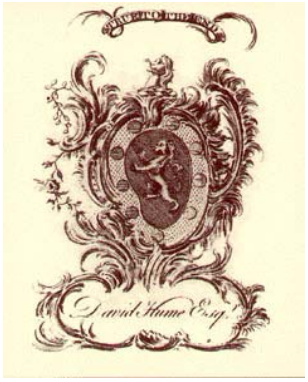

Going Out the Window: A Comment on Tweyman

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GOING OUT THE WINDOW: A COMMENT ON TWEYMAN

> Whether your scepticism be as absolute and sincere as you pretend, we shall learn bye and bye, when the company breaks up: We shall then see, whether you go out at the door or the window; and whether you really doubt; if your body has gravity, or can be injured by its fall; according to popular opinion, derived from our fallacious senses and more fallacious experience.[1]

My paper is divided into two sections. In the first section I will summarize and comment on Stanley Tweyman's paper[2] and in the second section present an alternative reading of Parts X and XI of the Dialogues.

SECTION I

In his paper Tweyman claims that, although Philo's argument in Parts I-IX of the Dialogues are Pyrrhonian, in Parts X and XI a major change of strategy occurs in which Pyrrhonian arguments are replaced by hypothetico-deductive ones.

Recent scholarship on Hume's Dialogues has revolved around two questions: (1) the identification of the sources and personages of the Dialogues and (2) Hume's attitude toward religion. Tweyman and I agree that Philo speaks for Hume. We differ on the character of Philo's challenge to Cleanthes' experimental theism.

Philo's methodological shift in Parts X and XI is said to consist in his presentation of scientific hypotheses for appraisal, in contrast to the alternative hypotheses of the earlier Parts, where sceptical arguments are used to undermine Cleanthes' position. I take it that the scientific hypotheses in question are construed realistically

and not instrumentally; they are supposedly true or false and permit deductions to be made from them.

The first evidence of the methodological shift, we are told, occurs in Part VIII in which Philo speaks in the third and not the first person, "a clear signal to the reader ... that his Pyrrhonism ... has now been abandoned." (Tweyman, 77) I find this claim unconvincing since in the majority of instances throughout the passage Philo writes in first-person fashion (D 186). Any detectable changes here seem to me to be purely stylistic in character.

Tweyman uses the terms 'scepticism' and 'Pyrrhonism' interchangeably. His account of Pyrrhonism involves two theses, the second of which is derived from the first: (1) scepticism involves suspense of judgment between alternative beliefs; and (2) Philo presents his "position in order to show that the hypothesis advanced by Cleanthes is false." (Tweyman, 76) In his sceptical mode in Parts I-IX Philo makes no truth claim for the hypotheses he sets out. But, according to Tweyman,

> ...this does not establish that Philo is a Pyrrhonian throughout the Dialogues, and that he always supports positions ... to argue against the hypothesis advanced by Cleanthes. (Tweyman, 76)

Tweyman gives two examples of Philonian scepticism in Parts I-VIII. The first is the debate in Part IV over the deity's relation to the world. Cleanthes contends that the deity is external to his creation, and Philo questions the validity of Cleanthes' causal inferences. (D 160) The second is the argument in Parts VI and VII in which Philo argues that the available data do not support the hypothesis of an intelligent designer. I find the account at this point unexceptionable.

The first example in which Philo's arguments become "distinctly un-Pyrrhonian" (Tweyman, 77) is the passage in which Philo details the 'inconveniences' of anthropomorphism. Philo begins by saying:

> ...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? (D 198)

But, he continues, "the course of nature tends not to human or animal felicity." (Ibid.) Cleanthes' has asserted human happiness, a thesis which Philo denies. We are no longer dealing with an alternative hypothesis designed to undermine Cleanthes' account but with "the hypothetico-deductive method for testing Cleanthes' hypothesis." (Tweyman, 78)

Part XI divides into the three sections which are each discussed to show that Philo's arguments are not Pyrrhonian. Since the argument is similar in all three cases, I will remark only on the discussion of the 'indifference hypothesis,' Philo's argument that the deity is 'indifferent' to the good and evil in the world. The moral attributes of the deity are under examination and not his existence or power. The probable conclusion that Philo draws is that the deity is neither good nor malicious but is 'indifferent' to the good and evil in the world. Philo eliminates all hypotheses but one -- the indifference of the deity -- and claims that this hypothesis "seems by far the most probable."

Although there is much in this reading with which I can agree, I find Tweyman's account misleading in its treatment of Hume's scepticism in the Dialogues.

SECTION II

I will begin an alternative account of Parts X and XI with a brief account of Hume's scepticism. Scepticism, as described in Pyrrho's Outlines of Pyrrhonism, involves two stages: (1) suspension of judgment, 'a standstill of the intellect as a result of which we neither deny nor affirm anything;'[3] (2) the famous ten modes or tropes of scepticism were to bring about the production of oppositions among the appearances of things, where 'appearances' simply refer to the impressions things make upon us. Scepticism is conceived of as a way of life for troubled (and untroubled) times. The sceptic contrasts his view with his opponent the dogmatist. A dogmatist has beliefs, but a sceptic neither affirms nor denies. Sceptics are doubters. The word 'dogmatist' in antiquity simply referred to someone with beliefs, not someone who refuses to consider evidence. When Philo calls Cleanthes a 'dogmatist' the term should be taken in its antique sense. To live as a Pyrrhonist required suspension of judgment, a suspense which will lead to tranquility of spirit or unperturbedness. The suspension of judgment includes not only reactions to sensory experiences but also to logic, physics and ethics, i.e. the systematic bodies of knowledge recognized by antique science. Hume agreed with the Pyrrhonists that no rational justification could be given either for the beliefs of common life or for scientific and philosophical beliefs. Here Hume is a 'theoretical sceptic.' Theoretical scepticism is wholly unmitigated except for immediate sensory beliefs[4] and is the proper stance toward scientific hypotheses, including those set out in the Dialogues.

But unlike the Pyrrhonians, Hume feels we are unable to withhold assent from the beliefs of common

life. The result is a view he calls variously 'mitigated' or 'moderate scepticism.' This leads to the famous statement in the Treatise that "Nature, by an absolute and uncontroulable necessity has determin'd us to judge as well as to breathe and feel." (T 183)

The double nature of Humean scepticism, its denial and its assent, is expressed in the following passage from Part I.

> To whatever length any one may push his speculative principles of scepticism, he must act, I own, and live, and converse like other men; and for this conduct he is not obliged to give any other reason than the absolute necessity he lies under of so doing. ...To philosophise on such subjects [natural or moral subjects] is nothing essentially different from reasoning on common life. ...All sceptics pretend, that, if reason be considered in an abstract view, it furnishes invincible arguments against itself, and that we could never retain any conviction or assurance, on any subject, were not the sceptical reasonings so refined and subtile, that they are not able to counterpoise the more solid and more natural arguments, derived from the senses and experience. But it is evident, whenever our arguments lose this advantage, and run wide of common life, that 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 134-136)

In effect two kinds of scepticism are examined in this passage: Pyrrhonian and moderate scepticism. Philo argues throughout that Cleanthes is the Pyrrhonist and he is the moderate sceptic.

The passage is the key to Philo's scepticism about the deity's moral attributes in Parts X and XI of the Dialogues.

To support this contention I will cite two passages from Parts I-IX and compare them with a later passage to show that Philo's stance toward Cleanthes' arguments is consistent throughout the Dialogues. The first passage runs as follows:

> [W]ere I obliged to defend any particular system of this nature (which I never willingly should do), I esteem none more plausible than that which ascribes an eternal, inherent principle of order to the world; though attended with great and continual revolutions and alterations. (D 174)

Philo here exhibits reluctance to give causal hypotheses a high degree of probability, his usual stance. The second passage I have in mind is at the end of Part VI. Philo once again claims that Cleanthes is the real Pyrrhonian.

> All these systems, then, of scepticism, polytheism, and theism, you must allow, on your principles, to be on a like footing, and that no one of them has any advantages over the others. You may thence learn the fallacy of your principles. (D 175)

But precisely the same picture emerges in Philo's speech at the end of Part X, the speech in which Philo tells Cleanthes it is now his turn "to tug the labouring oar." (D 202)

> I must use the freedom to admonish you, CLEANTHES, that you have put this controversy upon a most dangerous issue, and are unawares introducing a total scepticism into the most essential articles of natural and revealed theology. ...[B]y your resting the whole system of religion on a point, which, from its very nature, must for ever be uncertain, you tacitly confess, that

> that system is equally uncertain. (D 200-201)

The labouring oar that Cleanthes must now tug is to show that he is not a Pyrrhonian, as Philo claims.

Hume's complex attitude toward religion is consistent throughout his writings. His central purpose in discussing religion was to isolate the subject so that it would have no real effect on social and moral life. Hume's main rational argument, in contrast to whatever emotional or psychological attitudes influenced him, was the ever-intractable problem of evil. This is the problem which gives Hume such a low opinion of religion. Philo says in Part X:

> I will allow, that pain or misery in man is compatible with infinite power and goodness in the Deity, even in your sense of these attributes: What are you advanced by all these concessions? ...You must prove these pure, unmixed, and uncontrollable attributes from the present mixed and confused phenomena, and from these alone. A hopeful [strange] undertaking! (D 201)

However, Cleanthes and Philo share a belief in an empirical theism. In Part XII Philo says:

> ...that the cause or causes of order in the universe probably bear some remote analogy to human intelligence. (D 227)

We know that this is Hume's own position from what he tells us in The Natural History of Religion:[5]

> The whole frame of nature bespeaks an intelligent author; and no rational enquirer can after serious reflection, suspend his belief a moment 'with regard to the primary principles of genuine theism and religion.'

The argument in the Dialogues can be divided into four sections. The first section, running from

Parts I-II, examines the argument from analogy, with Philo showing the weakness of the analogy as an inductive argument. The second division of the argument occurs in Part III in which Cleanthes introduces the 'irregular argument.'

> Whatever cavils may be urged; an orderly world, as well as a coherent, articulate speech, will still be received as an incontestable proof of design and intention. (D 155)

In the third division, Parts X and XI, the moral attributes of the deity are examined. The final section, Part XII, summarizes the discussion.

Philo's argument in Parts X and XI is designed primarily to show that we cannot have knowledge of the moral attributes of the deity, his providence, justice, love and mercy. All we can comprehend are his natural attributes, his intelligence and power. The existence of the deity is accepted because of entirely non-rational tendencies in human nature, not because of rational proofs. (I will bypass discussion of the moot question of whether belief in the deity is a so-called 'natural belief' or not.)

The result is that, although both Cleanthes and Philo claim the title 'theist,' they mean quite different things by the term. Cleanthes believes that we can know both the natural and the moral attributes of the deity by an inductive argument similar to those found in science, a version of the so-called 'parity' argument. Philo denies this because he has a very different conception of the deity.

Philo speaks of God both as divine Being and a supreme intelligence. In Part X the divine attributes are said to be infinitely perfect but incomprehensible. But since these attributes are

incomprehensible the most we can have is a natural piety toward the deity. As Philo says in Part II:

> Nothing exists without a cause; and the original cause of this universe (whatever it be) we call GOD; and piously ascribe to him every species of perfection. ...But as all perfection is entirely relative, we ought never to imagine, that we comprehend the attributes of this divine Being, or to suppose, that his perfections have any analogy or likeness to the perfections of a human creature. (D 142, my emphasis)

At this point the famous incomplete syllogism is introduced:

> Our ideas reach no farther than our experience: We have no experience of divine attributes and operations: I need not conclude my syllogism. (D 142-143)

One might ask, if God is not the God to whom one can bend the knee, nor is he the metaphysical God of the philosophers, what function does he perform for the Philonian Hume? The answer is given at the end of Part XII: Be a Humean philosophical sceptic. When Hume talks of religion we occasionally hear the 'other voice,' the rueful voice of natural piety.

> ...[B]elieve me, CLEANTHES, the most natural sentiment, which a well-disposed mind will feel on this occasion, is a longing desire and expectation, that Heaven would be pleased to dissipate, at least alleviate, this profound ignorance, by affording some more particular revelation to mankind, and making discoveries of the nature, attributes, and operations of the divine object of our Faith. (D 227)

This last point can be emphasized by recalling Philo's contrast between true religion and the 'vulgar superstition' which he despises. The

former is described in Philo's last speech in the Dialogues.

> To be a philosophical sceptic is, in a man of letters, the first and most essential step towards being a sound, believing Christian. (D 228)

The latter, however, is totally pernicious:

> How happens it then ... if vulgar superstition be so salutary to society, that all history abounds so much with accounts of its pernicious consequences on public affairs? Factions, civil wars, persecutions, subversions of government, oppression, slavery; these are the dismal consequences which always attend its prevalency over the minds of men. (D 220)

The causal hypotheses under review throughout concern the value of the observational evidence that can be adduced for the deity's nature. For Philo, the sceptic, the probability of the observational evidence confirming the hypothesis is low; for Cleanthes, the dogmatist, it is high. Philo states his own position in a well-known and controversial passage from Part XII.

> [It seems evident, that the dispute between the sceptics [PHILO] and dogmatists [CLEANTHES] is entirely verbal, or at least regards only the degrees of doubt and assurance, which we ought to indulge with regard to all reasoning: And such disputes are commonly at the bottom, verbal, and admit not of any precise determination. No philosophical dogmatist denies, that there are difficulties both with regard to the senses and to all science: and that these difficulties are in a regular, logical method, absolutely insolveable. No sceptic denies, that we lie under an absolute necessity, notwithstanding these difficulties, of thinking, and believing, and reasoning with regard to all kind of subjects, and even of frequently assenting with confidence

> and security. The only difference, then, between these sects, if they merit that name, is, that the sceptic, from habit, caprice, or inclination, insists most on the difficulties; the dogmatist, for like reasons, on the necessity.] (D 219n)

We know from the researches of Kemp Smith that this passage was probably written in 1776, after the manuscript was completed, and that Hume attached considerable importance to it. The operative phrase in this long passage is that the causal hypotheses at the basis of the dispute '<u>admit of no determination</u>.'

The result of my analysis is in no way novel. Although Philo-Hume does not destroy the design argument, he delivered it a blow from which it has never recovered. There is a consensus, after Hume, that the argument from design is too weak an inductive argument for a successful case to be built upon it. Moreover, in Parts X and XI Philo-Hume showed the weaknesses of inferences about either the deity's intelligence and power -- his natural attributes -- or his moral attributes like providential care.

The substantive differences between Philo and Cleanthes remain immense. The reason is simple: a Philonian causal hypothesis about the creation of the world or the character is worthless as a rational argument. Its probative force arises only from the passional side of our nature. The bed-rock difference between Philo and Cleanthes arises from Philo's theoretical scepticism about all causal hypotheses. Because Cleanthes does not recognize the distinction he is continually forced, albeit from Philo's malice, into the position of an extreme Pyrrhonism -- a position which Philo (and Hume himself) had weighed and found wanting.

Although no hypotheses can escape Humean scepticism, the causal hypotheses in religion and

those in science are fundamentally different for Hume. Scientific causal hypotheses can be judged by general rules and the rules by which we judge of causes and effects. But religious hypotheses cannot be so analyzed since they lack precise determination. The result is that, although Tweyman has made an interesting suggestion about the role of scientific hypotheses in Parts X and XI, the application by Cleanthes to religion of results drawn from science is minimally effective. Philo shows the greatest respect for scientific results understood in his own sceptical terms, but science does not give anything of value to religion.

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1. David Hume, Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion, ed. Norman Kemp Smith (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1947), p. 132. Further references to the Dialogues will be cited as 'D' followed by the relevant page number(s).

2. Stanley Tweyman, "Hume's Dialogues on Evil," in this issue of Hume Studies XIII, (1987), pp. 74-85. All references in the text to his paper will be cited as 'Tweyman' followed by the relevant page number(s).

3. Quoted in Annas and Barnes, The Modes of Scepticism, Cambridge, 1985, p. 25.

4. I borrow the term from Robert J. Fogelin, Hume's Scepticism in the Treatise of Human Nature, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1985, Ch. 1.

5. Natural History of Religion, Reprinted in Hume on Religion, ed. Richard Wollheim, Fontana Library, New York, 1963, p. 31.