

# Candidate 2 evidence

## How successful is William Paley's teleological argument at proving the need for a designer?

"There cannot be design without a designer ... order without choice... purpose without that which could intend a purpose."<sup>1</sup> Said English Anglican Priest and philosopher William Paley in his book 'Natural Theology'. When we observe our universe, we happen to witness much of what Paley mentions here; we witness what appears to be design in the complexity of all life on earth, order in the rotation and orbiting of the planets and individual purpose in the function of all the body parts that keep us alive. So, by following Paley's logic this must mean that there lies a designer behind existence, who has chosen to create an ordered and purposeful universe. Paley holds that without such a designer the universe could not exist as it does. But is this a valid conclusion? In this dissertation I aim to find out if Paley's teleological argument is successful at proving the universe and life have a designer, or if the criticisms of the argument deem him unsuccessful in this.

The teleological argument aims to prove the existence of a god or a designer by appealing to the sheer complexity and purpose of everything within the universe. The word teleological comes from the Greek word telos meaning end or purpose, this argument is also known as the argument from design. Many versions of it have been put forward by different philosophers over the years, but William Paley put forward the most well-known and recognisable version. Despite being an old argument that has been debated for centuries the teleological argument continues to remain relevant. There is currently an increase of atheism in Britain<sup>2</sup> and because of this it is important to keep discussing arguments such as the teleological to make people reevaluate or confirm their stance and see if these arguments can bring to light something they had not considered previously. Furthermore, developments in science mean we have been

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<sup>1</sup> Paley, W. *Natural theology*, 1802, p11, accessed through <[Paley, W. 1809. Natural Theology: or, Evidences of the Existence and Attributes of the Deity. 12th edition London: Printed for J. Faulder.](#)> [30/12/24]

<sup>2</sup> Pepinster, R. *Academics say Britain is entering it is first 'atheist age'*, Religion media centre, 2024 <<https://religionmediacentre.org.uk/news/academics-say-britain-is-entering-it-is-first-atheist-age/>> [01/03/25]

discovering more complexity in our universe as well as studies and theories that might present problems for Paley's teleological argument.

William Paley describes his version of the teleological argument in his book 'Natural Theology' published in 1802<sup>3</sup>. He uses an analogy to put forward his argument asking us to imagine walking on a heath and coming across a stone. Paley argued the existence of a simple stone does not require any further thought or question as to why it is there, and considering the rocks simplicity it would be reasonable to assume that it had existed there forever. But if it were a watch that one had come across, then the same logic could not be applied as the watch's existence requires further thought. Paley held that it would be extremely illogical to say that the watch had just always been there because of its complexity and purpose<sup>4</sup>. Paley also argued that any logical person would reason that this watch was designed by a maker. In his analogy Paley goes on to compare the likeness of the watch and the human eye. Both are very complicated contraptions made up of smaller mechanisms that all work together to contribute to the contraptions overall purpose - the watch's purpose being to keep time and the eye's being to see. Because of these similarities Paley concluded that since the watch was designed the eye must have been designed too. Paley also argued that by extension all life and the universe are like the watch in that they have complexity and purpose, "Every manifestation of design, which existed in the watch, exists in the works of nature."<sup>5</sup> What Paley is saying here is that the traits which we attribute to a designed object can also be found in nature and the universe. Therefore, life and the universe must have been designed like the watch.

Firstly, I will address Paley's claim that the watch and the universe are similar in terms of their complexity. The universe is undeniably complicated but is Paley right to claim this means it was designed? Well although during Paley's life science did not yet have a sound explanation for the complexity of life, shortly after Paley's death, it did. Charles

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<sup>3</sup> Baker, C. *William Paley*, EBSCO, 2022 <[William Paley | EBSCO Research Starters](#)> [03/01/25]

<sup>4</sup> Paley, W. *Natural Theology*, 1802, p1-4, accessed through <<https://darwin-online.org.uk/content/frameset?itemID=A142&viewtype=text&pageseq=1>> [03/01/24]

<sup>5</sup> Paley, W. *Natural Theology*, p17-18 <<https://darwin-online.org.uk/content/frameset?itemID=A142&viewtype=text&pageseq=1>> [03/01/24]

Darwin published his theory of evolution in his book 'On the Origin of Species' in 1859<sup>6</sup>. This book outlined Darwin's theory that life has come to be complicated through natural selection, which is the non-random selection of advantageous traits over disadvantageous traits<sup>7</sup>. Because of this process, over long periods of time, species evolve to be better adapted to survive in their specific environment, as those not fit to survive die out before passing on their traits. So instead of being designed, all that is at play here is 'survival of the fittest' (fittest meaning best suited for their environment not fittest meaning strongest). So, Darwin's theory of evolution shows how life is not complicated in the same way that the watch is. The watch is complicated because it was made that way. Life however becomes more complicate and fit for purpose over time, independently of any designer. I think Darwin's theory of evolution poses big issues for Paley's argument since it explains how life is not actually designed despite it appearing to be. Because of this Paley's argument is less successful at proving life was designed.

However, despite being a widely accepted theory, evolution still receives criticisms. An early criticism of evolution was that Darwin could not explain how parents pass on traits to offspring, but scientists now understand that this is done through genetics. Evolutionary Biologist Richard Dawkins was an important figure who popularised the concept of 'the selfish gene' and wrote many books describing how genes and hereditary works in evolution. In his book 'The Greatest Show on Earth' Richard Dawkins addresses another criticism of evolution, that it is 'just a theory'. Dawkins highlights that the word 'Theory can be understood in two senses. Sense 1 being "a mere hypothesis, speculation, conjecture"<sup>8</sup> or sense 2; "a hypothesis that has been confirmed or established by observation or experiment and is propounded or accepted as accounting for the known facts"<sup>9</sup>. The criticism that evolution is only a theory is used by people who understand evolution as a theory in the first sense, but

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<sup>6</sup> Desmond, A. *Charles Darwin British naturalist*, Britannica, 1999  
<<https://www.britannica.com/biography/Charles-Darwin>> [03/01/24]

<sup>7</sup> Admin-science, *Understanding the Distinctions – Genetic Drift vs. Natural Selection in Evolutionary processes*, 2023 <[Differences between genetic drift and natural selection](#)> [04/01/24]

<sup>8</sup> Dawkins, R. *The Greatest Show on Earth*, Black Swan, 2010, p8

<sup>9</sup> Dawkins, R. *The Greatest Show on Earth*, Black Swan, 2010, p8

this is incorrect. Evolution is a theory in the second sense, so the criticism that evolution is 'just a theory' is obsolete since it is based on a misunderstanding of the word's definition. Evolution has also been criticised for not explaining how life can come from non-life, and this is an issue that has led to many believing an omnipotent designer is still necessary to have started the process of evolution. The Intelligent Design movement supports the idea that a designer (God) is necessary to have started off the process of evolution, so from their perspective evolution does not negate the need for a designer and therefore Paley's argument is still successful. However, the intelligent Design movement has been discredited by biologist Kenneth Miller who disproved the two main pieces of 'evidence' that supported Intelligent Design<sup>10</sup>. Even if this is set aside and one still argues that 'evolution must have been designed' this does not mean Paley's argument is successful. What Paley argues is that complexity can only be created by a Maker who intentionally designs something for a purpose. This is not the same as a designer creating a system that allows complexity to develop. The watch was designed in the former way and that is how Paley was claiming life was designed too. But Darwin's theory demonstrates how this is not the case, meaning Paley's argument is less successful at proving a designer exists, since evolution explains how life can become complicated without a designer.

Although evolution has presented us with an explanation for the complexity of life there is still a lot left unexplained. Namely, the complexity and order of all non-living things. If evolution cannot explain why non-living things are complicated, then is there a need for complex non-living things to have been designed? Many argue that it is impossible for solar systems or galaxies to have occurred randomly when they possess so much complexity and order. British Physicist Paul Davies highlighted this issue in his book *The Goldilocks Enigma*; "how can a truly absurd universe so convincingly mimic a meaningful one?"<sup>11</sup> This is an important question because if our universe can appear ordered when it is not, then there is no need for a designer. But is it possible? Scottish philosopher David Hume explained how it could be in his book "Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion". The character Philo in his book (whose views represent Hume's

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<sup>10</sup> Gold, S. *The case against intelligent Design*, Publisher weekly, 2008 accessed through <<https://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/authors/interviews/article/13773-the-case-against-intelligent-design.html#>> [08/02/25]

<sup>11</sup> Davies, P. *The Goldilocks Enigma*, Penguin Books, 2007, p18

own)<sup>12</sup> explained how if we assume matter is being thrown around by some “blind, unguided force” it will mostly produce random chaos and disorder<sup>13</sup>. However, if this continues ad infinitum eventually the chaos will produce temporary order and regularity and that could be what we happen to be experiencing now - order and complexity born purely out of chaos. This is Hume’s Epicurean Hypothesis<sup>14</sup>, which explains how it is possible for such a complicate universe to have occurred without being designed. However, there are issues with his hypothesis, the main one being that most scientists do not believe that the universe is infinitely old. After Georges Lemaître founded the modern version of the Big Bang Theory which today has been verified and proven, the consensus of scientists is that the universe has existed for 13.7 billion years<sup>15</sup>. This proves problematic for Hume’s counter argument. However, what scientists have not yet proved is whether the universe is spatially infinite. Experts of astronomy still have differing views on the shape and size of the universe. However, scientists have found that; “Measurements taken by satellites have pointed to the universe having a flat geometry. In a flat universe, two light beams shot side by side through space will stay parallel forever and will never cross or drift apart.”<sup>16</sup> This means that most scientists currently agree that the universe has flat geometry, but a ‘flat’ universe could be a finite shape such as a torus (which is doughnut shaped) or it could be like an infinite piece of paper. So, we do not yet know for sure if the universe is spatially infinite. Regardless, the possibility that the universe could be infinite is important because that means Hume’s Epicurean Hypothesis is possible. As a result, Paley’s argument is less successful at proving a designer since there is a chance that an infinite and random universe could produce complexity without being designed. Even if Hume’s hypothesis is wrong, I still think Paley is incorrect in assuming that the universe had to have been designed. Paley’s argument is implying that there would be an observable distinction

<sup>12</sup> Davidović, A. *who speaks for Hume: Humes presence in the dialogues concerning natural religion*, p1 <[Belgrade Philosophical Annual 2021-34.indd](#)> [01/02/25]

<sup>13</sup> Hume, D. *Dialogues concerning natural religion*, 1779, p35 accessed through <<https://www.earlymoderntexts.com/assets/pdfs/hume1779.pdf>> [09/02/25]

<sup>14</sup> Kirkwood, R. Designs on your body, special issue Dialogue philosophy of religion, Dialogue. 2006, p7

<sup>15</sup>Rayne, E. *How do we know the age of the universe?*, Live science, 2022<[How do we know the age of the universe? | Live Science](#)> [13/02/25]

<sup>16</sup> Moore, A. *Is Space infinite? We asked 5 experts*, Swinburne university of technology, 2021 <<https://www.swinburne.edu.au/news/2021/08/is-space-infinite-we-asked-5-experts/>> [15/02/25]

between designed complexity and complexity that is randomly generated, but I do not think this is the case. Consider the following, 2 people are given 50 marbles each. Person 1 makes a pattern by placing each marble on the ground but person 2 must drop them on the ground until they randomly form a pattern. The question is would a third person be able to tell which pattern was generated randomly, and which one was designed<sup>17</sup>. I do not think it would be possible to distinguish between the designed and the undesigned pattern, therefore Paley is wrong to claim that we can prove a designer from observing order in the universe. In summary there is a possibility that our universe came to be complicated and ordered by means which do not involve design and this makes Paley's argument much less successful at proving a designed universe.

Secondly, I will address Paley's claim that since everything is purposeful there must be a designer who created everything with purpose in mind. In his analogy Paley compares the purpose of the watch to the purpose of the eye but I think this is an invalid comparison. The watch has purpose because it was created intentionally for a specific reason, on the other hand, the eye's purpose has developed through natural selection so at no point was there any intention behind it is purpose. Because of evolution there is a crucial difference between the eye and the watch meaning Paley cannot convincingly prove both were designed. As well as this, if Paley thinks purpose is an indication of design, then what is life's purpose? Many philosophers have tried to explain human purpose, including St Thomas Aquinas who believed our purpose in life is to know God's love<sup>18</sup>. Many religious leaders and philosophers would also agree that our purpose in life is tied up with worshiping and devoting our life to a God or Deity. However, I do not think it makes sense for this to be our purpose because there are endless views about which God or Gods we should worship and in what way we should do so. On top of this there is a lot of debate over whether any such God even exists. I think that it is illogical for worshiping God to be our purpose because why would a designer create us with a purpose that we are not aware of? The watch does not need to be aware of it is purpose because it is inanimate but as humans, we cannot

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<sup>17</sup> Kirkwood, R. *Designs on your body*, special issue Dialogue philosophy of religion, Dialogue. 2006, p3

<sup>18</sup> Floyd, S. *Thomas Aquinas: Moral Philosophy*, Internet Encyclopaedia of Philosophy, accessed through <<https://iep.utm.edu/thomasaquinas-moral-philosophy/#~:text=Thus%20he%20says%20that%20human,consists%E2%80%94as%20the%20be%20atific%20vision>> [15/02/25]

fulfil a purpose that we are not aware of and cannot even agree upon. A different view on life's purpose is that we are responsible for the purpose we have in life. Philosopher Jean Paul Sartre held that "Man is nothing else but what he makes of himself." <sup>19</sup> This means that life has no inherent purpose given to us by a god or designer, but our purpose comes from what goals we decide to pursue. 19th-century philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche had a similar stance believing that since "God is dead"<sup>20</sup> we should seek purpose by becoming *Übermensch* which means 'super-man' and in his work he talks a lot about this concept which involves dictating and following your own morals and spending life trying to become whatever we define as a 'super-man'<sup>21</sup>. There is also the possibility that life has no purpose, which is what Nihilists believe. Either way, whether we determine our own purpose or we just do not have one, both ideas make Paley's argument less successful because they contradict the idea that life is purposeful because it was designed that way. So, in summary, since life is not purposeful in the same way the watch is, Paley cannot conclude that it had to have been designed like the watch.

However, the purpose of life could be looked at from a different angle and instead of being something like worship or any other greater purpose, the purpose of the universe might be as simple as to survive after all Dawkins describes all organisms as "survival machines" <sup>22</sup>. Paley might have argued that the purpose of life is to survive, and the purpose of the universe is to support life. If this were the case would Paley's analogy be more convincing? Well, there are still issues with this. I do not think that the fact that the universe can support life suggests that its purpose is to. Especially since

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<sup>19</sup> The Ethics Centre, Big Thinker; Jean-Paul Sartre, 2022 <<https://ethics.org.au/big-thinker-jean-paul-sartre/#:~:text=Sartre%20thought%20this%20was%20essential,what%20he%20makes%20of%20himself.%E2%80%9D>> [15/02/25]

<sup>20</sup> Maden, J, *Übermensch Explained: The Meaning of Nietzsche's 'Superman'*, Philosophy break, 2022 <<https://philosophybreak.com/articles/ubermensch-explained-the-meaning-of-nietzsches-superman/>> [09/02/25]

<sup>21</sup> Maden, J, *Übermensch Explained: The Meaning of Nietzsche's 'Superman'*, Philosophy break, 2022 <<https://philosophybreak.com/articles/ubermensch-explained-the-meaning-of-nietzsches-superman/>> [09/02/25]

<sup>22</sup> The Royal Institution, 'Richard Dawkins – *The selfish Gene explained*', 2014 accessed through <[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j9p2F2oa0\\_k](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j9p2F2oa0_k)>

relative to the size of the universe there is only a very small amount of life, even in just our own galaxy only 1 of 8 planets supports life, so I do not think it is reasonable to argue that the purpose of the whole universe is to support life. Furthermore, most of the universe is non-living so what is the purpose for all the non-living parts of the universe that are not supporting life? Why would a designer include so much extra matter and uninhabitable planets if the purpose of the universe was to support life? Aside from the issues of what the exact purpose of everything is, some argue that Paley is simply wrong in saying that the universe has a purpose at all. Philosopher Immanuel Kant suggested that as humans were wired to see purpose when there is not any and this can lead us to make false assumptions. For example, if one flip's a coin several times and it lands on heads each time, one might falsely assume the next flip will also be heads or on the contrary might believe it is more likely to be tails since it may seem like tails is 'due'. In both scenarios one would be assuming that either head or tails is more likely because we believe we are perceiving a pattern, but this is misleading. The odds are always 50/50. Kant called this the Gamblers fallacy<sup>23</sup> and Paley's argument is guilty of committing it, since as Paley is assuming that the universe and life must have purpose like the watch when it is very possible that this is just not the case. Paley is just seeing patterns of purpose where there is not any. Kant's criticism is also backed up by a study done in the university of Boston on humans' teleological tendency. According to the study our "promiscuous Teleological tendency" is our "tendency to explain all kinds of natural phenomena by reference to a purpose".<sup>24</sup> What this means is that humans have a habit of falsely believing things have a purpose when they in fact do not. Participants in the study were likely to agree that "The sun makes light so that plants can photosynthesize" but this statement is false. The sun does not make light specifically to help plants photosynthesis – it is not the sun's purpose. The study found that "even after completing multiple college level science courses, adults possess scientifically unwarranted teleological explanations of natural phenomena."<sup>25</sup> This means that we are more likely to believe that natural

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<sup>23</sup> <<https://thesiseleven.wordpress.com/philosophy/the-design-argument/kant/>>

<sup>24</sup> Kelemen, D, *The Human Function Compunction: Teleological explanation in adults*, 2009, p138 <[https://www.bu.edu/cdl/files/2013/08/2009\\_KelemenRosset.pdf](https://www.bu.edu/cdl/files/2013/08/2009_KelemenRosset.pdf)> [15/02/25]

<sup>25</sup> Kelemen, D, *The Human Function Compunction: Teleological explanation in adults*, 2009, p141 <[https://www.bu.edu/cdl/files/2013/08/2009\\_KelemenRosset.pdf](https://www.bu.edu/cdl/files/2013/08/2009_KelemenRosset.pdf)> [15/02/25]

processes have a purpose even when they do not, so this bias Kant highlighted is backed up by science. Because of this I think Paley is unsuccessful in proving that the universe was designed because in his argument Paley is unknowingly appealing to our 'teleological tendency' and this leads us to believe that the universe and life have a purpose even though Paley cannot prove this.

Despite these criticisms Paley might defend his argument by using Ockham's razor. Ockham's razor is the term used for the general principle that "when you have two competing theories either explaining or predicting an outcome then the one that is simpler is better."<sup>26</sup> This is also known as the principle of parsimony. Using this logic Paley might claim that explaining order and complexity with a designer makes for a simpler theory than those things randomly occurring in a spatially infinite universe and therefore his theory should be favoured. However, this is not necessarily the correct use of Ockham's razor. The exact translation of what Ockham said is "plurality should not be posited without necessity."<sup>27</sup> What this is taken to mean is that you should not multiply entities unnecessarily. So, when Ockham is recommending we stick to simpler theories, he is referring to theories that do not have excessive explanation with unnecessary additions. For example, claiming the universe has multiple designers would be a where the principle of Ockham's razor would suggest that the universe has a single designer. But the principle cannot be used to recommend a designed universe over an undesigned universe as it is debatable which of these is a simpler explanation. Even if we do accept that a designed universe is simpler, just because Paley's argument supports a simpler theory, this does not mean his argument is successfully proving anything. Because of this I still think Paley's argument is unsuccessful. Furthermore, I think it makes more logical sense for something as complicated as the universe to have had a complicated creation, potentially even one beyond our understanding.

Another criticism of Paley's argument put forward by Hume is that we do not have enough experience to be making claims about how the universe was created.

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<sup>26</sup> Kirkwood, R. *Designs on your body*, special issue Dialogue philosophy of religion, Dialogue. 2006, p8

<sup>27</sup> Duignan, B. *Occam's Razor*, Britannica, 2025 < <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Occams-razor> > [15/02/25]

Consider this “If we see a house, ... we conclude, with the greatest certainty, that it had an architect or builder ... But surely you will not affirm that the universe bears such a resemblance to a house that we can with the same certainty infer a similar cause”.<sup>28</sup> What Hume is saying here is that since we do not have experience of anything even remotely like the universe, we cannot know anything about how it was created. When we see a watch, we only know that it has a designer because we have experience of watches and other man-made objects like it being designed. However, Paley did preempt this criticism by arguing experience is irrelevant; “nor would it, I apprehend, weaken the conclusion that we had never seen a watch made”<sup>29</sup>. But I think that Paley is wrong to make this claim. I think Paley’s counter argument is weak because acknowledging that you do not have experience of something only highlights the fact that you are not in a position to know how it was created. For example, imagine showing an alien (of the same intelligence as a human) something from earth such as a fossil. The alien might reason that since this object has a complicated pattern and has the ‘purpose’ of documenting the history of life on earth it must have been designed as all other complicated and purposeful things that the aliens know of are designed. But this is the wrong conclusion. This scenario demonstrates how experience is necessary for us to understand something and since we lack this experience of the creation of the universe, we cannot make meaningful claims about whether or not a designer was involved. I think Hume’s argument highlights a major flaw in Paley’s argument that makes it less successful at proving the need for a designer.

Another criticism that Hume makes is that Paley has a weak analogy. Hume argues this because the universe is not similar enough to a watch for Paley’s analogy to be valid and is actually much more alike things that are not designed; “If the universe resembles animal bodies and plants more than it does the works of human skill, it is more probable that it is cause resembles the cause of the former ... so it is origin ought

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<sup>28</sup> Hume, D. *Dialogues concerning natural religion*, 1779, p11, accessed through <<https://www.earlymoderntexts.com/assets/pdfs/hume1779.pdf>> [15/02/25]

<sup>29</sup> Paley, W. *Natural Theology*, 1802, p3, accessed through < <https://darwin-online.org.uk/content/frameset?itemID=A142&viewtype=text&pageseq=1>> [15/02/25]

to be ascribed to generation or vegetation rather than to reason or design.”<sup>30</sup> Hume is saying that since the universe is similar to a vegetable or animal, we can conclude that the universe was not designed. Paley is making it easy to claim the universe was designed by comparing it something we know must have been designed, but Hume’s argument flips this analogy to prove the opposite. Paley would certainly disagree with Hume’s conclusion here but since Hume is using the same logic as Paley all this means is that Hume is highlighting how analogical arguments are not effective ways of proving a conclusion and emphasising his previous point that our lack of experience means we are not capable of knowing anything for certain about the universe’s creation.

In conclusion, Paley’s argument falls short in many aspects when trying to prove that the universe is designed. The universe’s complexity, order and purpose do not indicate a designer as these things could all exist in an undesigned universe. The complex life on earth can be explained by evolution, the order of the universe can be explained as coincidental regularity in an infinitely random universe, and any purpose we perceive in the universe or life can be explain by the human tendency to find purpose and meaning where there is none. Furthermore, because Paley uses an analogical argument, any conclusion he came to could never been considered as proof since analogical arguments are inductive and therefore can only result in likely conclusions. So even if Paley had convincingly compared the universe to the watch, his argument still would be unsuccessful as proof for a designer. Overall, I think the criticisms and flaws in Paley’s argument mean that he is unsuccessful in proving that there is a designer.

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<sup>30</sup> Hume, D. *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, 1779, p30 Accessed through <<https://www.earlymoderntexts.com/assets/pdfs/hume1779.pdf>> [15/02/25]

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