

**Summary of William Paley's *Natural Theology* (1802), Chapters I-III**  
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**Introduction.** *Natural Theology*<sup>1</sup> was written during the late 1790s. It was published in the early months of 1802, three years before [Paley](#) died. The first printing of 1,000 copies sold out almost immediately. It was “an enormous success.” Second, third, and fourth editions were published the same year (1802). Fifth and sixth editions were published in 1808. Twelve more editions were published between 1816 and 1822. Charles Darwin reported that he read and was influenced by the book.<sup>2</sup>

**Chapter I. State of the argument.** Paley makes his analogical argument for the existence of a deity. The analogy is implicit until Chapter III, where Paley makes it explicit. The watch is supposed to be analogous to an organism (or perhaps to an organ, such as the human eye or the human heart). Since we would infer the existence of a “maker” in the case of the watch, we should do the same in the case of the organism/organ. Having sketched the argument, Paley states and replies to various objections:

- I. We have never seen a watch made, or known anyone capable of making one; nor are we able to make one ourselves, or understand how it is done.
- II. The watch sometimes goes wrong (or seldom goes exactly right).
- III. The watch has parts the functions of which are unknown (or which may not have functions).
- IV. The watch is “one out of possible combinations of material forms.” This objection is obscure.
- V. A principle of order “disposed the parts of the watch into their present form and situation.”
- VI. The watch is proof not of contrivance but “only a motive to induce the mind to think so.” This objection is obscure.
- VII. The watch is the result of the laws of metallic nature.
- VIII. Nothing is known about the matter.

**Chapter II. State of the argument continued.** The watch now produces “another watch like

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<sup>1</sup> Full title: *Natural Theology: Or, Evidences of the Existence and Attributes of the Deity, Collected from the Appearances of Nature.*

<sup>2</sup> “In order to pass the BA examination, it was, also, necessary to get up Paley’s *Evidences of Christianity*, and his *Moral Philosophy*. This was done in a thorough manner, and I am convinced that I could have written out the whole of the *Evidences* with perfect correctness, but not of course in the clear language of Paley. The logic of this book and, as I may add, of his *Natural Theology* gave me as much delight as did Euclid. The careful study of these works, without attempting to learn any part by rote, was the only part of the Academical Course which, as I then felt and as I still believe, was of the least use to me in the education of my mind” (Charles Darwin, *Autobiography*).

itself.” What effect would this development have on our thinking?

- I. It would increase our admiration of the contrivance, and therefore of the skill of the contriver. If we infer a maker from the first watch, then *a fortiori* we should infer a maker from the second watch.
- II. Though the first watch made the second watch in some sense, it did not make it in a second sense. Paley discusses the stream of water, the mill, and the ground corn. Someone made the mill, which causes the water to grind the corn.
- III. (Paley calls his argument the “argument from design.” Discuss the question-begging nature of this name.) “Arrangement, disposition of parts, subserviency of means to an end, relation of instruments to an use, imply the presence of intelligence and mind.”
- IV. There cannot be an infinite regress of causes, for contrivance would be “still unaccounted for.” An infinite chain can no more support itself than a finite chain. (Is this a version of the cosmological argument?)
- V. The maker of the first watch is also the maker of the second; the second is made through the instrumentality of the first. It is as though one made a machine to make machines.

**Chapter III. Application of the argument.** Paley completes the analogy: “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 which exceeds all computation.”