

Handout 2

Design argument: Paley, Dawkins

PALEY'S ARGUMENT. Suppose I find a stone on a plain (Figure 1). It is uninteresting and absurd to ask why the stone happened to be there. Suppose, on the other we find a watch in these otherwise uninhabited surroundings (Figure 2). Suppose we are able to examine it. The complexity of its parts must convince us in its creation, convince us of a plan with which the watch was produced. Every part plays a small role in making the watch fulfil its overall purpose, which is, well, to show the time. Every part is so delicately arranged, in a non-obvious way, so as to convince us in the existence of a designer.



Figure 1: Unknown stone



Figure 2: Paley's(?) watch

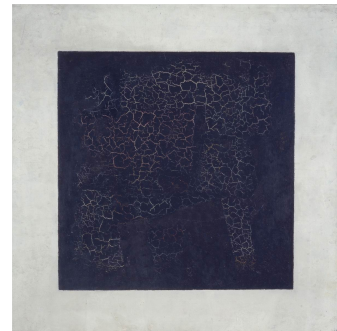


Figure 3: Malevich's Square

Paley then answers a few immediate objections. Several bear considerable interest. In II he says that imperfections of the watch do not prove that there was no designer. So at this stage at least the argument only purports to establish the existence of *a* designer, not any perfect designer. The inference to the existence of the divine designer is established in later chapters. In I and III he says that ignorance of the watch production or of the purposes of various parts should not preclude the design conclusion. The remark I is, I think, the more problematic one. It is true that we infer the existence of an artist from observing works of art. But that is in part because we are familiar with analogous works of art. If, for instance, an ancient Greek were to come to a modern gallery and find there Malevich's Black Square (Figure 3), he would not necessarily infer the existence of a designer. Perhaps he would recognise design in the frame, but not clear whether the square itself would be perceived as a designed object.

It is not clear what to make of VI. Why, that is, all that we infer could not be the best explanation provided by our minds, not reflecting the real existence of any designer?

The claim VII is similarly unclear. Why cannot the laws operate without any agent, any conscious intervention? Presumably we can repeat the question and ask whether there is a designer of laws. That is fair, but that is a different question. Paley makes a stronger claim, that the notion of a law absent a designer is meaningless.

DAWKINS' CRITIQUE: COMPLEXITY. We should acknowledge the force of Paley's arguments: biological complexity cries out for an explanation. It is true that the argument may not be useful for establishing the existence of God. Yet, to dispose of it, you have to provide an *alternative* explanation. 6

Now if it is the complexity of living things that inspires the design argument, then we have to get clearer about the notion of complexity. First idea: complexity is heterogeneity. A complex thing should consist of many parts. That may be so, but it is not a sufficient condition: a mountain has many parts, but its 'complexity' does not cry out for an explanation.

Second idea: the parts of a complex thing are arranged in such a way that any other arrangement would result in a different thing. This is not good either, since any thing is uniquely determined by an assemblage of its parts. 7

Question 1. Ponder this last claim further, taking into account Dawkins' example of Mont Blanc.

Generally, then, any combination of parts of any heterogeneous object is improbable. Yet some improbabilities are *interesting*. Mont Blanc parts can be rearranged, but the output would always be a mountain, a bit higher, a bit lower. At worst, it will be a chunk of matter. There is an obvious contrast between the various ways in which we rearrange Mont Blanc and in which we can rearrange Lassie the dog. We can move very many parts of MB in a pretty arbitrary way, and no interesting result would ensue. That is, as a result we would get just *another* mountain. Of course, not every such rearrangement is uninteresting. If you rearrange MB's parts in the form of a pyramid standing on its top, the resulting 'mountain' would collapse. So even MB is a little interesting: not every rearrangement is physically possible. Nevertheless Lassie is much more interesting: very many ways of rearranging her are incompatible with her survival.



Figure 4: Mont Blanc



Figure 5: Lassie the dog

Dawkins puts this by saying that any complex thing has a property 'specifiable in advance' that is extremely unlikely to be acquired by chance. This is a vague formulation; a traditional way of speaking would be to say that a complex thing has a 'function' or a 'goal' to fulfil. On the other hand, as we saw, a complex thing consists of minute parts. And these parts must all be arranged in such a way as to fit the function, to permit the complex mechanism to fulfil its function. This fit between the parts and the function is the extremely unlikely phenomenon crying out for an explanation. Because of that fit the complex thing as a whole is extremely unlikely to come about by chance.

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Dawkins' answer is that the emergence of the whole mechanism *is* unlikely, but it is made more likely if we allow a long sequence of small steps. This is a key insight of Darwin's view (see also the Atkins quote).

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