

Metaphysics // Fall 2025

Handout 1

Design and life: Paley, Atkins

PALEY'S ARGUMENT. Suppose I find a stone on a plain (Figure 1). It is not trivial to ask why *this* particular stone happened to be there. But it *is* a trivial question why *a* stone, any stone happened to be there: what else do you expect to find, a Rolex watch? Well, indeed, suppose 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: Rolex watch

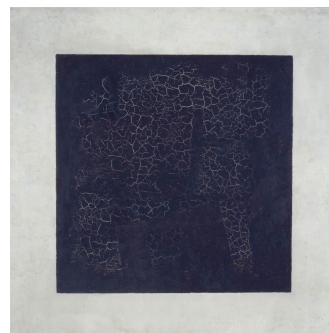


Figure 3: Black Square

Paley then answers a few immediate objections. Several are of considerable interest:

II: Paley says that imperfections of the watch do not prove that there was no designer. 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.

I, III: Paley says that ignorance of the watch production or of the purposes of various parts should not prevent us from thinking that the watch was designed. This claim will, in effect, be challenged by White.

I: This remark is also problematic. 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.

VI: Not clear what to make of it. 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?

VII: This is similarly unclear. Why can't 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 it is a different question. Paley makes a stronger claim, that the notion of a law absent a designer is meaningless. That *is* interesting. We have been familiar with laws from a political or religious context, long before they began talking of 'laws' in the context of natural science. In those contexts, there's always a lawmaker. So why do physical/natural laws have no lawmaker of their own? Laws without a lawmaker, governing alone the world through necessity—this is just too spooky!

COMPLEXITY OUT OF SIMPLICITY. But Atkins disagrees. The amazing complexity that prompts the Design argument in the first place is an inescapable product of a chemical (not even biological) evolution. Elephants and molecules are equally ‘unimportant’. With enough time on his hands, the designer should only come up with an array of fighting, cannibalising molecules, perhaps even much less than that. Everything is made up from the same stuff, and there is no *surprising* complexity anywhere. 5
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But why (as opposed to ‘how’) does change happen? Well, through a chemical reaction. All goings on tend toward decay—that is, higher entropy. Yet the chance is small that enough energy will enable the molecules to wander (or rather, their constituent atoms to get loose). Slightly paradoxically, then, the fundamental condition of decay may also be accompanied by a chancy order. 29

More complex phenomena, in other words, are born out of simplest phenomena through chaotic energy dispersal. The putative designer has no role to play in organising the amazing world.

Example 1. Explore the case of visual perception in page 33.

YSB