

The Principles of  
Moral and  
Political  
Philosophy

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William Paley

FOREWORD BY  
D. L. Le MAHIEU



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## Foreword

WILLIAM PALEY'S *Principles of Moral and Political Philosophy*, first published in 1785, played a seminal role in the dissemination of utilitarianism in England. Adopted as an integral part of the curriculum at Cambridge University, the *Principles* helped shape the political thinking of England's intellectual elite well into the nineteenth century. "It has laid the foundation of the Moral Philosophy of many hundreds—probably thousands—of Youth while under a course of training designed to qualify them for being afterwards the Moral instructors of Millions," Archbishop Whately wrote in 1859; "such a work therefore cannot fail to exercise a very considerable and extensive influence on the Minds of successive generations." As late as 1933, John Maynard Keynes called Paley's *Principles* "an immortal book."<sup>1</sup>

Paley's political philosophy remains difficult to classify, especially by modern standards. His theological utilitarianism helped buttress the formation of classical liberalism, the most important political ideology to emerge from the Enlightenment. Yet his *Principles* also contains passages that mesh comfortably with traditional eighteenth-century aristocratic paternalism, a philosophy

1. Richard Whately, ed., *Paley's Moral Philosophy: With Annotations* (London, 1859), iii; John Maynard Keynes, *Essays in Biography* (London: Macmillan, 1933), 108n. On Paley's influence at Cambridge, see Martha McMackin Garland, *Cambridge Before Darwin: The Ideal of a Liberal Education, 1800–1860* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 52–69; and Peter Searby, *A History of the University of Cambridge*, vol. 3, 1750–1870 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 295–313. Paley was much less influential at Oxford. See M. G. Brock and M. C. Curthoys, eds., *The History of the University of Oxford*, vol. 6, *Nineteenth Century Oxford, Part I* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1997), 210.

frequently antagonistic to liberalism. Then too, despite his published opposition to the French Revolution, some considered Paley sympathetic to radicalism, a charge that may have affected his clerical advancement. Paley vivified the gross inequalities of the distribution of property; he condemned the slave trade; he proposed a graduated income tax that appealed to Tom Paine. In 1802, the *Anti-Jacobin Review* noted that from Paley “the most determined Jacobin might find a justification of his principles, and a sanction for his conduct.”<sup>2</sup> Though radicals during the 1790s never claimed Paley as an ally, his iconoclasm remained appealing to many commentators. Paley wrote during a transitional era of rapidly evolving civic discourse when traditional political labels proved inadequate and emerging ideological designations had yet to be fully formed.<sup>3</sup>

Paley’s *Principles* might best be placed within the context of his life and writings. William Paley was born in Peterborough in 1743, the son of a vicar who two years later became the headmaster of Giggleswick in Yorkshire. At sixteen, Paley entered Christ’s College, Cambridge, where he distinguished himself as a student, graduating as Senior Wrangler in 1763. Three years later, he was elected to a fellowship at Christ’s, where he lectured on metaphysics, moral philosophy, and the Greek Testament. It was from these lectures that Paley rapidly gained the reputation as one of Cambridge’s most engaging teachers. He often challenged the complacent assumptions of his undergraduates, himself advocating a position so extreme that his students were forced to clarify their own opinions in relation to it. Paley’s classroom notes, now preserved in the British Library, reveal that he based an enormous

2. Quoted in A. M. C. Waterman, “A Cambridge ‘Via Media’ in Late Georgian Anglicanism,” *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, 42, no. 3 (1991): 423.

3. James J. Sack, *From Jacobite to Conservative: Reaction and Orthodoxy in Britain, c. 1760–1832* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 3–4.

amount of his later philosophy on his Cambridge teaching. As in his lectures, the *Principles* began with general observations on ethics, then proceeded directly into considerations of particular obligations such as the responsibilities of marriage, the nature of contracts, and the evils of fornication and drunkenness. Paley's great strengths as a writer—clear organization, lucid prose, striking examples—evolved from his years as an instructor of undergraduates.<sup>4</sup>

At Cambridge, Paley associated himself with Latitudinarians that included John Law, Richard Watson, and John Jebb. Law became Paley's closest friend and a valuable contact for Paley's career in the church. Watson rose to a minor bishopric, but was blocked from further advancement within the church by his outspoken views. Jebb eventually advocated politically radical views that Paley disavowed, though not at the cost of their friendship. This group shared a number of beliefs at Cambridge: they advocated a natural religion grounded upon the argument from design for the existence of God; they accepted a theologically informed utilitarian definition of virtue; and they endorsed an open and tolerant marketplace of ideas. As reformers, they also frequently disagreed among themselves. At one point on a particularly contentious issue, Paley noted flippantly that he “could not afford to keep a conscience,” a remark that would haunt his reputation.<sup>5</sup>

4. D. L. Le Mahieu, *The Mind of William Paley: A Philosopher and His Age* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1976), esp. chapter one. My analysis of Paley draws upon this earlier work. For Paley's life, see also M. L. Clarke, *Paley: Evidences for the Man* (London: SPCK, 1974).

5. Le Mahieu, 10–19. Paley's remark can be found in George Wilson Meadley, *Memoirs of William Paley, D.D.*, 2nd ed. (Edinburgh: A. Constable, 1810), 89. For Cambridge during this period, see John Gascoigne, *Cambridge in the Age of Enlightenment: Science, Religion, and Politics from the Restoration to the French Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), esp. 126–34, 195–211, 236–47.

Paley left Cambridge in 1776 and married Jane Hewitt, who would bear him eight children. He spent the remainder of his life as a clergyman, first in Appleby and Dalston for six years; then in Carlisle from 1782 to 1795 where he became archdeacon; finally in Durham and Lincoln from 1795 until his death in 1805. Like other eighteenth-century divines, he derived his income from a number of livings. Although he never experienced the poverty of some lesser clergy, he attained genuine affluence only when he was translated to the lucrative rectorship of Bishop-Wearmouth in 1795. The daily routine of his existence varied little after Cambridge. He discharged his clerical duties conscientiously; he involved himself in the domestic chores of raising a family; he devoted himself to his writings. In 1790, five years after the *Principles*, he published his most original study, *Horae Paulinae*, an exegesis of certain “undesigned coincidences” in the Acts and letters of Paul. In 1794, he completed his analysis of revealed religion with the *Evidences of Christianity*, a masterful example of Christian apologetics that earned him a variety of honors, including a Doctorate of Divinity from Cambridge. The *Evidences* also became part of the Cambridge curriculum and retained its defenders through the nineteenth century. In 1802, he published his *Natural Theology*, the cornerstone of his philosophic thought. The “following discussion alone was wanted to make up my works into a system,” he wrote in the preface. “The public now have before them the evidences of Natural Religion, the evidences of Revealed Religion, and an account of the duties that result from both.”<sup>6</sup>

Within the context of his life and thought, then, the *Principles* eventually became part of a coherent philosophic system that Paley synthesized from the Enlightenment in England and bequeathed

6. William Paley, *The Works of William Paley, D.D.*, vol. 5, *Natural Theology*, ed. Edmund Paley (London, 1825), xix.

as undergraduate texts to the nineteenth century. As part of this system, Paley's ethics and politics, like his biblical criticism, were intimately related to his natural theology. The logical problems and underlying assumptions of the teleological argument for the existence of God provided a conceptual framework which Paley used with systematic thoroughness when he confronted the difficult task of building a system of ethics. The link between morals and theology, like that between natural and revealed religion, lay in a series of interconnecting analogies; it was from his observations of *telos* in natural phenomena—the adaptation of means to ends for beneficent purposes—that he derived his notion of utility and the conviction that God willed human happiness.

Like many Enlightenment moralists, Paley asserted that ethical statements reflected the emotional and intellectual proclivities of the moral agent. Deriving his notion of the good from Locke's epistemology, Paley argued that man's basic instinct was to seek pleasure and to avoid pain. As a Christian, he disassociated himself from vulgar notions of hedonism, providing a variety of reasons why happiness did not consist in sensual pleasures. More positively, he offered a specific definition of happiness, whose cardinal tenet emphasized "engagement," a notion that curiously prefigured Christian existentialism. To Paley, happiness consisted in living by a standard that was self-imposed and self-realized. It was self-imposed because the choice of activity remained radically individual. Unlike the phenomena of nature, which God created with a specific purpose, each person chose their own purpose in life, their final cause. Yet, as in nature where God adapted the various mechanisms of the eye for the purpose of seeing, each person must individually adapt themselves to their chosen end. Christianity, through its promise of an afterlife, offered an incentive to meaningful engagement matched by no other activity. The eternal bliss guaranteed to the faithful provided the best hope of continued

pleasure after death. The notion of Christian engagement thereby dovetailed conveniently into Paley's general theory of value.

Paley defined moral virtue as "the doing good to mankind, in obedience to the will of God, and for the sake of everlasting happiness." In a single stroke, he thus encompassed the subject, rule, and motive of the moral life. To Paley, the undeniable demands of self-interest coincided rather than conflicted with the needs of society: one unselfishly contributed to the common good for the selfish purpose of achieving the pleasures of heaven and avoiding the pains of hell. For this reason, he has been called a theological utilitarian. Although he admitted that a future life remained strictly an article of faith, it provided his ethics with a powerful moral sanction. Secular utilitarians would dismiss the Christian motive for moral behavior, but found that the reconstruction of ethics without traditional sanctions was difficult to execute.

To Paley, as to thinkers before him, God's will could be found either in Scripture or nature, either in revealed or natural religion. In nature the purpose of each contrivance was not to harm a creature, and since God created all things, it followed that the Deity was benevolent. The argument's major premise encompassed a negative; that is, Paley demonstrated that evil was not the purpose of the contrivance. But behind the negative lay a positive assertion that constituted the thrust of the discussion; the adaptation of means to ends in all natural phenomena promoted the happiness of the creature. By analogy, Paley concluded that it was the utility of any moral rule alone which determined obligation, and he compressed this moral rule into a simple epigram: "Whatever is expedient, is right." Unfortunately, this notion of expediency would be misunderstood, even by his sympathetic readers. Of course "expedient" could mean "convenient" or "politic" as opposed to "just" or "right." For Paley, however, the controversial term was intended to convey moral suitability that was appropri-

ately adjusted to specific goals, not unlike the relationship between means and ends in nature's contrivances. Once again, God's designs set the standard for moral deliberation.

The sources of Paley's theological utilitarianism have generally been traced to ethicists such as John Gay, Daniel Waterland, and Abraham Tucker. Although Paley's knowledge of Waterland remains conjectural, he certainly read Gay, whose short treatise on ethics appeared in 1731 as a preface to a work edited by Edmund Law, Paley's early patron and the father of his closest friend. Paley followed Gay in his definition of virtue, his psychological egoism, and in a number of minor points, though Paley tended to be less deterministic than the more mechanistic Gay. Gay's brief essay influenced both David Hartley, popular among early Romantics, and Abraham Tucker, who under the pseudonym Edmund Search, published his massive *The Light of Nature Pursued* between 1768 and 1778. Paley commends the work in his preface, but his debt proved less comprehensive than sometimes assumed. To be sure, Paley followed the general prescriptions of Tucker's theological utilitarianism, but the vast mass of Tucker's ponderous work finds no parallel in the *Principles*. In fact, on specific points, Paley borrowed heavily from the Cambridge divine Thomas Rutherforth who, because of a private feud, he never acknowledged.<sup>7</sup>

The theological utilitarians rejected the notion of a moral sense, arguing with Locke that nothing could be innate to the mind. Yet moral sense ethicists such as Shaftesbury, Hutcheson, and Adam Smith also drew upon the teleological categories of natural religion for their analysis. Natural religion provided the moral sense school with an ethical standard and a methodology that guided their reasoning. Though substantial and intractable differences separated the moral sense school from theological

7. Le Mahieu, 123–24.

utilitarians, both sought in ethics what they detected in God's creation. In an era noted for satire and bitter polemic, moralists argued their differences with mutual respect precisely because they operated within a shared intellectual framework. Paley distilled fundamental elements of this consensus into his moral and political thought.<sup>8</sup>

Yet, as Paley himself asserted, he was more than a "mere compiler." He devoted the largest portion of his *Principles* to an extended analysis of individuals' specific rights and their duties to themselves, their society, and to God. This discussion, which consumes almost half the book, contains the bulk of his practical advice on such topics as business contracts, probate, legal oaths, and the duties of prayer. It also includes one of the most famous and original passages in all of Paley's works. The pigeon analogy demonstrated that Paley was painfully aware of the human exploitation that accompanied the institution of private property. Ninety-nine toiled relentlessly for the benefit of one, often a "madman" or a "fool." Wrenched from context, the analogy was perhaps the most radical declaration against property in the Enlightenment, though its explicit anti-aristocratic bias was not without parallel in Paley's ethical thought. He often emphasized virtues that could be practiced by rich and poor alike. His definition of happiness embodied strong elements of egalitarianism and reflected the New Testament's prejudice against wealth and privilege. Indeed, Paley saved some of his most scathing indictments for the idle preoccupations of the leisure class.

Yet Paley never sought to challenge landed wealth or to reform radically the institution of private property. A cautious though not always predictable realist, he valued social order. Immediately following the analogy, he endorsed the standard justifications for

8. *Ibid.*, 124–30.



private property and sanctioned philosophically the moral right of unlimited possessive individualism. He also justified the institution of property on the basis of its expediency for society. Property increased productivity and eliminated civil struggles over ownership. Despite its inequities, it contributed to social well-being. Unlike some apologists, Paley acknowledged the affective force of radical criticism and turned it to his own use. The parable of the pigeons, striking in its stark perception of human depravity, served as a rhetorical device to initiate a dialectical argument with his readers, much as he had done with his students at Cambridge.

He was less paradoxical when it came to charity. To Paley, individuals labored under a strong obligation to relieve the distress of the poor, since all land was once held in common, the private possession of no single person or state. Though eschewing the primitive communism of the early Christians, he also rejected the customary excuses why wealthy citizens refused to help the poor. Charity promoted their happiness and served the larger designs of God. Like earlier natural theologians such as John Ray and William Derham, Paley related the emotion of pity to the unfathomable wisdom of a great Creator. God created within human nature feelings of empathy intended to ease suffering. Though in the *Natural Theology* Paley accepted a more Malthusian approach concerning the dispossessed, both the *Principles* and his sermons emphasized the traditional Christian obligations toward the poor.<sup>9</sup>

Like other Enlightenment theorists, Paley initiated his analysis of politics by discussing the origins of political society. Once establish the rationale of political groupings, it was reasoned, and the rights and duties of both the citizen and the government would

9. On Paley and the poor, see Thomas A. Horne, "The Poor Have a Claim Founded in the Law of Nature": William Paley and the Rights of the Poor," *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, 23, no. 1 (1985): 51–70.

follow, like postulates from a theorem. This preoccupation with origins, which never pretended to be historical, had its counterpart in ethics where, as in Locke, moral problems were grounded in epistemology, ethics thereby becoming rooted in human psychology. The central precepts of the utilitarians liberated them from the awkward fiction of the social contract that, by the late eighteenth century, had sustained damaging criticism. Paley rejected the social contract for two reasons: He questioned its historical reliability, arguing that only in America had there been anything resembling a gathering of free individuals to plan a future government. More important, he repudiated the notion that political obligations passed from one generation to another without the knowledge or consent of the governed. As a theologian whose writings often implicitly challenged Original Sin, Paley mistrusted legal fictions. If, as Locke suggested, humans were born a *tabula rasa*, they could not be bound by ahistorical obligations.

In place of a social contract, Paley traced the origin of government to the gradual extension of the family unit into a protective military organization. He argued that the first governments were probably monarchies, though he stressed that this development carried with it no current rights or obligations. His natural history of civil society thus resembled those in vogue among Scottish philosophers, and forecast in embryonic form the anthropological studies of the late nineteenth century. Paley approached the issue of political obligation by analyzing how, in fact, governments controlled their citizens. Since the physical strength of any nation resided in the governed, the question became why major revolutions were not more frequent and minor revolts more violent. Writing four years before the French Revolution, Paley considered a number of possibilities, including the notion that the governed obeyed from prejudice and prescription. If, to Edmund Burke, the

notion of prescription embodied almost mystic overtones, Paley described it simply as the habit of obedience, reinforced by self-interest and rational calculation. He opposed such developments as the formation of “combinations” or trade unions, because he knew that, when organized, the general population might discover its own considerable strength. For all his authentic concerns for the poor, Paley still regarded them as politically unpredictable and potentially dangerous.

For Paley, the moral basis of political obligation resided in the same standard that animated his ethics, “the Will of God as Collected from Expediency.” Just as in nature where each part of a contrivance contributed to the efficient functioning of the whole, so in politics individuals needed to fit their own abilities to the happiness of the larger society. Conversely, a government remained legitimate only as long as it served effectively its constituents and therefore, as in Locke, the right of resistance became critical. To Paley such a right could be determined by careful calculation. He listed the factors to be evaluated, arguing that the larger social interest bound its individual parts. As in his analysis of evil in his *Natural Theology*, no exception disproved a general rule. Just as teeth were not contrived to ache, so also political subjects were not intended to revolt—even though occasionally teeth ached and subjects revolted. The rebellion in America, sympathetically assessed by Burke, stirred uneasy feelings in Paley, who found it difficult to comprehend the intense passions of political movements. He argued that discontented groups ought to act like rational individuals.

Like Paine, Paley recognized that the British constitution consisted of precedents fabricated by individuals and thereby subject to periodic revision. As a human artifact constructed over time, it nevertheless resembled nature in its concern for the happiness of its subjects. Paley endorsed the conventional notion found

in Montesquieu and others that the British constitution was a network of checks and balances. Each component served its own purpose while contributing to the functioning of the whole. To such trusted themes, Paley added a discussion of crown patronage as an integral element of the balanced constitution. Paley claimed that without an extensive system of patronage the king would eventually relinquish his political leverage over the House of Commons. The *Principles* was published only four years after the famous Dunning resolution which challenged the increasing power of the monarchy and only three years after the movement for economical reform eliminated the more egregious governmental sinecures. Though Paley refused to defend all forms of patronage, he recognized that the future lay with the House of Commons, not the monarchy.

Yet Paley opposed immediate electoral reform in part because he feared its unintended consequences. Ever since the protracted controversy over John Wilkes, reformers sought some alteration of the franchise. Although the younger Pitt, a Tory, introduced reform bills in the 1780s, it would be almost fifty years before the Reform Bill of 1832 extended the vote. Paley believed that Parliament should represent only the landed and moneyed interests of society. He rejected the notion that individuals possessed a natural right to vote, adding in a footnote that if such a right existed, women should vote as well. Though he defended the buying of seats as an effective means of introducing talent into the legislature, he condemned electoral bribery. Above all, he feared that comprehensive reform might lead unintentionally to mob rule. A balanced constitution could not survive the transference of power to those who lacked a stake in the system. This fear of democracy molded his opposition to the French Revolution, during which he republished his chapter on the British constitution as a separate pamphlet to be distributed among the poor. Paley's antagonism to the