7.11 European Enlightenment Philosophers Debate the Existence of God

Background: During the European Enlightenment philosophers and scientists grappled with the implications of their commitment to reason with their own beliefs in the existence of God as creator. Isaac Newton, who described the laws of motion governing the Universe believed that "This most beautiful system of the sun, planets, and comets, could only proceed from the counsel and dominion of an intelligent Being", a "supreme God" who is a "Being eternal, infinite, absolutely perfect." In *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* (1779), Scottish philosopher David Hume has philosophers debate the existence of God, a debate that seems to show his own uncertainties. William Paley in the *Natural Theology of Evidence of the Existence and Attributes of the Deity* (1802) was one of the great proponents of what was known as the "watchmaker analogy," the idea that the existence of a mechanism such as a watch is a priori proof of the existence of a watchmaker.

Questions

1. What did Isaac Newton believe about the existence of God?
2. According to the philosophical debate in Hume's Dialogues, why does the "truth" of the existence of God seem so "obvious"?
3. What does William Paley mean by "contrivance must have had a contriver"?
4. In your opinion, why did European Enlightenment thinkers grapple over the existence of God?
5. Assuming there is a watchmaker or Universe creator, how would you explain their existence? In your opinion, does this issue raise questions with the "watchmaker analogy"? Explain.

A. David Hume's Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion (1779)

Source: http://www.gutenberg.org/files/4583/4583-h/4583-h.htm

"What truth so obvious, so certain, as the being of a God, which the most ignorant ages have acknowledged, for which the most refined geniuses have ambitiously striven to produce new proofs and arguments? What truth so important as this, which is the ground of all our hopes, the surest foundation of morality, the firmest support of society, and the only principle which ought never to be a moment absent from our thoughts and meditations? . . . Throw several pieces of steel together, without shape or form; they will never arrange themselves so as to compose a watch. Stone, and mortar, and wood, without an architect, never erect a house. But the ideas in a human mind, we see, by an unknown, inexplicable economy, arrange themselves so as to form the plan of a watch or house. Experience, therefore, proves, that there is an original principle of order in mind, not in matter. From similar effects we infer similar causes. The adjustment of means to ends is alike in the universe, as in a machine of human contrivance. The causes, therefore, must be resembling . . . all experimental reasonings are founded on the supposition that similar causes prove similar effects, and similar effects similar causes.

B. William Paley in the Natural Theology of Evidence of the Existence and Attributes of the Deity (1802)

Source: https://www4.uwsp.edu/philosophy/dwarren/CTBook/06RLArguments/paley2.htm

"In crossing a heath, suppose I pitched my foot against a *stone* and were asked how the stone came to be there, I might possibly answer that for anything I knew to the contrary it had lain there forever; nor would it, perhaps, be very easy to show the absurdity of this answer. But suppose I had found a *watch* upon the ground, and it should be inquired how the watch happened to be in that place, I should hardly think of the answer which I had before given, that for anything I knew the watch might have always been there. Yet why should not this answer serve for the watch as well as for the stone? Why is it not as admissible in the second case as in the first? For this reason, and for no other, namely, that when we come to inspect the watch, we perceive -- what we could not discover in the stone -- that its several parts are framed and put together for a purpose, e.g., that they are so formed and adjusted as to produce motion, and that motion so regulated as to point out the hour of the day; that if the different parts had been differently shaped from what they are, of a different size from what they are, or placed after any other manner or in any other order than that in which they are placed, either no motion at all would have been carried on in the machine, or none which would have answered the use that is now served by it. -- the inference we think is inevitable, that the watch must have had a maker-that there must have existed, at some time and at some place or other, an artificer or artificers who formed it for the purpose which we find it actually to answer, who comprehended its construction and designed its use . . . Contrivance must have had a contriver . . . Every indication of contrivance, 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 or more, and that in a degree which exceeds all computation."