

Paley's Principle: What Do Sceptics of Testimony Owe?

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Abstract: William Paley objects to David Hume's rejection of miracle testimony, and especially Hume's seeming conviction that, as Paley puts it, "we are not obliged to explain how the story of the evidence arose" when confronted with testimonial evidence for claims that we reject as incredible. Paley holds that it is in some sense insufficient to dismiss miracle testimony merely with the claim that it must, somehow or other, be mistaken. Rather, we are obliged to explain how the testimony came to be uttered in spite of its falsity, when rejecting testimonial premises. I call this methodological scruple Paley's Principle. Following some initial clarifications, I explore various possible strengths and scopes of its claimed obligation, in order to determine whether a plausible version can be recovered. It is neither a logical norm nor a purely prudential principle. But relative to some socio-epistemic aims of argumentation, Paley's Principle expresses a reasonable norm, though perhaps not in quite the way Paley intended it.

Résumé: William Paley conteste le rejet par David Hume des témoignages miraculeux, et en particulier la conviction apparente de Hume selon laquelle, comme l'affirme Paley, « nous ne sommes pas tenus d'expliquer l'origine du récit du témoignage » face à des preuves testimoniales étayant des affirmations que nous jugeons incroyables. Paley soutient qu'il est, d'une certaine manière, insuffisant de rejeter un témoignage miraculeux en se contentant d'affirmer qu'il est forcément erroné. Nous sommes tenus d'expliquer comment ce témoignage a pu être donné malgré sa fausseté, lorsque nous rejetons les prémisses testimoniales. Je nomme ce scrupule méthodologique le Principe de Paley. Après quelques clarifications préliminaires, j'explore les différentes portées et forces possibles de cette obligation revendiquée, afin de déterminer si une version plausible peut être dégagée. Il ne s'agit ni d'une norme logique ni d'un principe purement prudentiel. Mais, au regard de certains objectifs socio-épistémiques de l'argumentation, le Principe de Paley exprime une norme raisonnable, même si ce n'est peut-être pas exactement dans le sens que Paley lui donnait.

Keywords: argumentation, Hume, Paley, scepticism, testimony

William Paley objects to David Hume's quite sweeping rejection of testimony that alleges the occurrence of miracles. He is especially vexed by Hume's seeming conviction that, as Paley puts it, "we are not obliged to explain how the story of the evidence arose" when confronted with testimonial evidence for claims that we reject as incredible. Paley holds that it is rationally, or perhaps dialectically, insufficient to dismiss miracle testimony merely with the claim that it must, *somehow or other*, be mistaken.

The existence of the testimony is a phenomenon; the truth of the fact solves the phenomenon. If we reject this solution, we ought to have some other to rest in; and none, even by our adversaries, can be admired, which is not inconsistent with the principles that regulate human affairs and human conduct at present, or which makes men then to have been a different kind of beings from what they are now (Paley 1851, pp. 19).

On Paley's view, when we reject testimonial evidence "we *are* obliged, not, perhaps, to show by positive accounts how it did, but by a probable hypothesis how it might so happen" that the testimony came to be uttered in spite of its falsity (1851, pp. 18-19).

We might call this methodological scruple *Paley's Principle*. Clearly it is normative; Paley twice alludes to an *obligation*. But is this a logical principle? A prudential one? A matter of etiquette? In the following brief remarks, I hope to shed some light on the sort of norm that Paley's Principle expresses, and to provide a few tools to help us consider whether, when, and why an argumentation norm concerning alternative explanations for testimony might be viewed as plausible.

I begin by noting what Paley's Principle is not. First, it is not itself a direct defense of the trustworthiness of miracle testimony. When Paley goes on to provide such a defense, he specifically distinguishes it from the principle just outlined.

If twelve men, whose probity and good sense I had long known, should seriously and circumstantially relate to me an account of a miracle wrought before their eyes, and in which it was impossible that they should be deceived: if the governor of the country... [required them] either to confess the imposture, or submit to be tied up to a gibbet; if they should refuse [both jointly and individually]

to acknowledge that there existed any falsehood; ...if I myself saw them, one after another, consenting to be racked, burnt, or strangled, rather than give up the truth of their account; still if Mr. Hume's rule be my guide, I am not to believe them. Now I undertake to say that there exists not a sceptic in the world who would not believe them, or who would defend such incredulity (1851, p. 19).

Paley describes *this* reasoning as convincing him “independently of any other” that Hume is mistaken. By contrast, his proposed obligation for the sceptic is a condition on argumentation that aims to raise the bar for rejecting miracle testimony. While Paley thinks that miracle testimony can be rationally compelling, the obligation to provide an alternative explanation would apply, including in the hypothetical case he proposes, even were the testimony not rationally compelling. If no cases of miracle testimony ever ultimately deemed credible, Paley's Principle would still require the sceptic to explain the fact that they exist.

Paley's Principle differs also from more general views of the default reliability of testimony. The position that testimony is trustworthy by default, other things being equal, is defended by authors ranging from Paley's contemporary Thomas Reid (1764) to many contemporary social epistemologists. This *antireductionism*, as it is typically known, is expressed in terms of a default acceptance principle or a presumptive right according to which audiences are entitled to accept testimony at the point of encountering it, merely on the grounds that it has been asserted, unless there is some stronger reason not to accept it (Fricker 1994; Burge 1993) .

On its face, though, this sort of default entitlement thesis is perfectly consistent with the thought that *some* types of testimony and epistemic contexts presumptively activate defeater worries (the “unless...” clause), without the need for case-specific explanation. Antireductionist Matthew Weiner makes this explicit, observing that the default status of testimony as warranting acceptance is overturned if “there is something fishy about the testimony,” which can happen either if “we have specific evidence against its trustworthiness, or *general experience tells us that this sort of testimony is not reliable*” – in which case the testimony no longer merits ac-

ceptance in its own right, and “we need positive evidence before we are justified in believing what we are told” (2003, p. 264, italics added).¹ In other words, an antireductionist can reject the presumption of warrant for some piece of testimony the instant they realize it is shaping up to be the claim that ancient aliens built the pyramids, that the Earth is flat, that climate change is a hoax – or, Hume would say, that a divine miracle has occurred. Antireductionism itself is silent with respect to why the testimony was produced, in such a case, whereas Paley's Principle requires us to provide an alternative explanation for the fact that the piece of testimony in question was given in spite of its falsity. Thus, Paley's Principle is not just antireductionism.

The degree of specificity of Paley's required alternative explanation is significant. Consider that Hume, in the passages to which Paley is responding, does provide ‘probable hypotheses,’ of a kind, for the existence of miracle testimony that he rejects. In *Of Miracles*, Hume argues among other things that pleasant feelings of novelty and excitement attaching to an exotic claim may induce belief; that a lie or exaggeration may strike even a speaker of general integrity as defensible if it promotes a “holy cause”; that, even without intending to lie, one might be especially subject to the distortive influences of vanity and self-interest in one's testimony; that “passion and a heated imagination” might overwhelm the better judgement of those who circulate such testimony; and that the pleasures of telling a striking story may incentivize its spread (1975, pp. 116-123). It doesn't much matter whether these are the best or most carefully developed explanations anyone today could give for the existence and spread of false miracle testimony. What matters is that they are empirical alternatives offered at some length by Hume to account for testimony of omens, oracles, and “the marvellous.” It is clearly due to their familiarity with such explanations that “the wise and learned are contented, in general, to deride its absurdity, without informing themselves of the particular facts, by

¹ This is practically of a piece with Hume's own remarks about the default diminished reliability of testimony that “partakes of the extraordinary and the marvellous.”

which it may be distinctly refuted” (p. 120). Paley’s Principle is presented in response to this reasoning, however, indicating that Paley does not consider the candidates proposed by Hume to count as sufficient explanations, and that he requires of the sceptic a ‘probable hypothesis’ much more specific to the actual cases of the testimony that’s been offered. This specificity doesn’t just raise the bar for rejecting miracle testimony; it makes Paley’s Principle a double-edged sword for practices of argumentation, a point to which I will return.

The idea that testimony to the miraculous or truly extraordinary can be rejected on quite general grounds continues to be defended in the philosophical literature. Sometimes it is explicitly presented as a Humean view (Blackburn 1999, pp. 179) and sometimes not (Law 2011, p. 133). Yet Paley’s Principle too has inspired contemporary defense. C.A.J. Coady cites Paley approvingly on this very point, writing that “[w]hen an investigator decides to dismiss testimony to the unusual there is some onus upon him to explain how the false or misleading testimony came about” (1992, pp. 196-7).

Nor does this methodological impulse date back only to Paley. The ancient biographer Plutarch writes that Coriolanus’ mother and her friends faced down an army besieging Rome. He goes on to relate the story of a miracle that was said to follow, when a temple and statue were built in their honour.

The senate... caused the temple to be built and a statue set up in it... which the Romans say uttered, as it was being put up, words to this effect, “Blessed of the gods, O women, is your gift.”

These words, they profess, were repeated a second time, expecting our belief of what seems pretty nearly an impossibility. But where history seems in a manner to force our assent by the concurrence of numerous and credible witnesses, we are to conclude that an impression distinct from sensation affects the imaginative part of our nature, and then carries away the judgment, so as to believe it to be a sensation; just as in sleep we fancy we see and hear, without really doing either (pp. 288-9).

Clearly Plutarch does not believe the miracle narrative he reports; but he offers at least a candidate explanation for the apparent fact

that “numerous and credible witnesses” told the story. The explanation is an attempt to reconcile two things: the testimony of speakers not otherwise notable for their unreliability; and the palpable falsity of their testimony. Plutarch isn't satisfied merely to register that the testimony is false; he wants to explain how testimony of this kind could have arisen in spite of its falsity.

Maybe the most fundamental question here is whether Paley's Principle is correct, or, as a methodological principle, whether it is applicable and with what scope. We can't really ask that question, though, without first knowing what sort of principle of argumentation Paley's Principle is intended to be. Is it as closely linked to testimony as Paley's discussion suggests? And how strong a principle of reasoning is it purported to be?

The view that alternative explanations are called for when an accepted premise is debunked is not exclusive to cases of testimony. For example, reasoning of a similar shape to Paley's and Coady's, though not bearing on testimony, is also displayed by Richard Dawkins. Curiously, the case also tangentially involves both Paley and Hume; but it is unrelated to their disagreement regarding miracle testimony. According to Dawkins, Hume's demonstration that the “Argument from Design” is a fallacy of natural theology is intellectually inferior to (that is, less “intellectually fulfilling” than) Darwin's presentation of an alternative explanation for the phenomenon of biological complexity:

I feel more in common with the Reverend William Paley than I do with the distinguished modern philosopher, a well-known atheist, with whom I once discussed the matter at dinner. I said that I could not imagine being an atheist at any time before 1859, when Darwin's *Origin of Species* was published. ‘What about Hume?’, replied the philosopher. ‘How did Hume explain the organized complexity of the living world?’, I asked. ‘He didn't’, said the philosopher. ‘Why does it need any special explanation?’

...[Hume] did not offer any *alternative* explanation for apparent design, but left the question open. An atheist before Darwin could have said, following Hume, ‘I have no explanation for complex biological design. All I know is that God isn't a good explanation, so we must wait and hope that somebody comes up with a better one.’

I can't help feeling that such a position, though logically sound, would have left one feeling pretty unsatisfied, and that although atheism might have been *logically* tenable before Darwin, Darwin made it possible to be an intellectually fulfilled atheist (1986, p.6, italics in original).

So Dawkins too seems committed to the idea that there is some degree of rational or argumentative duty to provide an alternative explanation when debunking. The strength of this duty and its provenance are not clear in Dawkins' remarks; he vacillates between the logical *soundness* and the logical *defensibility* conferred by Hume's reasoning, while "intellectual fulfillment" in turn connotes a rather subjective goalpost, the sort of feelings-over-facts approach that Dawkins himself has often disparaged. But the general idea seems to be that there is an argumentative incompleteness even to logically sound refutations that fail to provide alternative explanations.

Now, those of us who walk among philosophers and know their ways might observe that Dawkins may not be fully appreciating the connection between what his distinguished modern philosopher asks about "special explanation" and the point about theism's failing to comprise any explanation. It makes a difference if we understand the philosopher in Dawkins' reported exchange to have been asking, about biological complexity and speciation, "Why does it need any special explanation *merely in order for one to have known before 1859 that theism doesn't explain it?*" This is probably just what 'special' means, in fact. That is far from the view that organized complexity of the living world does not require explanation, special or otherwise.

Nobody would dispute that people are more intellectually satisfied overall to have an excellent explanation of biological complexity than to not have one. But this is just one of indefinitely many phenomena to be explained in the universe. People with a particular soft spot for biological complexity may feel deeply intellectually satisfied because it has received a sound explanation; but other people would like to see some other currently unexplained phenomenon explained. Dawkins' version of an alternative explanation norm, invoked generally, would delay people's intellectual gratification indefinitely, atheist or not, as there will always be a range of

unexplained things for which theism remains a lousy explanation. The lack of an alternative does not generally make theism a good explanation. So Dawkins' use of this non-testimonial analogue of the principle does not comprise any very persuasive response to the position he is addressing; and the testimonial aspect of Paley's Principle seems to add something richer than the mere appeal to intellectual fulfillment that animates Dawkins' reasoning. Still, the Dawkins example will be a useful contrast when we return to what might make testimony a special case for Paley.

As for the intended strength of Paley's Principle, the strongest interpretation would be that it is a formal requirement of sound argumentation, comprising or akin to an axiom or theorem. Understood this way, Paley's Principle would mean, among other things, that many unimpeachable uses of *Reductio Ad Absurdum* are unsound, because RAA itself includes no requirement to provide an alternative to the proposition that is reduced to absurdity. This is obviously wrong, and I consider it only to establish one boundary of possible interpretations.

What would be the opposing pole? Perhaps the weakest reading would be that the principle is no more than a prudential consideration for the arguer. If we want an audience to accept a sceptical argument against a particular piece of testimony, expediency might speak in favour of offering them not merely evidence of its falsity, but an alternative explanation for why the testimony was circulated in spite of its falsity.

One thing to be said for this interpretation is that providing alternative explanations for rejected premises really is an effective strategy in persuasion, one with considerable empirical support for its efficacy. To at least this extent, Paley and Coady are onto something important. For example, a strongly supported result from the psychological study of the "Continued Influence Effect" is the useful role of alternative explanations in mediating the uptake of debunking or correction. The Continued Influence Effect can be loosely summarized as the tendency for an audience to continue relying on (for example, drawing inferences from) a piece of evidence, once offered, even after it has explicitly been retracted as erroneous. Virtually all published studies of the phenomenon ob-

tain the result that offering a new piece of evidence in place of (and functionally coeval with) the debunked item, rather than just retracting it, leads to significantly greater acceptance of the correction.

Although variations of this result have been derived since the 1950s, the classic experimental framework originates with Wilkes and Leatherbarrow (1988). It involves providing subjects with a series of messages about a fire in a building. A message early in the series notes that fire department representatives are focusing on cans of paint and gas cylinders stored in a closet as playing a role in the fire. A later message states that the fire department now says that there were no cans of paint or cylinders present; the closet in question was actually empty. Yet an appreciable minority of subjects, around 30%, continue to refer to the cans or cylinders as an explanation for the fire. In some studies this happens even after subjects acknowledge and recall receiving the correction. Typically, though, this number drops dramatically when the paint or gas message is not merely retracted, but is replaced with an alternative explanation in a new message (for example, the fire department suspects an electrical short, or arson). This effect is both widely replicated in studies under variations of the experimental framework and sustained in meta-analyses of those studies (Walter & Tukachinsky 2020; Chan et al. 2017).

The commonly accepted explanation of this result invokes the primacy of a mental model, or of narrative coherence, over the felicity of single elements within the model. As Kan et al. summarize it,

Once a coherent narrative has been formed, it is largely resistant to updating, except when replacement information is available (Johnson-Laird, 2012; Verschueren et al., 2005). When alternative replacement information is presented, it allows a reader to disregard the initial discredited information and revise the mental model to include the alternative information (e.g., van Dijk & Kintsch, 1983). This two-step process is sometimes referred to as “outdating” (2021, p. 2).

So here, at least, is one tranche of evidence for the persuasive power of alternative explanations in debunking some piece of testimo-

ny. If all that Paley's Principle meant is that sceptics would do well to offer up alternatives to the rejected testimony – perhaps even known-false alternatives! – the evidence would speak in its favour.

What Paley and Coady (and to some extent Dawkins) urge on the sceptic, though, seems to live somewhere between the logical and the prudential interpretations. They say that there is some degree of obligation owed by the sceptic to the audience in such contexts and not simply owed by the sceptic to themselves or to their own argumentative persuasive interests. That sort of obligation is not captured in the purely prudential benefits to the speaker of providing alternative explanations, testimonial or otherwise.

One way of motivating a genuine obligation located between the logical and the prudential is to work from the distinction between argumentation as conformance with the canons of right reason, and argumentation as a communicative practice that conduces towards certain socio-epistemic ends. Of course, there is a clear overlap between these conceptions, when we consider the relation between activities like presenting structured sets of propositions that rationally entail or raise the probability of another proposition, on one hand, and helping other people understand why something is true or reasonable on the other. But the overlap is only partial. It can be quite hard work just to ensure that one is presenting a valid argument with true premises, yet a great deal more work to meet an audience where they are, anticipate their misconceptions, forestall incorrect inferences, defuse suspected biases, and so forth.

In addition to being more work, it is also a very different kind of work. Ensuring validity and true premises is argument-specific work. Ensuring uptake is audience-specific work. Negotiating how much focus and effort are appropriately spent on getting things right versus getting buy-in is a balancing act in many argumentative contexts. Paley's Principle asserts a norm bearing on this latter kind of project, according to which responsibly rejecting testimonial evidence means providing the audience with an alternative explanation.

This is not quite the distinction, recently much-discussed, between cooperative and adversarial modes or ends in argument (Dutilh Novaes 2021; Aikin 2011; van Eemeren & Grootendorst 1992).

Both cooperative and adversarial modes of argumentation can be extremely audience-focused; for example, a scorched-earth approach to winning an argument can require at least as close attention to the details of one's interlocutor as does a non-zero-sum approach of mutual understanding and benefit. The more relevant sub-distinction for current purposes is the difference of degree in what we might call audience-attentiveness in argumentation (cooperative and adversarial alike). Of course, no instance of argumentation is entirely audience-inattentive; the argument most indifferent to audience is the one you never bother to make in the first place. But argumentation that is cooperative in a very basic sense, enabling the audience to understand *what* has been said, may still fall well short of argumentation that aims to accommodate the audience: providing scaffolding for them to understanding clearly *how* and *why* the argument works, and helping them cognitively and emotionally to update their beliefs in light of what's been said.

Earlier I asked: Is Paley's Principle a logical principle? A prudential one? A matter of etiquette? I think we are now in a position to answer, first, that it is not a logical principle. It couldn't be. And it isn't merely a prudential principle, even though we've seen that what it urges will often be useful advice to a disputant. Because that doesn't really capture any sense of obligation to the interlocutor.

And it probably isn't merely a matter of etiquette, either, even though etiquette imposes a kind of obligation, and even though declining to explain a laconic denial certainly can be unmannerly. Aside from being brusque, there can also be something epistemically disengaged and unedifying about just saying "No" or "That's wrong." The problem isn't that these responses are false, but that they do so little for the project of mutual understanding.² But all of this can be a fairly generic communicative obligation, while Paley's Principle suggests something more specific to both argumen-

² Consider, for example, the social media debate trope of "it's not my job to educate you" – sometimes an appropriate reminder of the responsibility to understand matters before confidently wading into them; sometimes, even when strictly true, a counterproductive or bad-faith barrier to learning and communication.

tation and to testimony.

If there is anything substantive and distinctive to the testimonial context, though, it might emerge from comparison of audience-attentive approaches to rejecting testimonial premises with non-testimonial cases like the one raised by Dawkins. The Dawkins example suggests that people may lean on something akin to Paley's Principle wherever a favoured hypothesis for a striking phenomenon has been rejected. But in Paley's and Coady's hands, this is not a question merely of how to deal with generic pieces of evidence that stand in an apparently supportive relation to an independently disproven proposition. The person-theoretic character of testimonial support for beliefs, and especially alleged eyewitness testimony, complicates the discussion. In these cases, the relevant norms of argumentation concern both how to treat evidence, and how to treat people, when people are sources of evidence.

The question asked by Dawkins' philosopher ("Why does that require some special explanation?"), when directed towards the falsity of a person's or a group's first-hand testimony that P, implicates more than just the truth or falsity of P itself, because it bears also on a person's fitness to be a full participant in the activity of argumentation. If I say "Stress causes ulcers" and you say "No," you are primarily saying something about the proposition that stress causes ulcers. If I say "I saw a unicorn," and you say "No," you are to a far greater extent saying something both about the proposition that I saw a unicorn and about *me* as a perceiver of events and source of testimony. And what you're saying reduces or even refuses my status as a credible participant in the exchange, to the extent that it calls my basic competence into question. Relative to the project of giving sound structured sets of propositions, this might not greatly matter. But relative to the project of promoting argument uptake and maintaining an open-ended conversation, it more plausibly violates a norm.

It may be prudent and it may be polite for you to offer a nuanced, non-dismissive candidate explanation that renders my belief and my testimony explicable in a case like this, without starkly rejecting my general perceptiveness and integrity. But it is also a way of serving some socio-epistemic aims of argumentation: changing

minds, mitigating polarization, and sustaining truth-conducive and mutually edifying discourse, for example. Absent this sort of alternative explanation, the impugning of an interlocutor along with their premise arguably has higher stakes than the etiquette violations of terse or unhelpful communication alone and hence incurs a correspondingly stronger discursive obligation to avoid it. Here we see one way of recovering a distinctive and prima facie plausible norm of the sort to which Paley appeals, and that Coady endorses.

This may seem a vindication of Paley's Principle, and to some extent it is. But it returns us to the question of the principle's applicability and scope. We've already seen that rejections of testimony and arguments against testimony in no way need comply with Paley's Principle in order to be true or sound. But the activities of giving reasons and changing minds are something else altogether. And the project of treating interlocutors as agents worthy of sustained reasoned interaction is another thing again. Conditional on one's wishing to engage in these shared activities, and to treat interlocutors this way, Paley's Principle can be a reasonable norm and expectation. Yet it could also be a mug's game, since the specificity that we earlier observed in Paley's claimed obligation may well serve to personalize a disagreement in a way that undermines engagement rather than promoting it.

Imagine a young-Earth creationist who denies biological evolution, and responds to reasonable refutation by saying, "I majored in Chemistry with a minor in Biology and got high grades. Are you saying I somehow never learned anything in my studies?" Depending on context, it's fair to regard that as an uncooperative discursive tactic. The speaker seeks to force disagreement into an *ad hominem* mold – in effect, standing in front of their views so that interlocutors can't get at the views without going through the person. This kind of escalated personalization might dissuade some people from following through with the public disagreement. It also prepares a rationale for the speaker to abandon the exchange out of aggrievement should an effective rebuttal appear. In a similar way, given the difficulty of impugning eyewitness testimonial premises without to some extent impugning the testifier, Paley's Principle might function to over-personalize the rejection of those premises.

If Paley's Principle demands the kind of specificity that Paley seems to want, then a sceptic's appealing to *types* of misleading or distortive influence on testimony to which otherwise competent and honest people in general are known to be subject would be insufficient to explain why false testimony is offered. If what is wanted instead is a narrative relating how *this* person could have succumbed to *that* influence in *this* case (but then failed to notice that they had made the error and persisted in their mistaken testimony with undiminished conviction), then the Principle begins to look more like shielding a testimonial premise with the testifier's body. Highly agent-specific conjectures of the provenance and persistence of error are naturally disposed to bruise the assumptions of competence or integrity, to a greater extent than general theory-based alternative explanations would.

Even in the conditional context-sensitive sense that allows it to be a reasonable expectation, then, Paley's Principle is best understood as a norm of balance between opposing ways of shutting down discussion. This probably means taking the principle in a less demanding – and less resolutely apologetic – sense than Paley intended it. But it still recognizes an insight and a fair point at the heart of his remarks. Paley's Principle reminds the sceptic that explaining and not merely asserting the unreliability of a piece of testimony can reflect more than expediency and courtesy. It can reflect some structuring assumptions of the project of sustained engagement with and learning from interlocutors.

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