



## **Hume's Dialogues and the Comedy of Religion**

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HUME'S DIALOGUES AND THE COMEDY OF RELIGION

Laughter is the key to Hume's Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion. Indeed, I would suggest that if the Dialogues have not made one laugh, and if one has not experienced the sheer delight of Hume's rhetorical excesses and gaiety, then one hasn't really understood this work at all. From this perspective, the usual questions are irrelevant -- Is Hume Cleanthes or Philo? Is Philo a mitigated sceptic or a Pyrrhonian? Such debates are sterile and miss the point, for however consistent or inconsistent the characters may be, the actual drama of the text has an intention and a direction all of its own, destroying the religious hypothesis not so much by 'serious' calculated argument as by ridicule and excess. Hume's Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion are the expression of a healthy and cheerful malice which strives at every turn to intensify the sense of the absurdity of religion. Hence their flavour is primarily rhetorical, and it would be a mistake to consider them as merely a collection of paraphraseable proofs directed against the possibility of rational theology. This is not to say, however, that Hume did not take religion seriously; on the contrary, he uses all of the devices of comedy in order to overwhelm it -- rather as Nietzsche was to argue: "Not by wrath does one kill but by laughter."<sup>1</sup>

In this paper, I will consider the rhetorical aspect of Hume's Dialogues to show how the literary mode -- the elaboration and contrast of characters, the use of parody and sudden turns in the plot, etc. -- enables Hume to make a far more compelling assault on the religious hypothesis than the plain recital of

'reasonable' objections would ever achieve. I will focus my discussion on three central themes: First, the professed acceptance of God by all of the participants, and the consequent need for an oblique attack upon religion; second, Hume's comic perspectives on the argument from Design; and third, Hume's development of an 'antinomies of religion,' whereby the various religious arguments are used to undermine each other.

### 1. The Belief in God

No man; no man, at least of common sense, I am persuaded, ever entertained a serious doubt with regard to a truth so certain and self-evident. The question is not concerning the being but the nature of God.<sup>2</sup>

Ostensibly, the one thing that is never questioned in the Dialogues, the one thing that all the participants remain agreed upon, is that God exists. Indeed, it seems that however limited the scope of natural theology may turn out to be, the actual being of God can never be in dispute, for in the Dialogues, belief in God is often presented as if it were an unchallengeable 'given' of human experience. Cleanthes, for example, apparently follows Locke in arguing for the reasonableness of theism; and yet, when he is pressed he defends the Design hypothesis in terms of its psychological irresistibility, appealing to a natural sentiment of belief rather than the claim of any argument:

Consider, anatomize the eye: Survey its structure and contrivance; and tell me, from your own feeling, if the idea of a contriver does not immediately flow in upon you with a force like that of sensation .... it requires time, reflection and study, to summon up those frivolous, though

abstruse, objections, which can support infidelity (D 154).

According to Cleanthes, the Design hypothesis is so self-evident that it really does not need any philosophical justification at all. It is simply the articulation of what we all already knew to be true:

The comparison of the universe to a machine of human contrivance is so obvious and natural, and is justified by so many instances of order and design in nature, that it must immediately strike all unprejudiced apprehensions, and procure universal approbation (D 216).

Demea also denies that religion is based upon argument. He claims that each man is brought to feel the truth of religion within himself through the consciousness of his own complete ignorance and misery.<sup>3</sup> And in this respect, 'reason' can only hamper religious belief. Finally, at the end of the Dialogues, even Philo argues that the difference between theism and atheism is simply one of degree, and that in practise all men are obliged to accept some formulation of the argument from Design:

A purpose, an intention, or design strikes everywhere the most careless, the most stupid thinker; and no man can be so hardened in absurd systems, as at all times to reject it (D 214).

Thus, I think it emerges from the text that for Hume, belief in God is a naive and pre-critical sentiment that seeks to clothe and justify itself with whatever arguments are available. This, indeed, is the basis of Philo's complaint that depending upon the fashion, religious apologists will support their claims, either by stressing the complete inadequacy of human reason or by arguing that faith is a branch of reason:

Sceptics in one age, dogmatists in another; whichever system best suits

the purpose of these reverend gentlemen, in giving them an ascendant over mankind, they are sure to make it their favourite principle, and established tenet (D 139-140).

If religious belief precedes its justification, however, it must also be immune to all particular reasoned objections. One cannot destroy belief in the religious hypothesis with good arguments, because the belief itself does not actually depend upon argument -- it is a 'feeling,' a truth that is experienced as immediately as if it were 'sensation.' Precisely for this reason, the attack upon God and religion must be oblique and rhetorically inspired. It cannot proceed through the elaboration of 'serious' objections, but through comedy and the generation of a reductio ad absurdum: in the Dialogues, belief in God must be exorcised through laughter.

This is why I do not believe we should accept the characters' pronouncement, that the existence of God can never seriously be in question, as confirming anything about the deeper intention of the Dialogues themselves. If the belief in God is somehow 'natural' and pre-critical, it will necessarily elude all formal attempts at falsification, so that a devious mode of operation becomes necessary in order to overcome it.<sup>4</sup> Hence the use of the dialogue form, and, as I shall show, the 'antinomies of religion' that Cleanthes and Demea create through their objections to each other. Hence the explosion of the Design hypothesis through the absurd multiplication of equally valid suppositions, and the exaggeration of all the miseries that such an alleged 'Design' has wrought for us. And hence, also, the unbelievable comedy -- 'the universe is like a vegetable,' 'the

universe was created by an alien deity who has since died,' 'even atheists really accept the argument from design.' But all these levels of humour are going to be missed by the 'literal' interpretation which accepts all the claims of the Dialogues at face value.

## 2. The Argument from Design

In 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).

According to Cleanthes, the argument from Design is an eminently reasonable scientific hypothesis which is, in fact, far more acceptable to ordinary folk than the theories of Copernicus or Galileo. In other words, it doesn't do to argue that we must remain silent about what lies beyond the realm of ordinary experience, for then we would not only have to reject knowledge of God but also the very possibility of scientific knowledge. In this way, Cleanthes projects himself as the spokesman of common sense, quite opposed to the absurd scepticism of Philo, or the blind faith of Demea. He rejects all abstruse a priori proofs in theology, as well as all nice sceptical objections, to argue that experience alone provides us with sufficient evidence to infer the existence of a divine intelligence:

Look round the world: Contemplate the whole and every part of it: You will find it to be nothing but one great machine, subdivided into an infinite number of lesser machines, which again admit of subdivisions.... The curious adapting of means to ends, throughout all nature, resembles exactly, though it much exceeds, the productions of human contrivance; of human design, thought, wisdom, and

intelligence. Since therefore the effects resemble each other, we are led to infer, by all the rules of analogy, that the causes also resemble; and that the Author of nature is somewhat similar to the mind of man (D 143).

Faced with such a very 'reasonable' argument, Philo's response is to restate the Design hypothesis, ostensibly for Demea's benefit, but in such a way as to emphasize its equivocal foundation:

that order, arrangement, or the adjustment of final causes is not, of itself, any proof of design; but only so far as it has been experienced to proceed from that principle (D 146).

From this point on, Philo ridicules the Design hypothesis with the recital of a litany of all the other extravagant conclusions that follow with just as much validity from this accepted fact of order.

Now it would hardly be sufficient for Philo to claim, summarily, that the argument from Design is merely a provincialism of thought, creating God in man's own image. As Cleanthes has shown, the argument from Design has a rhetorical power all of its own, and it is able to use the mask of scientific authority in order to appeal to the most basic credulousness of human beings. In response to Philo's initial criticisms, Cleanthes had argued as follows:

Shall PHILO, a man of so liberal a genius, and extensive knowledge, entertain any general undistinguished scruples with regard to the religious hypothesis, which is founded on the simplest and most obvious arguments, and, unless it meet with artificial obstacles, has such easy access and admission into the mind of man? (D 138)

Accordingly, it is rhetoric which must be used to strip away the reasonable face of the Design hypothesis. And just as Cleanthes defends the argument with an appeal to self-evidence, and with colourful 'illustrations,' so Philo will finally bury it in a wealth of ludicrous but compatible possibilities. In this way, the Design hypothesis is shown to be far removed from 'common sense,' and the methodization of that realm in science.

Philo has a lot of fun pushing Cleanthes' anthropomorphism to its most absurd limits. In Part V for example, he suggests,

Why not assert the Deity or Deities to be corporeal, and to have eyes, a nose, mouth, ears, &c.? EPICURUS maintained, that no man had ever seen reason but in a human figure; therefore the gods must have a human figure (D 168).

He then goes on to give Cleanthes and the horrified Demea a list of some of the possibilities that are open to us, once we go beyond the conjecture of Design and attempt to characterize the Deity or Deities responsible for the Design:

This world, for aught he knows, is very faulty and imperfect, compared to a superior standard; and was only the first rude essay of some infant Deity, who afterwards abandoned it, ashamed of his lame performance; it is the work only of some dependent, inferior Deity; and is the object of derision to his superiors: it is the production of old age and dotage in some superannuated Deity; and ever since his death, has run on at adventures, from the first impulse and active force, which it received from him (D 169).

Likewise, to say that an intelligent God created the world is neither more nor less reasonable than to say that it was spun out of the belly of a great spider.

The vast number of such hypotheses which can be validated by similar analogies serves to bring about the complete triumph of scepticism.

Through tactics such as these, the hypothesis that Philo appears to favour most, namely that the material world contains the principles of order within itself, stands forward as the most economical and least fanciful hypothesis of all. Against the simple-minded illustrations of Cleanthes, who sees the hand of an intelligent and benevolent Designer everywhere -- legs were made for walking, camels were made for our use in the desert, etc. -- Philo points out that an 'immanent' principle of order at work in the universe would have produced exactly the same appearance of 'art':

This at once solves all difficulties; and if the solution, by being so general, is not entirely complete and satisfactory, it is, at least, a theory, that we must, sooner or later, have recourse to, whatever system we embrace. How could things have been as they are, were there not an original, inherent principle of order somewhere, in thought or in matter? And it is very indifferent to which of these we give the preference (D 174).

While Cleanthes initially rejects this proposal, it is rather ironic that later, when he condemns Demea's a priori proofs of God, he resorts to a notion reminiscent of Philo's immanent economy to ridicule Demea's dogmatism: "Why may not the material universe be the necessarily existent Being ... for aught we can determine, it may contain some qualities, which, were they known, would make its non-existence appear as great a contradiction as that twice two is five" (D 190-91).

The most amusing and damning consequence of the argument from Design is brought out in Part X, where Philo mischievously encourages Demea in their long lament over the misery and suffering of all human existence. Part X offers us a kind of 'anti-Design' argument, where Philo turns the tables on Cleanthes by suggesting that if God did design the universe then he must have designed it with the chief intention of making things awful for us:

The whole earth, believe me, PHILO, is cursed and polluted.... The first entrance into life gives anguish to the new-born infant and to its wretched parent: Weakness, impotence, distress, attend each stage of that life: And it is at last finished in agony and horror.

Observe too, says PHILO, the curious artifices of nature, in order to embitter the life of every living being. The stronger prey upon the weaker, and keep them in perpetual terror and anxiety. The weaker too, in their turn, often prey upon the stronger, and vex and molest them without relaxation.... And thus ... every animal is surrounded with enemies, which incessantly seek his misery and destruction (D 194-95).

At this point, Cleanthes is in a complete dilemma, for if he accepts the intelligence and power of a divine Craftsman from an analogy with human works, it would seem that he is also obliged to infer either the moral reprehensibility of this Deity or his complete incompetence, through the same process of analogy. Cleanthes realizes, however, that such a conclusion would entail the real end of religion as a relevant moral force in people's lives. Thus he is prepared, in Part XI, to accept that God is only finitely perfect in a desperate attempt to salvage the bare possibility of his goodness:

Supposing the Author of nature to be finitely perfect, though far exceeding mankind; a satisfactory account may then be given of natural and moral evil, and every untoward phenomenon be explained and adjusted (D 203).

Hume therefore demonstrates how the argument from Design must eventually overcome itself, and bring the ordinary assumption of an omnipotent and perfect God into question. The argument from Design focusses upon the alleged contrivances of the world, attributing them to the direct intervention of God. Once we realize, however, that not everything is contrived in the best possible way -- indeed, "One would imagine, that this grand production has not received the last hand of the maker; so little finished is every part" (D 210) -- and that so many things serve as unnecessary annoyances and evils, we are forced to acknowledge either God's malevolence, or else His complete incompetence. This is a conclusion which could have been avoided, had Cleanthes not been so confident that, notwithstanding Philo's objections, the Design argument can always sustain religious belief:

These suppositions I absolutely disown, cried CLEANTHES: They strike me, however, with no horror; especially, when proposed in that rambling way in which they drop from you. On the contrary, they give me pleasure, when I see, that, by the utmost indulgence of your imagination, you never get rid of the hypothesis of design in the universe; but are obliged, at every turn, to have recourse to it. To this concession I adhere steadily; and this I regard as a sufficient foundation for religion (D 169).

Now there is a sense in which Philo is willing to concede that Cleanthes is correct for as

he himself proclaims towards the end of the Dialogues, no one could possibly deny that the original source of order in the universe bears some degree of analogy to the principle of intelligence:

The theist allows, that the original intelligence is very different from human reason: The atheist allows, that the original principle of order bears some remote analogy to it. Will you quarrel, Gentlemen, about the degrees, and enter into a controversy, which admits not of any precise meaning, nor consequently of any determination? (D 218)

By this point, however, the religious consequences of such an assertion have been reduced to practically zero. For one thing, Philo has destroyed the privileged claim of intelligent Design by showing that a lot of other principles, such as generation, vegetation, and even matter falling into order by itself are equally possible explanations of the order we find in the universe. So many absurd analogies have been shown to conform to the facts that it becomes a mere joke, a final irony for Philo to piously conclude that the analogy which is the basis of Cleanthes' position, cannot even be denied by an atheist. In other words, by the end of the Dialogues the analogy with intelligence has been shown to be so remote and innocuous that one may safely assume that no one could possibly find anything there to argue with. And thus in conclusion, Philo can make the startling assertion that all of natural theology resolves into one "simple ... ambiguous ... [and] undefined proposition, that the cause or causes of order in the universe probably bear some remote analogy to human intelligence" (D 227). Hume's implicit conclusion is that apart from such a feeble

and general claim, every other argument in favour of religion is useless.

### 3. Hume's Antinomies

It is surely ironic, and damning to the cause of religion, that both Demea and Cleanthes think they can demonstrate the truth about God with principles that are completely opposed to each other. Worse still, these two religious apologists spend so much of their time refuting and even insulting each other, that the reader is left with an intense awareness of the prejudice which belongs to the 'natural' belief in God. In fact, I would suggest that in the Dialogues Hume's rhetorical strategy is for mystic and anthropomorphite to cancel each other out. And through the construction of this 'antinomies of religion' he forces us to challenge the religious beliefs which both opponents espouse.

At the very beginning of the Dialogues, Demea claims that the mysteries of religion can only become palatable after one has undergone a long and deliberate training in stifling the ordinary claims of reason. It seems that the understanding must be harassed and criticized so that it finally becomes so unsure of itself that it will accept religious truths without question:

Having thus tamed their mind to a proper submission and self-diffidence, I have no longer any scruple of opening to them the greatest mysteries of religion, nor apprehend any danger from that assuming arrogance of philosophy, which may lead them to reject the most established doctrines and opinions (D 130-31).

Such unabashed and calculating bigotry is rather humorous in being so completely self-discrediting.

Certainly, it seems to amuse Philo, who proceeds to give a long and exaggerated homily on the feebleness of human reason. And this in turn provokes Cleanthes into giving his defence of the reasonableness of religion.

As the friend of common sense, Cleanthes rejects all a priori proofs of God's existence to insist that only the argument from experience, the argument from Design, is valid. As scientific thinkers we ought only to accept that for which there is firm factual evidence, and the evidence for Design is apparently overwhelming. Thus, according to Cleanthes, all of Demea's talk about the "adorable mysteriousness" (D 145) of God, and his mysticism which refuses to make any analogy between man and Deity, is actually a disguised form of atheism:

I can readily allow, said CLEANTHES, that those who maintain the perfect simplicity of the supreme Being, to the extent in which you have explained it are complete mystics, and chargeable with all the consequences which I have drawn from their opinion. They are, in a word, atheists, without knowing it (D 159).

As I have already shown, however, at the end of the Dialogues Philo emphasizes in turn that the theist's insistence upon Design hardly distinguishes his position from that of atheism. For given what we can say about Design, or the nature and existence of any 'Designer,' the terms 'atheism' and 'theism' are practically interchangeable.

The antagonism between Cleanthes and Demea develops, as Demea now attacks Cleanthes' anthropomorphism, and the sheer presumption of taking human nature as the model for that of God. Thus, when Philo is described as "confounded" by Cleanthes'

illustrations of the voice in the clouds and the vegetable library, it is Demea who rescues him:

By representing the Deity as so intelligible, and comprehensible, and so similar to a human mind, we are guilty of the grossest and most narrow partiality, and make ourselves the model of the whole universe (D 156).

Later on, Demea argues that the plethora of repugnant hypotheses which anthropomorphism indifferently allows makes religion quite impossible as a guide for how we should live:

While we are uncertain, whether there is one Deity or many; whether the Deity or Deities, to whom we owe our existence, be perfect or imperfect, subordinate or supreme, dead or alive; what trust or confidence can we repose in them? ... To all the purposes of life, the theory of religion becomes altogether useless (D 170).

Though if Demea is right, and no analogy can be made between the human and the divine, then we are just as much in the dark as to how we should behave. Later still, it is quite ironic when Demea berates Cleanthes for not providing any supporting 'data' for his assertions (D 177). Once again, the apologist's argument actually serves as an objection to his own brand of theism.

In Part IX, Demea offers an a priori proof of God's existence in order to remove some of the difficulties which beset him: that something exists rather than nothing, and that its nature is that of a "particularity possibility, exclusive of the rest," can only be explained by having recourse to a necessarily existent Being, "who carries the REASON of his existence in himself" (D 189). One can only wonder at Demea's newly found respect for abstract

reasoning. Cleanthes, of course, is quite delighted to be able to attack Demea once more, declaring his argument to be "obviously ill-grounded" and based on "an evident absurdity." He then offers this parroted refutation:

Nothing is demonstrable, unless the contrary implies a contradiction. Nothing, that is distinctly conceivable, implies a contradiction. Whatever we conceive as existent, we can also conceive as non-existent. There is no Being, therefore, whose non-existence implies a contradiction. Consequently there is no Being, whose existence is demonstrable (D 189).

Cleanthes goes on to ask why the material universe may not itself be the necessarily existent being. He argues that it is absurd to give the causes for several particular things, and then to be asked, in addition, for the cause of all of them. Once again, however -- and this was Hume's joke -- such an objection can also be used against his own hypothesis of an intelligent Designer of the universe. As Philo immediately points out:

Instead of admiring the order of natural beings, may it not happen, that, could we penetrate into the intimate nature of bodies, we should clearly see why it was absolutely impossible, they could ever admit of any other disposition? So dangerous is it to introduce this idea of necessity into the present question! And so naturally does it afford an inference directly opposite to the religious hypothesis! (D 191)

Likewise, a little later, Cleanthes vehemently objects to Demea's assurance that apparently 'evil' phenomena may actually be justified when viewed in the larger perspective:

No! replied CLEANTHES, No! ... To establish one hypothesis upon another is building entirely in the air; and

the utmost we ever attain, by these conjectures and fictions, is to ascertain the bare possibility of our opinion; but never can we, upon such terms, establish its reality (D 199-200).

Once again, however, Philo has already demonstrated that the argument from Design is subject to exactly these limitations: it is certainly consistent with the facts, and it is a hypothesis which cannot be proved. But in the final analysis, it is an unwarranted and unnecessary claim. Cleanthes may accuse Demea of "building entirely in the air," but at this point in the argument his speech functions, ironically, as a commentary on all the arguments of natural theology, including his own.

At the end of Part VIII, Philo describes the way in which all the different arguments for religion contradict and destroy each other: "Each disputant triumphs in his turn; while he carries on an offensive war, and exposes the absurdities, barbarities, and pernicious tenets of his antagonist" (D 186). Nevertheless, he adds that the result of such mutual antagonism is nothing but "the complete triumph of the sceptic." I have suggested that in the Dialogues themselves Hume attempts to create such an antinomies of religion, in which the basic religious positions undermine each other and effectively cancel each other out. Through the comedy of the Dialogues, we are led to conclude that there is no natural theory, and God himself suffers a reductio ad absurdum.

And once we have laughed God out of ourselves, we will come to understand the real foundation upon which religion is built: as Philo insists at the end of the Dialogues, it is a principle of terror which feeds our melancholy and

which forces us to live in the shadow of another realm. On the other hand, we shall also recognize that the idea of God is so appealing because it is, quite simply, the 'nicest' idea of all:

The most agreeable reflection, which it is possible for human imagination to suggest, is that of genuine theism, which represents us as the workmanship of a Being perfectly good, wise, and powerful; who created us for happiness, and who, having implanted in us immeasurable desires of good, will prolong our existence to all eternity (D 224).

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1. In recent years, however, more work has been done on the dramatic and rhetorical aspects of Hume's Dialogues. See for example, D. Rohatyn, "Hume's Dialectical Conceits: The Case of Dialogue XII," Philosophy and Phenomenological Research vol. XLIII, 1982-83; W. Parent, "An Interpretation of Hume's Dialogues," Review of Metaphysics vol. 30, 1976; and A. Vink, "The Literary and Dramatic Character of Hume's Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion," Religious Studies vol. 22, 1986.
2. David Hume, Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion, edited by Norman Kemp Smith, Second Edition (London: 1947), p. 141. Further references will be cited as 'D' followed by the relevant page number(s).
3. See, for example, his initial claims in Pt. X, p. 193.
4. When I call the belief in God a 'natural belief,' I only mean to suggest that for Hume religious belief is a basic unexamined prejudice of thought which requires the correction of philosophy. As Kemp Smith points out, however, Hume's own doctrine of 'natural belief' is that the mind is committed by nature to certain

beliefs. The belief in continuing, independently existing objects, for example, "rests neither on insight nor on evidence." (see Kemp Smith, The Philosophy of David Hume, (London, 1949)).