



## **Hume and the God-Hypothesis**

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HUME AND THE GOD-HYPOTHESIS<sup>1</sup>

Interpretation of Hume's Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion<sup>2</sup> has always been contentious. While some think it obvious that Philo is Hume's spokesman, others think it is Cleanthes. Whether or not Philo is Hume's spokesman, he certainly produces the better argument. Nonetheless, that argument is flawed by an assumption which I doubt Hume ever questioned. I want to consider that assumption, but want to make it clear that it is not my intention to defend Cleanthes' position. The second thing I want to do in this paper, which I have not seen done elsewhere, is to connect Hume's arguments in the Dialogues with his anthropological account of religiosity.

Perhaps the least contentious thing about the Dialogues is that Demea's a priori position is not taken too seriously, nor is much time spent on the first cause argument, so important from Aristotle to Leibniz. What is given serious attention is what might be described as the 'God-hypothesis', which is more or less the Argument from Design. Philo rejects the argument for reasons we shall review below, but makes a concession. The concession is basically that it is intelligible to contend that the cause or causes of order in the world bear some resemblance to human intelligence. The catch, which is the point driven home against Cleanthes, is that, while intelligible, the idea is utterly pointless. Philo says:

*If the whole of Natural Theology...resolves itself into one simple...proposition, That the cause or causes of order in the universe probably bear some remote analogy to human intelligence: If this proposition be not capable of extension...If it affords no inference that affects human life...if the analogy...can be carried no farther... (203)*

then it is without point.

Hume is willing to let the theist have his vague analogy, for it serves no point. In fact, the theist cannot

win, for to the extent that the God-hypothesis might have explanatory power, it approaches the status of an empirical hypothesis, and as such loses theological import.

The Dialogues should be devastating, yet seem to miss the mark.

Suppose we look a bit more closely at what is going on. The position Cleanthes elaborates is an hypothesis to the effect that the world exhibits order and that that order is best explained by the postulation of an orderer. Cleanthes' moves are a bit more complicated, as we shall see in a moment, but this is the essential point. The hypothesis is conceived by Hume as either competing with or completing science. In the Enquiry we read that

*The religious hypothesis...must be considered only as a particular method of accounting for the visible phenomena of the universe: but no just reasoner will ever presume to infer from it any single fact, and alter or add to the phenomena, in any single particular. (237)*

The passage is virtually a summary of Philo's thesis. There can be no move from an inferred cause to anything further in terms of either facts or properties. Cleanthes may be grudgingly granted his causal supposition, but he is not allowed to use it. Again:

*And what can you say more, allowing all your suppositions and reasonings? ... (O)ur conduct and deportment in life is still the same... You persist in imagining, that, if we grant that divine existence,...you may safely infer consequences from it... You seem not to remember, that all your reasonings...can only be drawn from effects to causes... (238)*

The crucial failure is that

*All the philosophy...and all the religion... will never be able to carry us beyond the usual cause of experience, or give us measures of conduct and behaviour different from those which are furnished by reflections on common life. (244)*

God, as putative cause simply makes no difference, so long as we conform to the standards of rational thought.

It is important to be clear that what is being rejected is God as "a fruitful rival to scientific explanatory notions, such as gravity".<sup>3</sup>

The rejection of God as explanatory principle turns on the illegitimacy of Cleanthes' moves. As Peter Jones puts it,

Cleanthes makes two inferences: firstly, to design as a cause, and secondly, from design to a designer in whom the cause resides.<sup>4</sup>

Hume's attention in effect focuses on the second move. Philo's concession shows a certain willingness to accept something like the first move, since concession of the possible similarity to intelligence requires concession of a basis for the postulation of intelligence. It is characterization of the entity "in whom the cause resides" that is most bitterly contested.

For my purposes what is important is the basis for the hypothesis, for Cleanthes' postulation, namely the perception of holistic and cohesive order. It is that perception that makes it possible to consider the world as (possibly) an artifact and hence in need of an artificer. It is crucial that the way Cleanthes is shown to go wrong makes sense only if his inference is distinct and separable from its basis.

Hume seems to accept Cleanthes' basis, but balks at using the world as an occasion for the introduction of a radically general explanatory concept which is in fact otiose because of its very generality and the lack of specific support for its postulation and for its putative powers.

But the trouble is that, as should by now be evident, Hume is throughout conceiving of Cleanthes as representing the core of the theist's initial acceptance of religiosity as an hypothesis based on evidence. This is the assumption with which I am concerned, that theism is essentially inferential. Cleanthes' position is something of an ideal: the theistic hypothesis carefully and reflectively articulated, at its best - and still found wanting. But that is so only

if theism is inferential and as such yields to Philo's arguments. Let us briefly look at Hume's position on the point.

Hume never quite allows Demea the position he should. Demea clearly represents the view that religiosity is not inferential: *No man...ever entertained a serious doubt with regard to a truth, so certain and self-evident.* (113) But Philo immediately recasts the position: *The...truth, as you well observe, is unquestionable and self-evident. Nothing exists without a cause...* (114, my emphasis) Demea's is an a priori position, but Philo (Hume) here recasts it as an a posteriori one, appealing as he does to the notion of adequate cause. Demea tries again:

*...each man feels...the truth of religion within his own breast; and from a consciousness of his imbecility and misery, rather than from any reasoning, is led to seek protection from that Being, on whom he and all nature is dependent.* (165)

Rudolf Otto could have said that. But to the extent to which Hume took seriously such a position it is just that of God as "the name of a private sentiment", as Jones suggests. In terms of what he considers seriously at issue, God is an explanatory notion. In The Natural History of Religion we read that the notion of God *...springs not from an original instinct or primary impression of nature* (31), which is as close as Hume will come to an innate or a priori notion or putative awareness of manifest divine presence. The important notion of God is explanatory, one arrived at through inference and postulation in the first instance: *...the ignorant multitude must first entertain some groveling and familiar notion of superior powers, before they stretch their conception to that perfect Being...* (34) First there is primitive explanation in terms of elusive but powerful agency, the attribution of responsibility which is polytheism. Only later does a unified conception of an almighty God enter the picture. But what is crucial here is Hume's conception of religiosity as beginning in attribution of

responsibility to agents and then progressing to a state where all responsibility is attributed to a single omnipotent agent. In discussing polytheism, which he takes as the initial move to religiosity, he says:

*We may conclude, therefore, that...the first ideas of religion arose not from a contemplation of the works of nature, but from a concern with regard to the events of life, and from the incessant hopes and fears, which actuate the human mind. (38)*

Here Cleanthes' holistic perception of order is relegated to a very sophisticated and later stage of speculation, and the God-hypothesis is anchored in mundane explanation, in answers to questions such as why a child died, why the crop failed, why a battle was lost. The primitive question is never "What happened?", it is "Who did it?", and the answer is polytheism. Much later the God-hypothesis is refined until it is adequate to any question, and hence to none.

Now this is an eminently sensible anthropological account of the genesis and development of religion, but it would be either alien to some theists or rejected as at most the causal process by which men came to acquire religious concepts and know God. Cleanthes is not, to some theists, the inheritor of religion. The crucial flaw is, as indicated, the conception of religiosity as inferential.

Hume seems to have been fascinated by religion for most of his life. As an atheist, lacking what Kai Nielsen once called "participant's understanding", he worked out that fascination in terms of trying to understand how religiosity is a consequence of discursive thought. Cleanthes is supposed to embody the best religious thought, the most carefully and consciously worked out version of the God-hypothesis. Demea is a counterpoint: the theist who fails to understand the nature of his own hypothesis, who has confused inference with self-evident truth. Demea sees normative content as part of that truth; Cleanthes recognizes it must be hard won. And Philo, of course, is out to show that neither

explanatory nor normative content are to be had.

But having said all this, and assuming that the assumption I call attention to is operant, why is Philo's argument less than devastating if directed only at those theists for whom the God-hypothesis is inferential?

The conception of God in question in the Dialogues is taken as restricted by the basis for his postulation: perceived order. But Philo actually exceeds those restrictions in making his concession. What Hume seems to miss is what Leibniz was at pains to argue: that the crucial point is that the world, or its order, is explained in terms of agency as opposed to causal forces. If we take Philo's concession seriously, it amounts to a concession of the intelligibility - on the basis of perceived order - or postulating an act as the cause of the world or its order. Secondly, there is the at least tacit assent to the nature of the basis for the postulation: the perception of order as something distinct in the sense that it may serve, whether or not adequately, as a reason to postulate a creative act. With respect to the former, if God is initially conceived of as an agent, there is more being postulated than a mere intelligent cause, for the concession of similarity to intelligence is empty if it is not a concession of agency.

It may be thought that the concession simply should not be taken seriously, that Hume has precisely emptied it of content by precluding the attribution of characteristics, purposes, etc. to the God of the Cleanthean hypothesis. But the matter is not so straightforward as that. The concession cannot be simply a piece of irony or a nod in the direction of popular piety. The reason is, again, Hume's assumption that theism is inferential: specifically, the basis for Cleanthes' postulation. In allowing the basis, Hume commits himself to the intelligibility of the minimal analogy.

Hume conceives of religiosity as inferential and of Cleanthes' position as a logical conclusion to a lengthy historical inferential process: as crowning what began in

simple polytheism as the attribution of otherwise inexplicable events to hidden agents. As noted above, as an anthropological account Hume's progression is of great interest, but it does not do justice to all theists. The consequence is that Philo's position is innocuous with respect to non-inferential theists, and undermined with respect to inferential theists because of the conceded analogy.

If we distinguish between a priori non-inferential theists, such as Demea, what emerges is that the latter would argue that we cannot drive a wedge, as Hume does, between the perception on which Cleanthes bases his speculation and that speculation.

At this point we might recall a remark John Hick makes in the introduction to his The Philosophy of Religion to the effect that the a posteriori arguments are all circular because they rely on taking up an attitude toward the world which entails what the arguments seek to establish. Hume is wrong in taking it that the God-hypothesis always involves a 'neutral' first step wherein events are attended to as exhibiting an order that can be considered as possibly the consequence of causal processes on the one hand or possibly the consequence of agency or design on the other. Admittedly Hume does not think that step is a simple one of looking around: he sees it as the culmination of a lengthy process of ever more grand attributions of responsibility. But that first step is nonetheless required, else Cleanthes has no position. The a posteriori non-inferential theist would precisely argue that Cleanthes has no position, that perception is not of a neutral order but of manifest (divine) agency. The perception in question is of the world as an artifact, not of an order of a magnitude that supports the postulation that the world might be an artifact.

Hume makes it appear that the theist employs God as an explanatory principle or principle of cohesion illegitimately in that the theist is using a hypothesis which simply fails to support the weight put on it. Given the scenario

in question, theism would be understood as a progression of evermore dubious attributions of responsibility leading up to the most grand attribution to an entity masquerading as the viable postulate of an inferential process that is grounded on something that is simply inadequate. The complication is that at least for many there is no independent basis - adequate or inadequate. The attribution in question is identical with the perception on which it allegedly rests; Cleanthes' move to design is the same as his perception of the order which allegedly warrants that move. It suffices, to undermine Philo's argument, if some maintain that there is not available to us a discernible independent basis for Cleanthes' postulation.

As for the inferential theist, like Cleanthes, who would accept the independence of the basis for the God-hypothesis, the trouble is that as Hume acknowledges through Philo's concession, that basis does seem to support the minimal analogy, and since that analogy involves agency, as I have suggested, Cleanthes is left only bent, but not broken, by Philo's arguments.

It will no doubt be argued that the position of the a posteriori non-inferential theist is incoherent. Examples of espousals of this view are readily available. For instance, John Hick, to whom I referred earlier, described the man of faith as conscious of God as a divine presence, not as believing in God on the basis of evidence. Perhaps his best known statement of this view is to be found in his "Religious Faith as Experiencing-As", an article widely anthologized. But there is no need to appeal to specific authors. Even though Hume's notion of an explanatory hypothesis is essentially that of a predictive hypothesis, there is another long tradition, namely the metaphysical, wherein an explanatory hypothesis is one which lends intelligibility in the sense of bringing out the conditions of possibility, given certain phenomena. For many - probably most - theists God is an explanatory hypothesis in just this sense, and divine agency

is manifest in the world, not something postulated on the basis of neutral order. I am not endorsing this view as coherent, only pointing out that it is held and that Hume's Dialogues miss it entirely.

Hume, then, through Philo, seems to be conceiving of theism as inferential, and his concession to Cleanthes comes to something like: even if the inference in question is taken as plausible, that is, even if we grant that there are grounds to infer something analogous to intelligence as the source of the world, nothing else follows. What I am further arguing is that Philo's arguments are directed only at inferential theism and that the concession gives too much to non-inferential theism. I think that Hume fails to see that the concession, couched in terms of intelligence, because it involves agency, results in the unwanted consequence just mentioned.

In closing I want to say just a word or two about three points raised by readers of an earlier version of this paper. One was that Hume is not really conceding anything about intelligence in particular, since intelligence, along with generation, etc., is just one possible principle. I think, though, that here I can say simply that the crucial concession (203) is precisely articulated in terms of human intelligence. There is no qualification and, though perhaps arguable, my interpretation is that Hume meant what he said. Second, it was suggested that Nelson Pike's view was that Hume accepts a direct and non-inferential deism. I do not agree with this, as my point is that Hume errs in precisely conceiving of theism as inferential. This seems to me to be an issue, though, that I need not deal with here, as Pike's interpretation is by no means generally accepted. It was also suggested that Hume thinks a "vague deism" to be a natural belief. I am sympathetic to this suggestion and think it compatible with my interpretations as the latter deals with the "working out" of such a belief. Finally, an objection very like the first held that I must explain

Philo's apparent change of heart: that is, his apparent going back on much of what he argues in Parts II-XI if in the concession what is conceded is intelligence. Here again I can only say that my point is that Hume erred in not appreciating the implications of the concession as stated. In a way the concession is interesting, dramatically, only if it gives Cleanthes what he wants and still points to futility. The trouble is that the unrecognized possibility of non-inferential theism extracts a high cost for the dramatic victory. I do not think Philo goes back on anything. Rather he voices an ill-advised concession designed to wring the last drop of futility from the God-hypothesis, but one which in fact supports an alternative theistic position.

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1. A version of this paper was read at the IXth Hume Conference, Oct. 1980, and helpfully commented on by Professor James Noxon.
2. All references are to Hume on Religion, Richard Wollheim, ed., Fontana, 1966.
3. Peter Jones, "Hume's Two Concepts of God", Philosophy, Oct. 1972.
4. Ibid.