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Hume Studies Volume XX, Number 2 (November, 1994) 289-291.

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Given that readers of Hume almost invariably praise the clarity and precision of his writing style, it seems odd that they carry from his works nonetheless such hopelessly conflicting interpretations of exactly what he is trying to say. The *Dialogues*, representing the culmination of Hume's treatment of natural religion, entertains correspondingly the broadest range of critical interpretations. His earlier works, his source materials, and his personal correspondence have all been closely scrutinized for the smallest scraps of evidence that could shed light on his precise position on natural religion. In the context of this endeavor, I propose to re-examine a certain passage from his personal correspondence that has been frequently cited in interpretive works on the *Dialogues*, and just as frequently misunderstood.

The passage to which I refer appears in Hume's letter to Gilbert Elliot of Minto dated March 10, 1751. It reads thus:

You wou'd perceive by the Sample I have given you, that I make Cleanthes the Hero of the Dialogue. Whatever you can think of, to strengthen that Side of the Argument, will be most acceptable to me. Any propensity you imagine I have to the other Side, crept in against my Will... I cou'd wish that Cleanthes' Argument could be so analys'd as to be render'd quite formal & regular. The Propensity of the mind towards it, unless that Propensity were as strong & universal as that to believe in our Sense & Experience, will still, I am afraid, be esteem'd

a suspicious Foundation. Tis here I wish for your Assistance. We must endeavour to prove that this Propensity is somewhat different from our Inclination to find our own Figures in the Clouds, our Face in the Moon, our Passions and Sentiments even in inanimate Matter. Such an Inclination may, & ought to be controul'd, & can never be a legitimate Ground of Assent....The Instances I have chosen for Cleanthes are, I hope, tolerably happy, & the Confusion in which I represent the Sceptic seems natural.¹

This passage has been cited as showing that Hume felt the argument from design to be merely rhetorical (Morrisroe, 1969 and 1970).² Price offers it as proof that Hume sympathized with Philo: why else would Hume need to seek help in constructing the opposing argument? "Since Hume's sentiments obviously lie with Philo," reasons Price, "some assistance in the composition of one of the opposing views might be more helpful—it would prevent the greater persuasiveness of Philo's arguments from looking too much like a 'put-up job.'"³ Where Hume's sentiments lie, however, is anything but obvious. As I read the letter, he could equally be seen to presuppose that the 'propensity of mind' toward the design argument is in fact different from those of the more fanciful instances, and thus indeed be seeking Elliot's assistance only in his "endeavour to prove" this.

Price continues:

It is possible, of course, that Hume felt great sympathy for the argument from design, but, as we can read in the above letter, any inclination or intuitive assent to the argument he rejected as ill-founded.⁴

Wadia reads the letter similarly:

...the letter makes the significant point that "the propensity" to draw the inference of the design argument is not "as strong and universal as that to believe in our senses and experience."⁵

These readings, however, twist the actual wording of the letter. It is clear that what "can never be a legitimate Ground of Assent" and what should "be controul'd" is *not* the propensity toward the design argument, but the inclination toward the other instances, i.e., finding faces in the moon. In this letter, at least, Hume is searching for a proof that the propensity of mind toward the design argument is "somewhat different" from the other propensities. He does not indicate his personal convictions on the matter, or why exactly he wishes to render Cleanthes' argument "quite formal & regular."

Hume indicates in a postscript to the letter that the design argument is standardly based on similarities between the "Works of Nature" and the

"Effects of Mind." His own project in several works is to cast light on the dissimilarities. He states, "The only Difficulty is, why the other Dissimilarities do not weaken the Argument. And indeed it would seem from Experience & Feeling, that they do not weaken it so much as we might naturally expect." This need not indicate that Hume is advocating abandonment of the argument—it could be that he is simply urging for a better understanding of what it is that is being believed and why. His curiosity as to why the dissimilarities do not weaken the design argument in no way implies that he thinks they ought to do so. Among the possible alternatives to the received view that Hume rejected the argument from design altogether is Weiland's suggestion that "Hume was trying to show in the *Dialogues* that there is a natural propensity to believe that God exists in the same way that there is a natural propensity to believe that the external world exists."⁶ In short, we cannot allow the letter to Elliot to guide any particular reading of the *Dialogues*, since how we interpret Hume's stand in the *Dialogues* already guides our reading of the letter. To employ one of Philo's strategies from Part XI, I submit that though the letter can be rendered compatible with the notion that Hume rejected the argument from design, "yet surely it can never be sufficient to establish that conclusion."⁷

NOTES

1 *The Letters of David Hume*, ed. J.Y.T. Greig, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1932), I 153–155.

2 Michael Morrisroe, Jr., "Hume's Rhetorical Strategy: A Solution to the Riddle of the *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*," *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 11 (1969): 963–974. Also, "Characterization as Rhetorical Device in Hume's *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*," *Enlightenment Essays* 1 (1970): 95–107.

3 John V. Price, "Empirical Theists in Cicero and Hume," *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 5 (1963): 255–264.

4 Price, 263.

5 P.S. Wadia, "Philo Confounded," *McGill Hume Studies*, eds. D.F. Norton, N. Capaldi, and W.L. Robison (San Diego: Austin Hill, 1979), 387–396.

6 Jeffrey Wieand, "Pamphilus in Hume's *Dialogues*," *The Journal of Religion* 65 (1985): 33–45.

7 David Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, ed. Norman Kemp Smith (New York: Macmillan, Library of Liberal Arts, 1990), 207.

Received November 1993

Revised April 1994