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COMMENTARY ON PROFESSOR TWEYMAN'S 'HUME ON EVIL'

Philo concludes his long and celebrated debate with Cleanthes on the problem of evil (Parts X and XI of Hume's Dialogues) with the assertion that the "true conclusion" to be drawn from the "mixed phenomena" in the world is that "the original source" of whatever order we find in the world is "indifferent" to matters of good and evil. From what Philo says immediately thereafter it is clear that by the phrase "The true conclusion is..." he does not mean 'The truth is...' but rather something like 'The conclusion best supported by the available evidence is....' (D 212)

Now according to both Nelson Pike and Stanley Tweyman, the claim made by Philo in these passages involves him in a shift or departure from the procedure he adopted in earlier dialogues when he examined the design argument set forth by Cleanthes. It is claimed that whereas in the earlier dialogues Philo emphatically professed a sceptical outlook -- "the view requiring that one embrace no metaphysical position of one's own" (to quote Nelson Pike¹) -- in the quoted passage he seems to abandon this scepticism in favor of embracing what amounts to being a metaphysical position in natural theology. Pike thinks that this alleged shift is only an apparent one, that the central import of these passages is sceptical rather than metaphysical, and that here, as elsewhere in the earlier dialogues, Philo's sole purpose in offering a more plausible counter-hypothesis is to show that Cleanthes' hypothesis is false. Tweyman, on the other hand, argues that the shift is a very real one and that Hume does indeed "intend Philo's conclusion in Part XI to be a truth in natural theology [...] ... Philo is

not arguing as a sceptic; rather he is employing the hypothetico-deductive method for testing Cleanthes' hypothesis."²

Let me say at once that I agree with Tweyman, as against Pike, that in these passages Philo does claim to put forward a truth in natural theology, and I also agree with just about everything that Tweyman says in his paper concerning the proper interpretation of Philo's views in Parts X and XI leading up to this conclusion. I follow the lead of those scholars who, at least since Kemp Smith, have argued that Philo's whole purpose in demonstrating such "truths" is to discredit natural theology in the eyes of a true Christian believer by dramatizing the enormous gulf between the very attenuated form of theism ("diaphonous deism" one scholar calls it), which is the most one can hope to get out of Cleanthes' experimental approach to religion, and the claim of Christian theism to which Cleanthes aspires. But I do not accept the view that Philo's claim in these dialogues represents any sort of sudden departure (and certainly not a "fundamental methodological difference") from his critical stance against the design argument in earlier dialogues. What I hope to show below is that not only does this view distort what Philo does in the earlier dialogues, but it also distracts our attention from the true nature of Hume's achievement in Parts X and XI of the Dialogues. (Incidentally, I will assume throughout the sequel that Kemp Smith's identification of Hume with Philo is essentially correct.)

It would indeed be extremely paradoxical, in the face of Philo's famous (or notorious) peroration at the end of Part VIII proclaiming the "complete triumph of the sceptic" in regard to "all religious

systems," to raise any doubts about Philo's acceptance of the sceptical import of his own earlier arguments. But this still leaves unsettled the question as to what sort of scepticism it is whose triumph Philo proclaims at this point and whether it is inconsistent with the conclusion he reaches at the end of his discussion of evil.

One would have hoped that at this late stage in the scholarship on the Dialogues, if there is one issue on which all of us could agree it is that Philo at no time in the Dialogues takes the (easy) Pyrrhonian line against Cleanthes' "hypothesis of experimental theism." I mention this because at several places in his paper Tweyman characterizes Philo's scepticism in the first eight parts of the dialogues as being of the Pyrrhonian variety. I will assume that this is simply a lax way of using the term "Pyrrhonian" as if it were synonymous with "scepticism" and let it go at that. If, now, we turn to Pike, whose view Tweyman is criticizing after all, it is clear (see the quote above) that for him the view Philo pretends to depart from in the dialogues on evil is mitigated scepticism, whose positivistic prescriptions require us to eschew all metaphysical speculations and confine our philosophizing to the "unavoidable" reasoning of "common life and experience."

The puzzling thing about Pike's position is that in his detailed and very useful discussion of the early dialogues in his longer commentary on them, Philo is shown as agreeing to drop his principled opposition to metaphysical speculations with which he opens his criticism of Cleanthes' proof of God's existence, long before the dialogues on evil. I cannot of course do any justice to Pike's commentary but very, very briefly the situation with regard to

the early dialogues he describes may be summed up as follows. Cleanthes' proof is offered as an "argument from experience" and, as such, it is subjected by Philo to a rigorous examination in accordance with "the normal canons of adequacy that apply to all inferences of this general sort." (Pike 134) At the center of this proof is the claim that the universe as a whole belongs to the class of ordered systems whose other members are human artifacts such as watches and houses. Now, according to Pike, the central thrust of Philo's criticisms in Part II of the Dialogues is that Cleanthes' "hypothesis of design" is "conceptually immature" because order in the universe is not "an empirically identifiable datum." (Pike 156-57 and 164) So far Philo cannot be said to have gone beyond the narrow confines of mitigated scepticism. To continue with Pike's account, he says that after two interludes when Philo returns to his attack on Cleanthes' hypothesis (Parts V to VIII) he assumes, though only for the sake of argument, that this "hypothesis is a possible explanation of a genuine fact." (Pike 175) What Philo now does is to subject Cleanthes' hypothesis to a comparative test with other putative explanations for order in the universe and concludes that none of these explanations, and certainly not Cleanthes', is a clear winner in this competition. He ends with the peroration mentioned above recommending a "total suspense of judgment" in regard to all such explanations.

I have no quarrel with Pike's description of what takes place in Parts I and II and from Parts V to VIII. I would argue, however, that when Philo accepts there must be some explanation for order in the universe, he is genuinely conceding this point to Cleanthes, although Pike's contention is that Philo

is doing this simply to move the argument forward. My difference with Pike here stems from our radically different readings of Part III of the Dialogues,³ an issue I do not need to go into here. What I wish to contend here is simply that, given Pike's interpretation of the relevant earlier dialogues, the scepticism with which Philo concludes Part VIII is altogether different in kind from the scepticism we encounter in Part II. Whereas the scepticism of Part VIII results from the application of normal procedures of scientific enquiry, Philo's scepticism in Part II does not permit such an enquiry to even get off the ground because of his contention there that we have no clear notion of what it is we are enquiring about. Or, to put the matter slightly differently, even to allow (as Philo is said to allow beginning with Part V) the mere possibility of a transcendent explanation for the order in the universe being true, is to "carry our speculations into the two eternities" and, thus, to abandon the strictures against metaphysics laid down by Philo in the first two parts of the Dialogues. But then, if what I have just said is correct, what Philo does in Parts X and XI concluding with the claim with which these comments began, does not constitute a radical break from his method of philosophizing in the immediately preceding parts. In other words, to say that he is engaged in doing metaphysics in one place but not in the other, is not a proper way of characterizing how Philo's claims in the earlier and later dialogues differ from each other.

To return now to Tweyman, I find that he locates the difference between Philo's viewpoints in these two sets of dialogues in the proper place but that he misdescribes this difference. Tweyman is essentially correct in characterizing this difference

by the thesis that the earlier dialogues deal with the natural attributes of the deity and the available empirical data are insufficient to warrant the acceptance of any explanatory hypothesis. But in the later dialogues on evil he argues sufficient empirical evidence is available to enable us "to proceed more scientifically, and, in this manner, eliminate all but one of the hypotheses...." But Tweyman is altogether mistaken when he says that this explains "why there is a fundamental methodological difference" between the manner in which Philo proceeds in these dialogues. As a matter of fact, there is no difference in Philo's method in the two places. In both places Philo is using the self-same method -- the "hypothetico-deductive" method as Tweyman prefers to call it -- but with different results simply because the data to which the method is applied in the two places are so very different. One is not necessarily proceeding "less scientifically" simply because the data one happens to be examining do not warrant drawing a definite conclusion!

Let me point out finally what I believe Hume's achievement in these dialogues to be: one part of the achievement is philosophical in a straightforward way, whereas the other can more properly be described as being of a literary kind.

One of the dominant themes in Christian (and most other varieties of) monotheism is that the creator of the universe is a benevolent and just being who is morally concerned with the ultimate well-being of his creatures. Philo's philosophical achievement in Parts X and XI of Hume's Dialogues consists in his demonstrating to a natural theologian like Cleanthes that his preferred method of experimental proof for the existence of a designer for the

order in the universe can be turned against him when it comes to proving the moral attributes of such a designer. Grant to Cleanthes that we cannot reject his "hypothesis of design" "without the greatest violence" to common sense (D 154) -- where does that get him? As long as there is even a smidgen of what Philo calls "avoidable" evil in the world, inference to God's moral attributes remains problematic. Cleanthes cannot appeal to common sense and the argument from experience at one stage and deny the consequences of just this sort of appeal at the next stage in the discussion. That Philo is perfectly aware he has set just this trap for Cleanthes is quite evident from the well-known final paragraph of Part X wherein he concedes to Cleanthes that "Formerly, when we argued concerning the natural attributes of intelligence and design, I needed all my sceptical and metaphysical subtilty to elude your grasp." But, he goes on, it is Cleanthes' "turn now to tug the labouring oar, and to support your philosophical subtilties against the dictates of plain reason and experience." (D 201-202) Cleanthes' only response to this challenge is to propose a "new theory" of a "finitely perfect" but omni-benevolent deity to account for the existence of evil -- a move, as we have just been shown, which gets him nowhere.

What I have called the more literary side of Hume's achievement in the dialogues on evil, has to do with the confrontation between Philo and Demea that takes place toward the very end of Part XI. As happens not infrequently in these Dialogues, Hume is at this point taking advantage of the dialectical interplay which is inherent in the logical structures of the arguments he is dealing with, in order to make what, broadly speaking, we may call a literary point. In the confrontation between Philo and Demea, Hume, I

believe, is using this kind of an interplay as a device to deliberately unmask Philo and thus, since I identify Hume with Philo, reveal his own views in this matter. By the time the discussion on evil is brought to a close, it has begun to dawn on the slow-witted Demea that Philo, without putting it in so many words, has confronted him with a dilemma: Either go along with Cleanthes' "experimental theism," in which case the most you can get is a deity who is indifferent to moral good and evil, or go the whole hog with your 'sceptical fideism,' in which case you end with a diety whose moral, no less than natural "attributes" [are] infinitely perfect but incomprehensible." Demea, who has obviously not confronted the lesson of the biblical story of Job and his three worldly-wise friends, has no stomach for this dilemma and leaves the company much distraught and perplexed. Meantime, Hume has exposed the fatal flaws both in Cleanthes' "anthropomorphism" and Demea's "mysticism" which leave no middle ground for the ordinary Christian believer to stand upon. Only later will an extraordinary Christian believer like Hamann (followed much later still by Kierkegaard and his modern-day progeny) have the courage of Demea's convictions to revel in the "adorable mystery" and "absolute incomprehensibility" of the God of religious faith. But that is a different story. All I wanted to do here was to show that there is a price to be paid for this misreading of the Dialogues that denies that Philo consistently uses the same method when dealing with the natural as well as moral attributes of the original source or sources of order in the universe.

1. See Nelson Pike's Commentary on the Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion (New York: Bobbs-Merrill 1970), p. 201. All page references to Pike in the body of this paper are to this extended commentary which includes a slightly revised version of the relevant passages from his "Hume on Evil" referred to by Tweyman. All page references to the Dialogues are to the Kemp Smith edition, and will be cited by 'D' followed by the page numbers.
2. Stanley Tweyman, "Hume's Dialogues on Evil," in this issue of Hume Studies XIII (1987), pp. 74-85; see pp. 74 and 78.
3. See my "Pike on Part III of Hume's Dialogues" Rel. Stud. 14, pp. 325-342.