

Mark Nelson, "Paley before Hume: How Not to Understand the Design Argument"

Many philosophy of religion courses discuss the classic design argument for the existence of God, and many of these treat Paley's *Natural Theology* (1802) before Hume's *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* (1779). I myself did this for many years because the readings by Paley came before the readings by Hume in the reputable and widely used anthologies I assigned for those classes.ⁱ That order made apparent dialectical sense, too: everyone knows that Hume is an important critic of the design argument, so no explanation is needed for assigning his *Dialogues*. But we don't criticize an idea until after the idea has been presented, and who has presented the best-known version of the design argument in modern philosophy? William Paley, of course, with his celebrated watchmaker analogy! So, it makes sense: read Paley for the design argument, then read Hume for criticisms of the design argument. (Perhaps this was the rationale behind the order of those readings in those anthologies.)

I now think that is a serious mistake, as it distorts our understanding of both arguments by creating the impression that Hume was responding to Paley. Not only is it obvious on chronological grounds that Hume was not responding to Paley; it is obvious on textual grounds that the reverse was true: Paley was in fact responding to Hume, and, carefully crafted his version of the design argument to avoid most of Hume's earlier criticisms of a different design argument.

Hume has Cleanthes present an explicitly analogical version of the design argument:

1. Like (i.e., proportional) effects have like (proportional) causes.
2. The whole world is like a machine, only vastly greater.
3. The cause of the design in a machine is a human mind.
Therefore,
4. The cause of the design in the whole world is like a human mind, only vastly greater.

And, famously, he has Philo criticize it with this dilemma: either the analogy between world and machine is a weak one, in which case the inference does not go through; or the analogy between world and machine is strong enough for the inference to go through, in which case the argument's conclusion leads to a theologically unacceptable anthropomorphism. Hume also has Philo argue that Cleanthes' claim about the whole world in (2) is indefensible, as no one has empirical experience of the world as a whole.

I argue, however, that Paley's design argument is not a classic analogical argument, and it makes no claims about the world as a whole, but that these important features are easily missed if we assume that Hume was replying to Paley.

ⁱ For example: J. Feinberg & R. Shafer-Landau, *Reason and Responsibility: Readings in Some Basic Problems of Philosophy* 16th edition (Wadsworth, 2016) and L. Pojman & M. Rea, *Philosophy of Religion: An Anthology* 7th edition (Wadsworth, 2014).