



Comments on Tweyman and Davis

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Hume Studies Volume XIII, Number 1 (April, 1987) 98 - 103.

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COMMENTS ON TWEYMAN AND DAVIS

Tweyman contends that in Parts X and XI of the Dialogues Philo sets aside his Pyrrhonian or skeptical approach to theology, which consists in falsifying or casting doubt on the hypotheses of Cleanthes, and instead argues for a thesis of his own, viz. what we might call the "indifference thesis" that the original source of all things is morally indifferent.¹ Davis counters with an alternative interpretation of these two Parts of the Dialogues, arguing that Philo's approach to Cleanthes' arguments is consistent throughout the Dialogues and that Philo's aim is always the same, viz., to show that if Cleanthes remains true to his principles and accepts their logical consequences, it is Cleanthes who is the Pyrrhonian and Philo who is the moderate skeptic. My position is that neither Tweyman nor Davis have given a proper analysis of Parts X and XI.

I would agree with Davis that Tweyman's position does seem to have an initial implausibility to it for at least two reasons. First of all, in Part II Philo commits himself to the "mystical incomprehensibility thesis" that the attributes of God are perfect but incomprehensible; and the mystical incomprehensibility thesis is incompatible with the indifference thesis. It cannot be the case both that God has perfect but incomprehensible attributes and that we also know he is morally indifferent. Moreover, the mystical incomprehensibility thesis is reiterated in Part VI² and more importantly, in Part X: "None but we mystics, as you were pleased to call us, can account for this strange mixture of phenomena, by deriving it from attributes, infinitely perfect, but incomprehensible"

(D 199). Since Philo appears to stick to the mystical incomprehensibility thesis, Tweyman has a problem explaining how Philo can hold one position on the attributes of God in Part X (the mystical incomprehensibility thesis) and then supposedly reverse himself in Part XI to argue for another (the indifference thesis). Second, Tweyman's position seems to contradict the strategic position outlined by Philo in Part II: "You seem not to apprehend, replied Philo, that I argue with Cleanthes in his own way; and by showing him the dangerous consequences of his tenets, hope at last to reduce him to our opinion." (D 145) The strategy is to show Cleanthes that any position but that of the mystics has dangerous, i.e., skeptical or theologically unwelcome consequences, and so should be abandoned. Philo's strategy is not to defend his own position, but rather to reveal the weaknesses in Cleanthes' position.

Thus far I would agree that Davis' interpretation is more consistent with both Philo's strategic position and with his mystical incomprehensibility thesis. Yet Davis does not directly take up the important point about Parts X and XI which Tweyman raises: that Philo changes his way of arguing in Parts X and XI from that which he had been employing previously in the first eight sections, i.e., that he changes from a Pyrrhonian to a non-Pyrrhonian way of arguing. This is how Tweyman puts it:

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. (Tweyman 84-85)

Now Tweyman does seem to have a point here. It is true that Philo takes his arguments in Parts X and XI to have a conclusiveness which he did not attribute to his arguments in Parts I-VIII. But at least part of the explanation for Philo's confidence in his arguments about God's moral attributes, as Tweyman himself recognizes, is that there is no dispute about the data from which inferences are to be drawn: all the participants agree that the world contains both good and evil and that the data, therefore, consists of mixed phenomena. Consequently, one source of skeptical argument, viz., how the data are to be classified, has been eliminated, and, therefore, it is not surprising that one of Philo's typical modes of skeptical argumentation cannot be found in Parts X and XI. But ambiguities in the data are not the only source of dispute between Philo and Cleanthes. Something that both Tweyman and Davis overlook is that one of the major differences between Philo and Cleanthes is over the question of mysticism versus anthropomorphism, i.e., whether the attributes of God are to be conceived as strongly resembling those of man. This difference is

obvious in Part X where Philo attempts to dislodge Cleanthes from his anthropomorphism:

And it is 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? (D 198)

Cleanthes' first response to this challenge is not to deny his anthropomorphism, but to deny the data, i.e., "to deny absolutely the misery and wickedness of man" (D 200). At this juncture Philo introduces the point noted by Davis, viz., that Cleanthes' position is verging on skepticism, because to the extent that the foundations of religion depend on establishing the unestablishable, that the quantity of goodness or pleasure in the world exceeds the quantity of evil or pain, Cleanthes is introducing total skepticism into the foundations of religion. The important point here, not noticed by Davis, is that Philo is forcing Cleanthes into a skeptical position, not because he wants to ironically present Cleanthes as the Pyrrhonian and he as the moderate skeptic, but rather in order to get Cleanthes to abandon his anthropomorphism by showing him its dangerous consequences. In the ensuing Part XI, Cleanthes acknowledges the point and the force of Philo's argument:

If we preserve human analogy, we must for ever find it impossible to reconcile any mixture of evil in the universe with infinite attributes, much less, can we ever prove the latter from the former (D 203, my emphasis).

His point is that Philo's arguments are taken to be decisive against an anthropomorphism which Cleanthes

cannot discard. Since he cannot abandon anthropomorphism, Cleanthes' only remaining out is to abandon the claim that God has infinite attributes. But even this will not save Cleanthes' position. Philo's point in Part XI is that on the agreed-upon data, the most probable inference is that God lacks both moral goodness and moral malice, when those moral attributes are characterized anthropomorphically. Philo says: "...so long as there is any vice at all in the universe, it will very much puzzle you anthropomorphites, how to account for it" (D 212). Philo's point, then, is a skeptical, not a metaphysical one: if Cleanthes persists in his anthropomorphism and experimental theism on the topic of the moral attributes of God, the consequences are the undermining of his own position. Cleanthes must choose: abandon religion or anthropomorphism.

Both Davis and Tweyman fail to pay enough attention to the issue of Philo's anti-anthropomorphism. This leads them in opposite directions: Davis sees correctly that Philo continues to argue skeptically in Parts X and XI, but mistakenly focuses on the question of skepticism as the lesson of these parts and fails to notice that the issue of anthropomorphism is central. Tweyman, on the other hand, although noting correctly that a certain type of skeptical argument is irrelevant to Parts X and XI, is mistakenly led to interpret Philo as abandoning all skeptical arguments and instead embracing scientific proofs of the moral indifference of God. However, that mine is the more plausible interpretation of Philo's moves in Part XI is confirmed by reference to Part XII of the Dialogues, to which Tweyman himself appeals to shore up his interpretation. But if Tweyman were correct in his interpretation, we should expect Philo in Part XII to

be endorsing, or at least saying things consistent with, the indifference thesis. What we actually find is Philo continuing to maintain the moral perfection of God: "For, as the supreme Being is allowed to be absolutely and entirely perfect, whatever differs most from him departs the farthest from the supreme standard of rectitude and perfection" (D 219).

I conclude, then, that Tweyman is correct about Philo's abandoning skeptical argument only to the extent that he is correct that Philo has abandoned one kind of skeptical argument, that based on the ambiguity of the data; but he is not correct that Philo has ceased to argue skeptically at all in those Parts of the Dialogues, inasmuch as Philo does continue to present, not his own view, but rather 'inconveniences of anthropomorphism.' What is puzzling, however, and not accounted for by either Tweyman or Davis is the nature of and justification for Philo's "mystical incomprehensibility thesis." Unlocking the mysteries of Philo's mysticism may yet give access to the key to the Dialogues.

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1. 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).
2. David Hume, Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion, ed. Norman Kemp Smith (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1947), p. 172. Further references to the Dialogues will be cited as 'D' followed by the relevant page number(s).