



Hume's Dialogues on Evil

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HUME'S DIALOGUES ON EVIL

Only two sections of Hume's Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion¹ are concerned with the topic of the benevolence of the designer of the world (Parts X and XI), and the conclusion reached is stated by Philo in an unambiguous manner:

The true conclusion is, that the original source of all things is entirely indifferent to all these principles, and has no more regard to good above ill than to heat above cold, or to drought above moisture, or to light above heavy. (D 212)

In light of the fact that much of the Dialogues is concerned with setting out sceptical or Pyrrhonian objections to positions in natural theology which reveal our ignorance in this area, it is important for an understanding of Parts X and XI to ask whether we are meant to take Philo's conclusion seriously; that is, does Hume intend Philo's conclusion in Part XI to be a truth in natural theology? Nelson Pike answers this negatively:

Philo claims that there is an 'original Source of all things' and that this source is indifferent with respect to matters of good and evil. He pretends to be inferring this conclusion from observed data. This represents a departure from Philo's much professed skepticism in the Dialogues.... I think the center of Philo's remarks in this passage must be located in their skeptical rather than their metaphysical import. Philo has proposed a hypothesis which is counter to the one offered by Cleanthes. And he claims that this hypothesis is the 'true conclusion' to be drawn from the observed data. But the point is not, I think, that Philo's new hypothesis is true, or even probable. The conclusion is, rather, that the hypothesis advanced by Cleanthes is false, or very

improbable. When claiming that evil in the world supports a hypothesis which is counter to the one offered by Cleanthes, I think Philo simply means to be calling attention to the fact that evil in the world provides evidence against Cleanthes' theological position.²

It is true that at certain points in the Dialogues Philo does profess to be a sceptic (Pyrrhonian), and he often attempts to show Cleanthes that his hypothesis is false by generating an hypothesis from the available data which is as plausible as Cleanthes' hypothesis (e.g., Part IV, where they debate Cleanthes' view that God is external to the world which He has designed), or which has greater plausibility than Cleanthes' hypothesis (e.g., Parts VI and VII where Philo argues against Cleanthes' claim that the available data support the hypothesis of an intelligent designer for the world). However, whenever Philo proceeds in this manner, he makes it clear that he has no hypothesis on the matter under discussion (e.g., D 164) which he is willing to defend, and that he has proceeded in this manner, not to argue for a position -- he maintains that the available data are not adequate to do so -- but to argue against the position Cleanthes is defending (see, for example, D 177). In fact, at one stage in the discussion, Philo urges against embracing any religious system, because of the victory which awaits the sceptic:

All religious systems, it is confessed, are subject to great and insuperable difficulties. Each disputant triumphs in his turn; while he carries on an offensive war, and exposes the absurdities, barbarities, and pernicious tenets of his antagonist. But all of them, on the whole, prepare a complete triumph for the sceptic; who tells them, that no system ought ever to be embraced with

regard to such subjects: For this plain reason, that no absurdity ought ever to be assented to with regard to any subject. A total suspense of judgment is here our only reasonable resource. (D 186-187)

This passage, which appears toward the end of Part VIII, is reminiscent of the point Philo made in Part I, when he warned of arguments which "run wide of common life." In the case of such arguments, "the most refined scepticism comes to be upon a footing with them, and is able to oppose and counterbalance them. The one has no more weight than the other. The mind must remain in suspense between them; and it is that very suspense or balance, which is the triumph of scepticism. (D 135-136)

There is, therefore, much in the Dialogues which shows that Philo frequently argues for a position in order to show that the hypothesis advanced by Cleanthes is false. However, this does not establish that Philo is a Pyrrhonian throughout the Dialogues, and that he always supports positions in order to argue against the hypothesis advanced by Cleanthes. Accordingly, we must now examine those passages which give insight into Philo's mode of argumentation in Parts X and XI.

The first passage in this regard occurs at the end of Part VIII:

And if every attack, as is commonly observed, and no defence, among theologians, is successful; how complete must be his victory, who remains always, with all mankind, on the offensive, and has himself no fixed station or abiding city, which he is ever, on any occasion, obliged to defend? (D 187)

What is noteworthy in this passage is that Philo speaks of the triumph of scepticism over all religious systems in the third person, rather than (what

we should have expected) in the first person. It was Philo, who, as sceptic, argued against Cleanthes; therefore, it is Philo who has scored the victory. That he speaks in the third person at the end of Part VIII is a clear signal to the reader -- and, perhaps, to Cleanthes -- that his Pyrrhonism, which proved so effective when arguing against Cleanthes' hypothesis that the cause of the design of the world is an intelligent being, has now been abandoned.

Philo's argument against Cleanthes in Part X is distinctly un-Pyrrhonian. Cleanthes urges that the hypothesis of an infinite benevolent deity can explain the design of the world. When Philo argues against Cleanthes' hypothesis, he does so not (as we should expect if Pike's account is correct) by generating alternative hypotheses which are as plausible as, or even more plausible than, Cleanthes' hypothesis, but by showing that the design of the world fails to confirm Cleanthes' hypothesis:

And is it possible, Cleanthes, said Philo, that after all these reflections, and infinitely more, which might be suggested, you can still persevere in your anthropomorphism, and assert the moral attributes of the Deity, his justice, benevolence, mercy, and rectitude, to be of the same nature with these virtues in human creatures? His power we allow infinite: Whatever he wills is executed: But neither man nor any other animal are happy: Therefore, he does not will their happiness. His wisdom is infinite: He is never mistaken in choosing the means to any end: But the course of nature tends not to human or animal felicity: Therefore it is not established for that purpose. Through the whole compass of human knowledge, there are no inferences more certain and infallible than these. (D 198)

Philo is not arguing as a sceptic; rather he is employing the hypothetico-deductive method for testing Cleanthes' hypothesis.

What accounts for this shift in Philo's procedure? When Cleanthes argued by analogy that the designer of the world is an intelligent being, he emphasized the resemblances between the world and machines in terms of means-to-ends relations and a coherence of parts.³ Philo argued that these features are present not only in those cases where intelligence is the cause of design, but also when non-intelligent causes (e.g., generation, vegetation) are the source of design.⁴ Hence, to show that the design of the world has an intelligent cause of design, Cleanthes must establish that the design of the world bears a sufficient resemblance to a particular type of machine, so that the world can be classified as a machine of that sort. Only in this way, Philo insists, can the principle 'like effects prove like causes' be employed to prove that God resembles human intelligence. Within the discussion, Philo shows that the features of design present in the world are insufficient to classify the world as a (particular kind of) machine, and, for that matter, as any kind of object whose cause of design is known. Accordingly, Philo argues that all arguments by analogy fail to establish the nature of the cause of the design of the world. And, therefore, when he puts forth any arguments of this sort (Parts VI, VII, VIII) it is not done to support a particular hypothesis about the designer of the world, but to argue against Cleanthes' Design Argument.

In Part X, the issue of how the design of the world is to be classified does not arise. All three speakers agree that the world contains both good and evil ('mixed phenomena'), and Cleanthes argues that

the hypothesis of an infinite benevolent deity can explain this situation. Philo shows that the only world which can be inferred from Cleanthes' hypothesis is one containing only good, and, therefore, no evil. Hence, there is no need for a Pyrrhonian approach to Cleanthes' hypothesis in Part X.

Philo's argument in Part XI is divided into three parts: (1) he argues against Cleanthes' hypothesis of a finite benevolent deity; (2) he attacks the Manichaeian account of the causes of good and evil; and (3) he argues for the indifference of the designer of the world. I will now show that nowhere in his argument in Part XI is Philo proceeding as a Pyrrhonian.

(1) The discussion between Philo and Cleanthes on the hypothesis of a finite benevolent cause of design of the world focuses on the four causes of evil in the world and whether these causes are necessary and unavoidable. Now, when Philo argued against Cleanthes' 'intelligence' hypothesis, he made it clear that the number of counter hypotheses he could put forth regarding the origin of the design of the world is indefinitely large: "[I]n such questions as the present, a hundred contradictory views may preserve a kind of imperfect analogy; and invention has here full scope to exert itself." (D 182) On the other hand, when he begins his attack on Cleanthes' claim that evil is necessary and unavoidable, he urges "not to admit of any hypothesis, whatever; much less, of any which is supported by no appearance of probability." (D 205) In other words, Philo maintains that there is no hypothesis which can support the necessity of evil with any degree of success. This difference in Philo's approach will be explained shortly.

Cleanthes' position⁵ on the necessity and unavoidability of evil always takes the following form: a) isolate a particular feature in the world (pain, general laws, powers and faculties, the adjustments present in all parts of the world), and make the (obvious) point that the feature contributes substantially to the survival of sensible creatures; b) acknowledge that there are occasions when each feature contributes to the destruction, rather than to the survival of, sensible creatures; c) argue that to eliminate the evil consequences associated with each feature, the feature itself would have to be eliminated; d) conclude that if c) were adopted by the Designer, more evil than exists at present would result, since our survival would encounter even greater challenges than it currently faces. Philo, on the other hand, shows that for each cause of evil in the world, some alteration which it is within the Designer's power to bring about, would greatly decrease the quantity of evil, without threatening the quantity of good which obtains. In this way, he shows that evil is neither necessary nor unavoidable.

Philo's arguments here are not those of the sceptic. Furthermore, his arguments are, in fact, only indirectly related to God. When arguing against Cleanthes' intelligence hypothesis, Philo maintained that we cannot know anything about God, because the dissimilarities between the design of the world and machines are too great to enable us to reason analogically to the nature of God. When dealing with the question of why there is evil in the world, Philo's argument focuses on the four natural causes of evil -- on features of the world with which scientists and philosophers are concerned. It is, therefore, our causal knowledge of the world which disproves Cleanthes' hypothesis that this is the best

world possible. It is, for example, because we know that people pursue pleasure as eagerly as they avoid pain, that Philo can suggest that avoidance could be accomplished through the prospect of a diminution of pleasure; it is because we know that general laws operate in accordance with the 'secret powers' in objects, that he can propose that particular changes in the secret powers of objects would avoid the evil to be brought about by the operation of certain general laws; and so on. A finitely perfect deity who is benevolent could bring these alterations about: Philo finds nothing in the concept of such a being which is incompatible with the proposed changes. These proposals, however, are not based on our knowledge of the deity, but on our (causal) understanding of the world. It is in this sense that Philo's arguments are indirectly related to God. And, it is because all suggested improvements to the design of the world are based on our understanding of how the world operates, that Philo does not resort to Pyrrhonian arguments. Cleanthes' 'intelligence hypothesis' has 'some appearance of probability,' given that we find design originating in intelligence manifests means-to-ends relations and a coherence of parts. On the other hand, our causal understanding of the world reveals no basis for holding that any of the causes of evil is unavoidable. Accordingly, hypotheses regarding the unavoidability of evil are 'supported by no appearance of probability.' On the topic of evil, there is no hypothesis which requires the counterbalancing achievable through Pyrrhonian arguments.

(2) Philo's attack on Manichaeism⁶ proceeds in two stages. In the first, he asks what we should expect to find in the world, if Manichaeism is

true. Because Manichaeism offers a causal account of the presence of good and evil through the hypothesis of a benevolent and malevolent being, we should find marks of combat between these opposing causal forces. Philo argues that the absence of such marks of combat in nature disproves the Manichaean hypothesis. This mode of argumentation is but a further use of the hypothetico-deductive method for testing hypotheses.

Philo concedes that there is an 'opposition' between good and evil in nature; in examining this hypothesis as a defence of Manichaeism, he puts forth the second stage of his argument against this doctrine. He shows that, logically, good and evil do not differ from other opposites; e.g., hot and cold, moist and dry. That is, just as hot and cold are adequately explained through opposing immediate causes, without reference to opposing original causes, so good and evil can be explained through opposing immediate causes. Whenever a satisfactory causal account is obtainable without reference to original causes, these latter are not included in our explanation. Given that there are physical causes of good and evil, no reason can be put forth to show that good and evil should be explained through opposing original causes.

Philo makes an additional point on this topic. If a satisfactory causal account for a pair of opposites can be had without reference to any original cause, then there is no basis for arguing that the original source of all things has a preference for one of the immediate causes over the other. Alternatively, only a known unique (causal) relationship between an original cause and one member of a pair of opposites (such as Manichaeism attempts to establish) can prove that the original

cause has a preference for one member of the pair over the other. It is because we lack knowledge of such unique causal relations, that Philo concludes "The true conclusion is, that the original source of all things is entirely indifferent to all these principles, and has no more regard to good above ill than to heat above cold, or to drought above moisture, or to light above heavy." (D 212)

Throughout his attack on Manichaeism, Philo proceeds in a scientific manner -- insisting that hypotheses be stated in such a manner that they can be confirmed or refuted by having recourse to observation. His point is that no observation or set of observations supports Manichaeism, and that all observations are compatible with but one hypothesis regarding the deity: indifference. The deity may, in fact, have a preference for good over evil: Philo argues that nothing within our experience reveals that such is the case, for nothing within our experience reveals a unique relationship between the deity and the production of goodness.

(3) The 'indifference hypothesis,' as we have seen, was first developed in the context of his critique on Manichaeism. Philo argues for this position, once again, in the third stage of his argument. Considerations of the deity's power (infinite, finite) have not assisted Cleanthes' efforts to argue for benevolence of the deity; hence, in this stage of Philo's argument, no reference is made to God's power. Philo now is concerned only with the moral attributes of the deity, and with whether any attributes or combination of attributes is either compatible with, or can be proved from, the mixed phenomena we find in the world. The most probable conclusion appears to be that the deity is

neither good nor malicious; i.e., that the deity is indifferent to the good and evil in the world.

There may four hypotheses be framed concerning the first causes of the universe: that they are endowed with perfect goodness, that they have perfect malice, that they are opposite and have both goodness and malice, that they have neither goodness nor malice. Mixed phenomena can never prove the two former unmixed principles. And the uniformity and steadiness of general laws seem to oppose the third. The fourth, therefore, seems by far the most probable. (D212)

The inquiry into the moral attributes of the deity, therefore, ends without having recourse to Pyrrhonian arguments or objections.

We are now able to understand why there is a fundamental methodological difference between the first eight sections of the Dialogues in which the intelligence hypothesis is discussed, and Parts X and XI in which the moral attributes of the deity are discussed. In the first eight sections, Philo argues against Cleanthes' hypothesis by advancing his own hypotheses. His effort to advance hypotheses must be assessed in light of the fact that (by his own admission) all such hypotheses are based on insufficient data, and, therefore, none is, strictly speaking, acceptable. Their use is not to establish truths about the nature of God, but to establish the conclusion which we find at the end of Part VIII that "A total suspense of judgment is here our only reasonable resource." The design of the world is compatible with, and could have arisen from, an indefinite number of designing principles. On the other hand, we have seen that in dealing with Cleanthes' hypotheses in Parts X and XI we are able to proceed more scientifically, and, in this manner,

eliminate all but one of the hypotheses which can be introduced to explain the design of the world.

Scientific investigations never yield certainty. Accordingly, when Philo argues for the indifference of the deity, he emphasizes that this position "seems by far the most probable." What cannot be doubted is that Philo is more satisfied with his arguments in Parts X and XI, than he is with those in the first eight sections. This can be shown by noting that in Part XII he acknowledges a willingness to assess the arguments of the first eight sections, but gives no indication that, Parts X and XI will also be reviewed. His former lack of caution (mentioned in the second paragraph of Part XII) does not extend to Parts X and XI.

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1. All references to the Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion are taken from the Library of Liberal Arts edition, edited by Norman Kemp Smith (Indianapolis, New York, 1947). Further references to the Dialogues will be cited as 'D' followed by the relevant page number(s).
2. Nelson Pike, "Hume on Evil" in God and Evil, edited by Nelson Pike, (Prentice-Hall, Inc., Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, 1964), p. 100.
3. See, for example, D 143-146.
4. This is particularly evident in Part II, and Part VI and VII of the Dialogues.
5. D 205-211 are the pages covering this portion of the discussion of evil.
6. Philo's attack on Manichaeism appears in one (highly condensed) paragraph, D 211-212.