truth of the Scripture History of St. Paul* (1790) and his *Evidences of Christianity* (1794). Though less popular with the general public than his other major works, *Horae* is often regarded as his most original work. Carefully juxtaposing St Paul's letters with the Acts of the Apostles, Paley draws on 'certain undesigned coincidences' to prove the authenticity of Scriptural testimony. Extending his probabilistic method of demonstrating the historical and spiritual authenticity of early Christianity, Paley's *Evidences* were directed against Hume's perceived atheism and epistemological scepticism. Divided into three parts, the book marshals historical evidence corroborating the Gospels, defending the plausibility of miracles (famously called into question by David Hume), and analyzing the language of prophecy, the persona of Christ, and the thorny issue of disparities between the various Gospels. Once again, Paley's fluent style and manifest gift for clear expository writing and superb organization are on full display. As a result, *Evidences* also rose to

canonical stature on the Cambridge curriculum, where it was required reading for nearly a century (1822–1920) for all second-year undergraduates sitting for examination.

Yet the image of Paley as a consummate apologist of (latitudinarian) Anglicanism and a staunch (Whiggish) defender of the political status quo is complicated by some of his more pronounced political statements during the 1790s. Thus his eldest son and first biographer, Edmund Paley, portrays him as 'an advocate of liberal principles', a characterization borne out by Paley's unwavering opposition to slavery and his (less consistent) indictment of establishment greed and privilege. His views on slavery emerged most fully in a 'Speech on the Abolition of the Slave Trade', given at a public meeting in Carlisle in 1792; aside from condemning the slave trade, advocating a graduated income tax, and expressing contempt for the sheer inutility of a privileged and profligate aristocracy would prompt, as late as 1802, a writer in the *Anti-Jacobin Review* to remark how in Paley's writings 'the most determined Jacobin might find a justification of his principles, and a sanction for his conduct'. Whatever appeal Paley's stand on these issues might have held for the progressive wing of the Whigs and determined opponents of slavery in particular was compromised by his decision to publish *Reasons for Contentment* (1792). Reflecting anxiety over the course of the French Revolution and its impact on English politics, the pamphlet notoriously juxtaposes an upper class burdened by the numerous responsibilities of its estates with a working class serenely untroubled by any care with personal or political fortunes. The work was vigorously denounced and mocked by a wide array of progressive intellectuals (Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Samuel Parr, and William Hazlitt, among others).

Shortly before the publication of his *Evidences*, Paley was made vicar of Addingham, as well as the vicarage of Stanwix (near Carlisle), where he moved at the age of 50. By 1795, he received his Doctor of Divinity degree from the University of Cambridge, and by December of the same year he married Catherine Dobinson and divided his time between serving as local magistrate in Bishop-Wearmouth and his clerical duties at Lincoln. Already plagued by the onset of kidney disease, Paley in 1800 began his final work, *Natural Theology; or, Evidences of the Existence and Attributes of the Deity, Collected from the Appearances of Nature*, which was first published in 1802 and by the time of Paley's death three years later had already passed through nine editions. The apparent stagnation of his career after 1795 has at times been attributed to misgivings about his politics in high places, including some unconfirmed reports that George III himself had spoken critically of Paley's utilitarianism. Tentative plans to elevate him to the rank of bishop came to nothing, and his final years were instead spent on amassing the rich inventory of scientific 'proof' from nature for the existence of the deity. Following his death at Bishop-Wearmouth on May 25, 1805, Paley was buried at Carlisle Cathedral.

WRITINGS AND INFLUENCE

In his lifetime, Paley's intellectual influence and stature were considerable. His moral and theological writings figured prominently in the undergraduate curriculum at Cambridge where support was widespread for a latitudinarian view of Anglicanism (see Waterman 1991; Fyfe 1997), the repeal of the test act and the oath of subscription to the Thirty-Nine Articles, as well as political causes such as the abolition of slavery. Paley's sermons, and especially the many successive editions of *Principles* and *Evidences* are often regarded as a pitch-perfect expression of the pluralism, pragmatism, and rationalism that had been gaining ground in Anglican theology throughout the eighteenth century. His decision to merge political and moral philosophy, which Paley himself acknowledges as unusual in the 'Preface' to *Principles*, reflects a desire to raise the practical relevancy of moral and theological reflection. Paley significantly departs from early Platonist thinkers (Shaftesbury) and

Scottish moral philosophy (Hutcheson, Smith) by rejecting the idea of an innate 'moral sense', suggesting instead that moral judgements and values arise from 'fashion', 'institutions', 'climate . . . or local circumstances of the country', even as their pervasive and deep-seated character renders them 'very apt to be mistaken for the order of nature'.

Principles, which John Maynard Keynes called 'an immortal book', is often regarded as the first substantive articulation of British utilitarianism, as evidenced by the notorious opening of chapter six in book two ('Whatever is expedient, is right. It is the utility of any moral rule alone, which constitutes the obligation of it'). Coleridge was not alone to worry that Paley's 'mode of defending Christianity . . . had increased the number of infidels' and that Paley was about to 'annihilate the Idea of Virtue by placing its essence in Selfishness' (letters to George Fricker, 4 October 1806, and to Sir George Beaumont, ca. 30 December 1808: see Coleridge 1956–71, vol. 2: 1180; vol. 3: 153). Opposition to Paley's dominant role on the Cambridge curriculum and within popular, middle-class culture also markedly rises by the 1820s, as Evangelicals, High-Church Anglicans, members of the Puseyite (or Oxford) Movement, and proponents of modern, specialized scientific inquiry find Paley's balancing of religious, moral, and scientific concerns increasingly superficial and conceptually weak. High-Church Anglicans in particular found Paley's theology to be slippery, evasive on questions of the Trinity, the divinity of Christ, and they tend to portray him as yet another Cambridge Socinian in all but name. Paley's vision of religious and moral culture is undeniably irenic, and much of his oeuvre reflects a paternalistic and conciliatory faith in nature as a providential order aimed at general contentment and happiness of the greatest number.

Paley's dominant method of argument, usually practised with great stylistic verve, is that of analogy. Most famous and controversial may well be the so-called pigeon analogy that opens Book III of *Principles*, which in sharp contrast with his later defence of Georgian England's stark inequality of property in *Reasons for Contentment* (1792) hints at the radical edge of Paley's political economy; indeed, his reference to the one wholly unproductive pigeon ('oftentimes the feeblest and worst of the whole set, . . . a madman, or a fool') was also perceived by some contemporaries as a not-so-subtle allusion to George III. *Natural Theology* opens with the famous, if not original, analogy of a watch accidentally discovered on the heath, and gradually compelling the observer to establish a parallel between the manifest 'contrivance' of the watch by a designing intelligence and God as the creative source of all of nature. The limitations of Paley's analogical method, and the contradictions to which it gives rise, have been amply discussed in recent literature (Eddy 2004; Thomson 2005; Jager 2007). Likewise, beginning with Thomas Gisborne, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Richard Whately, John Herschel, and Adam Sedgwick, a wide array of criticisms was levelled at Paley. Objections tended to centre on Paley's decision to limit religion's moral and spiritual force to strictly utilitarian standards and to treat God strictly as an inference, to be drawn from empirical 'evidence' the discernment and explication of which is the exclusive domain of human reason. By the time that Darwin worked through Paley's *Natural Theology*, along with Paley's two other major works, for his second-year ('little-go') exam at Cambridge, pressure was growing to have Paley's works removed from the syllabus.

Though the argument from design can already be traced in *Principles* and *Evidences*, it is most fully articulated in *Natural Theology*. While often restating his main thesis that 'wherever we see marks of contrivance, we are led for its cause to an *intelligent* author', Paley never engages alternative accounts or criticisms of the 'natural theology' framework, such as Erasmus Darwin's contemporary accounts of 'generation' or, most notoriously, David Hume's shrewd if understated dismantling of the argument from design in *Dialogues concerning natural religion* (1779). Instead, Paley

asserts that 'in the works of nature we trace mechanism; and this alone proves contrivance'. His vision of the universe is indeed mechanistic and nominalist – a rich inventory of otherwise wholly discrete and 'contrived' things, each one robotically following the unchanging trajectory mapped in advance by divine preformation. There is no evolution, no chance mutation, nor any dynamic or competitive interaction between species. Still, some recent accounts have argued that the unwavering rationalism and pragmatism of Paley's physico-theology inadvertently paved the road towards the Darwinian conceptions of life as a systemic, agonistic, and self-regulating evolutionary process. Remarking on the legalistic and forensic nature of Paley's arguments concerning the existence of God, the deity, Thomson thus sees 'a direct connection . . . between Paley's arguments *against* any kind of evolutionary theories . . . and the origins of modern scientific thinking *in favour of* evolutionary theory' (2005: 7). Lines of influence between Paley, Lyell, and, especially, Charles Darwin (who was to occupy the same room at Christ's College that had been Paley's quarters) have often been drawn (Brooke 1991; Knight 2004; Thomson 2005). Browne (1995) notes that it was Paley who first alerted the young Charles Darwin to the relevancy of Malthus's ideas. Malthus's *Essay on the Principle of Population* (1798) did indeed significantly shape Paley's increasingly economic and utilitarian account of natural processes and provided him with two premises of great concern to Darwin later on: 'overproduction (superfecundity) and the shifting economy of the struggle for existence' (Thomson 2005: 261). Mostly avoiding the pitfall of outright anthropomorphism so pervasive in other versions of natural theology, Paley increasingly adopted Malthus's systemic and quantitative approach. In so doing he produced 'a subtle, coherently reasoned brief for an adaptationist natural theology' based on the sheer 'frequency, not ubiquity, of adaptation' (Gould 2002: 266). Yet Paley's stature in intellectual history remains principally defined by two factors: (1) his rhetorically effective alignment of moral, political, and scientific thought towards the end of the eighteenth century, and (2) his inspiring of major intellectuals such as Coleridge, Darwin, or Newman to define their more profound intellectual projects through a critique of his own.

SEE ALSO: Coleridge, Samuel Taylor, Prose; Darwin, Erasmus; Natural History and Scientific Prose; Philosophy, Politics, and Religion.

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Pantomime and Harlequinade

MELYNDA NUSS

Leigh Hunt called the pantomime the period's 'best medium of dramatic satire' (1949: 144). Fast-paced and full of bustle and variety, the pantomime made fun of politics, commerce, culture, technology, law, war, urban life, and even the drama itself. It was one of the most popular forms of theatre in the period, reputedly carrying the finances of the major houses while they lost money on Shakespeare. Its changes marked England's transition from a rural culture to a modern, urban consumer power.

Although pantomime has its roots in the Continental *commedia dell'arte* and, before that, in traditional fairs, rituals, and festivals that pre-date theatre (Gaull 2003), the form that eighteenth-century and Romantic viewers would recognize first emerged in the 1720s. John Rich (1692–1761), the manager of the New Theatre in Lincoln's Inn Fields, is often credited with devising it, though the credit likely comes more from his reputation for pleasing audiences and his star performances in the role of Harlequin than from any evidence of his actual invention (Thomson 2006: 75).

The form that emerged in the eighteenth century featured a two-part structure. A serious 'opening' or 'frame story' – generally drawn from familiar tales such as Classical mythology, English folklore, best-selling fiction, fairy tales, or current events – sets up the classic story where an authoritarian father prevents the love between his daughter and a young man of equal or lower rank to the father, often pressing her to marry another suitor who is older, deformed, foppish, or foolish. When the conflict reaches an impasse, a good fairy or other benevolent agent reproaches the father for his unnatural behaviour, promises the lovers her protection, and, to facilitate the lovers' escape, changes the father, the lovers, and the other suitor into their allegorical counterparts from Continental *commedia dell'arte* – Harlequin, the clever servant and lover of Columbine, Columbine, his love, and Pantaloon, the disgruntled father, often accompanied by Columbine's spurned lover (Lover) and Pantaloon's foolish servant Clown. In the 'harlequinade' section Harlequin and Columbine lead Pantaloon, Lover, and Clown on a series of knockabout pursuits and magical transformations – interspersed with operatic arias, comic songs, bits, tricks, jokes, and special effects. The Harlequinade pursuit ends in a 'dark scene' – a gloomy, macabre cave, tower, or grotto – where Harlequin is put to a final test. The benevolent agent again intervenes and effects a reconciliation among the pantomime characters. The characters are then transported to a splendid final scene – a magic temple, palace, or garden, or a scene showing the grandeur of Britannia – where they celebrate their love.

But despite the skeleton plot sketched out above, the pantomime was not unified by any overarching design or principle of narrative logic. The true joy of the pantomime lay not in its plot and characters but in acrobatics, spectacle, song, dance, travelogue, slapstick, and special effects. In most pantomimes the plot was merely a pretext for a variety of set-piece comic scenes, transformations, tricks, chases, musical numbers, and special effects. At any point, the action could be interrupted by a bit of comic business, a trick, or a song. Actors might even break character and leave off the chase for a song, an encore, or an unrelated bit