



Why Hume Wasn't an Atheist: A Reply to Andre

Beryl Logan

Hume Studies Volume XXII, Number 1 (April, 1996) 193-202.

Your use of the HUME STUDIES archive indicates your acceptance of HUME STUDIES' Terms and Conditions of Use, available at

<http://www.humesociety.org/hs/about/terms.html>.

HUME STUDIES' Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the HUME STUDIES archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Each copy of any part of a HUME STUDIES transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

For more information on HUME STUDIES contact humestudies-info@humesociety.org

<http://www.humesociety.org/hs/>

Why Hume Wasn't an Atheist: A Reply to Andre

BERYL LOGAN

In a recent issue of *Hume Studies*,¹ Shane Andre argues that, as Hume's position on theism can be read primarily from Philo's position in the *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, and since Philo's position in the *Dialogues* is one of "limited theism," Hume was also a "limited theist" and therefore not an atheist. According to Andre, a "limited theist" is one like Epicurus, "who denied, not that the Gods exist, but that they intervene in human affairs" and, he continues, "...at least in philosophical circles, the term 'atheist' is generally restricted to people who disbelieve any form of theism, and this is the sense in which I propose to enquire whether Hume was an atheist" (142). Andre's claim then is that Hume is not an atheist in this latter sense, but is a limited theist in the former sense. This is shown in "three major objections to standard theism" in the *Dialogues*: those addressing the Argument from Design and the problem of evil, as well as the lack of debate on whether or not God exists.

Philo's criticisms of the Argument from Design amount to the claim that, "not that there is no God, but that, if there is a God," empirical evidence cannot show that God has any of the traditional characteristics of wisdom, power or goodness. The "proper conclusion" of Philo's argument from evil does not concern God's existence, but establishes that God is "limited in some important respect." Philo's "limited theism" is expressed in his ambivalent attitude toward Cleanthes' Argument from Design in Part 12 ("that the cause or causes of order in the universe probably bear some remote analogy to human

intelligence”). In sum, Philo and Cleanthes never debate God’s existence, and they accept a limited Deity, therefore they hold positions of limited theism, therefore Philo is not an atheist.

While I agree with Andre’s conclusion that Hume is not an atheist, I will show in this paper first, that the interpretation which provides his means for arriving at this conclusion is not consistent with the text and faces a number of difficulties, and second, that the sense in which Hume is a limited theist has to do with the limitations of human reason and experience, and not with God’s limited nature.

My criticisms of Andre’s position will be directed at three points in his argument: (1) his claim for Philo’s theism based on Philo’s lack of scepticism about God’s existence; (2) what he regards to be the “proper conclusion” (153) to the problem of evil, as this directly influences his view of Philo’s scepticism and the nature of the Deity; and (3) his view that Philo’s theism is to be found in his acceptance of the Argument from Design (Philo’s limited theism). My arguments will centre upon the “suspense of judgement,” and where and how this mental stance is used by Hume in the arguments of the *Dialogues*.²

Scepticism about God’s Existence

Andre claims that the arguments in the *Dialogues* are directed only to God’s nature and do not address God’s existence in spite of the fact that Cleanthes concludes his Argument from Design by claiming that the data in the world provide conclusive analogical support for the existence and (human-like) intelligence of the (traditional) Deity.³ Cleanthes’ anthropomorphic Argument from Design purports to “prove” that the world has an intelligent divine designer just like machines have intelligent human designers and the only difference between the causes based on the effects is one of degree and not one of kind: the designer of the world is far grander than the designer of a computer because the world is more complex than a computer.

I would urge, though, that Philo’s scepticism is directed at *both* aspects of the Argument from Design: that the data in the world “prove” both God’s nature and existence by analogy. In Part 4 for example, Philo asks, with respect to the cause of order, “can any other reason be assigned by you, anthropomorphites, than that it is a rational faculty, and that such is the nature of the Deity,” and then remarks:

But why a similar answer will not be equally satisfactory in accounting for the order of the world, without having recourse to any such intelligent Creator, as you insist on, may be difficult to determine. It is only to to say, that *such* is the nature of material objects, and that they are all originally possessed of a *faculty* of order and proportion. (DNR 163/126)

Later, Philo suggests that the universe might not be the work of a single Deity at all, or that a blind, unguided force may be responsible for the order in the world: these are all possible hypotheses, supportable by the data in the world.

We must note that Philo does state that the existence of the Deity is self-evident.⁴ Philo has, I think, two goals in the *Dialogues*: to argue against Cleanthes that the existence and nature of the Deity can be proven by an analogical argument, and to show that the existence and nature of the Deity is self-evidently available on the face of nature. It is not the case that Philo is sceptical about the truth of the Deity's existence and nature, but that he is sceptical about the possibility of the data in the world providing conclusive proof of the existence of the Deity as Cleanthes states in the Argument from Design. So Andre is mistaken in regarding Philo to not be sceptical about the existence of (Cleanthes') God.

As his entire argument turns on the claim that Philo is sceptical only about God's nature and not about God's existence, Andre urges us not to "dismiss" Philo as a sceptic for two reasons: first, that "one can believe [that God exists] without claiming to know very much about the positive nature of God," and, second, that "Philo's sceptical outburst occurs well before the end of the work" (the suspense of judgement claim at the conclusion of Part 8) (147). If the sceptic's role is only to raise "counterpoising" arguments and not to present a position, then we should not find, if Andre is correct, any occurrences beyond Part 8 of the suspense of judgement that Philo considers is the "triumph of the sceptic." Andre regards Philo's skeptical "outburst" (as opposed to a sustained attack) to conclude at the end of Part 8 with such a judgement, but I will show now that similar devices are found in Part 9 with respect to the modality of the Deity's existence, and in Part 11 with respect to the Deity's benevolence. This will enable me to show that Andre is mistaken about the extent of Philo's scepticism, which directly impacts upon what he considers to be the "proper conclusion" of the argument from evil (that the Deity is limited) and Philo's expression of belief (that Philo is a theist because he accepts the Argument from Design).

In Parts 4 to 8 Philo shows Cleanthes that a number of alternate hypotheses may account for the data in the world, and not just the conclusive claim that the world was designed by one intelligent (like the human) Designer. Thus Part 8 concludes with the well-defined and well-known suspense of judgement.

Part 9, though, presents a special case: as it is Cleanthes who criticizes Demea's *a priori* argument, and as we are concerned with Philo's scepticism, we need to show that Philo would or does concur with the scepticism shown there by Cleanthes.⁵ In this part, Cleanthes argues against the *a priori* argument that attempts to establish conclusively the Deity's *necessary* existence. As argued by Tweyman,⁶ Demea's argument that existence is

inseparable from God's nature is only conclusive if one accepts that existence is a separate idea that is separable from what exists, i.e., that there are two ideas, the thing and its existence, and in God's case, these two ideas are inseparable. Cleanthes, though, makes the Humean point that existence is not a separate idea but is the manner in which the idea is conceived. So only if one adopts a Cartesian view of existence as a separate idea that is inseparable from God's nature could one accept the *a priori* argument as being conclusive proof. A standoff (or suspense of judgement)⁷ will be the result of a dialogue between a Cartesian and a Humean on the point of existence as a separate (and separable/inseparable) idea.

Cleanthes then suggests, as an alternate hypothesis, that it may be the case that it is matter or the stuff of the universe which carries the feature of necessary existence, and that there may be a contradiction in denying *matter's* existence. Cleanthes is saying: why claim that necessary existence applies only to an external Deity when it might just as well apply to the stuff of the universe itself? But whether it is the Deity's non-existence or matter's non-existence that appears impossible, it must be, Cleanthes states, because of some "unknown and inconceivable" qualities. So it can never be proved that such features are incompatible with matter. And, more important for our purpose, as the qualities that "would make its non-existence appear as great a contradiction as that twice two is five" (DNR 190/149) are "unknown and incomprehensible," not only can they never be proved incompatible with it, they can never be proved *compatible* with it either.

So nothing can be said regarding to what or whom the features might or might not belong. If one looks to logic for the inseparability between God and God's existence, the argument is only conclusive for one who adopts a Cartesian rather than a Humean view of existence. For one who looks to the data in the world for proof, the features cannot be proved to belong or not belong to the Deity or to matter.

Philo concludes Part 9. He states that the order in a system may be the result of the internal structure of the system itself. Referring to an *a priori* science, mathematics, Philo indicates that one who has insight into all the qualities of numbers, the skillful algebraist, "immediately concludes [the regularity of numbers] to be the work of necessity," and to be open to a demonstration (a relation of ideas). Only if we have this kind of insight could we determine whether and to what entity ascriptions of necessity were appropriate. Cleanthes has earlier stated that we do not have such insight with respect to the Deity or the universe. So Philo, in agreement, cautions against transferring the proofs possible in mathematics to the religious argument "where it ought not to have place." Due to the limitations of human reason and experience—we have no insight into all the qualities of the universe—no conclusion may be drawn with respect to either the appropriate source of order or the modality of that source's existence. So even though Cleanthes,

and not Philo, has argued the case in Part 9, Philo has reinforced the points made by Cleanthes and it is not clear that he would have taken an alternate approach if the task of criticizing Demea's argument had fallen to him.

The Problem of Evil

So far we have a suspense of judgement, the triumph of the sceptic, occurring in Part 9. We turn now to Parts 10 and 11, and the "problem of evil." According to Andre, these next two parts present the final opportunity for Philo to exhibit his scepticism about God's existence. ("If Philo is truly sceptical about the existence of God, we can expect that fact to emerge from the ensuing discussion of the problem of evil" [147].) Philo's argument, according to Andre, is, I think—Andre does not seem to draw any defined conclusion in this section of his paper—that because Philo does not use the argument from evil to argue against God's existence, Philo is not sceptical about God's existence and only intends to argue for the "less than exemplary" nature of God to establish God's limited nature. Continuing my strategy, if I can show that suspense of judgement occurs in these discussions, then I have shown that Philo is continuing to criticize Cleanthes' Deity, and is not arguing for his own Deity.

In Part 10, Philo, Cleanthes and Demea present their very graphic account of the amount of evil that is found in the world. No suspense of judgement arises in this part, since the view that the Deity is both infinitely powerful and benevolent is refuted. Cleanthes claims that

The only method of supporting divine benevolence (and it is what I willingly embrace) is to *deny absolutely* the misery and wickedness of man...Health is *more common* than sickness: Pleasure than pain: Happiness than misery. And for one vexation, which we meet with, we attain, upon computation, *a hundred* enjoyments. (DNR 200/158, emphasis added)

However, Cleanthes has sewn the seeds of his own refutation by first acknowledging that any misery is fatal to his position, and then in his assertion that happiness outweighs misery showing that he accepts the presence of misery in the world! After making the empirical point to Cleanthes that pleasures and pains cannot be computed with any degree of certainty (as they go beyond human capability and experience), this is the point that Philo emphasizes:

Why is there any misery at all in the world?...Is it from the Deity? But he is perfectly benevolent. Is it contrary to his intention? But he is almighty. Nothing can shake the solidity of this reasoning.... (DNR 201/159)

In the opening passage of Part 11, we find that Cleanthes has, as a result of Philo's refutation in Part 10, abandoned the claim that the Deity has infinite power in order to retain the claim that the Deity is benevolent. Philo then shows Cleanthes that even a Deity with limited power could make the world a better place by making four "minor" adjustments, and since these adjustments are not evident, Cleanthes cannot maintain that the available evidence supports any claims for the Deity's benevolence.

Philo concludes his arguments in Part 11 with the following:

There may four hypotheses be framed concerning the first causes of the universe: *that they are endowed with perfect goodness, that they have perfect malice, that they are opposite and have both goodness and malice, that they have neither goodness nor malice.* Mixed phenomena can never prove the two former unmixed principles. And the uniformity and steadiness of general laws seems to oppose the third. The fourth, therefore, seems by far the most probable. (DNR 212/169)

Evil may be compatible with infinite power and benevolence, but the presence of evil precludes the possibility of any *proof* of these features. Given the presence of mixed phenomena—both goodness and evil in the world—the most probable hypothesis regarding the first cause(s) of the universe is that they have neither goodness nor malice. In other words, no claim may be made with respect to the benevolence of the first cause(s). Given Cleanthes' analogical argument, goodness and power must be inferred from the available data; as the data do not indicate that evil is remedied where this may be possible, no claim may be made for the Deity's goodness and (finite) power. This is, I submit, a further suspense of judgement with respect to Cleanthes' claim that the Deity is benevolent. The "proper conclusion" is not that God exists but is limited (as God is unable to prevent evil where it occurs), but is that no claim can be made, based on the evidence, with respect to God's benevolence. Philo is not intending to establish anything about his "own" Deity, as Andre has stated, but is only attacking Cleanthes' Deity, as one whose anthropomorphic nature can be established conclusively by the evidence in the world.

A suspense of judgement, while the position of the Pyrrhonian sceptic, has become a tool in the hands of Hume. Philo has used it to show Cleanthes that the data in the world provide no evidence for inferring either the existence or nature of Cleanthes' Deity.⁸

I will now turn to my final criticism of Andre's interpretation, that Philo's own assertion of faith is to be found in his "agreement" with Cleanthes' Argument from Design.

Philo's Own Belief

In paragraph 5 of Part 12, Cleanthes states that it is not possible to maintain or defend any system of theism at all (a suspense of judgement), and he opts to support the analogical Argument from Design for pragmatic reasons—its intelligibility and completeness, and its ability to account for experience.⁹

Philo too denies the possibility of maintaining this mental stance in the theological instance (and launches into his account of the verbal dispute that he thinks exists between the theist and the atheist), and, it is popularly held,¹⁰ expresses his own belief in his acceptance of Cleanthes' Argument from Design in paragraph 6 and the penultimate paragraph of Part 12. Philo first states that “according to all the rules of good reasoning,” since one cannot deny that an analogy exists between the world and machines, “the legitimate conclusion is, that the causes have also an analogy....” However, I would urge that Philo is not agreeing with Cleanthes that his Argument from Design is the one to support. He is merely stating that in an analogical argument, where there is clearly *some* similarity (however small), a conclusion may correctly be drawn. (Drawing a conclusion based on a comparison between two items, regardless of the degree of similarity, is an analogical argument—only the less similar the items, the weaker the argument.)

Philo's pronouncement in the penultimate paragraph, “...that the cause or causes of order in the universe probably bear some remote analogy to human intelligence” (DNR 227/184) is taken by Andre (and others) to be Philo's statement of his acceptance of the Design Argument, and of his limited theism: it is truly a “limited” theism if Philo will not even acknowledge that there is only one cause! But this, I submit, is the position in which those who support the anthropomorphic, analogical argument find themselves at the end of the day (“If the whole of natural theology, as some people seem to maintain...” [DNR 227/184]), and it reflects Philo's criticisms raised in Parts 4 to 8. And if it is the case that this proposition cannot provide any guidance for life as to what should be pursued or avoided, etc., then all it can possibly command is “plain, philosophical assent.”¹¹

This is similar to what results when reason applies itself to moral matters. In the *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, Hume states that “What is intelligible, what is evident, what is probable, what is true, procures only the cool assent of the understanding” (EPM 172). In moral matters, unless feelings of desire or aversion are aroused in us, the distinctions that reason can make in identifying those things we ought to embrace and those we ought to avoid, can have no influence on conduct and behaviour. The placing of two ideas in a relation is no motivator to action: when reason distinguishes that a room temperature of 15 C is cooler than 20 C, I am not prompted to put on a sweater unless I *feel* cold. Only when I am struck with some forceful perception will I act. Similarly, the reasoned assent that follows from the analogical Argument

from Design (as one that follows the rules for analogical arguments) is inert. It cannot do the job that Cleanthes expects of religious belief, namely: "...to regulate the heart of men, humanize their conduct, infuse the spirit of temperance, order, and obedience..." (DNR 220/177). So, Philo's agreement with Cleanthes' argument can hardly be seen as a statement of belief. It is an acknowledgement "that the arguments, on which it is established, exceed the objections, which lie against it" (DNR 227/185). Given Hume's own view that a belief is an idea conceived in a lively manner, this mere acceptance carries little liveliness with it.

As it is Hume's own position that Pyrrhonian arguments are broken by the force of Nature, it seems that one should look to Nature for the enlightenment to break the suspense of judgement in this case. What one finds in Nature is the strong proof of the Deity's existence—the present economy of things, the artifices that indicate the Deity's "prodigious superiority" so plainly that "no stupidity could mistake them." (DNR 215-216/173) Philo's theism is to be found in several passages in the *Dialogues*, and it is expressed as the conclusion of an irregular (non-analogical or anthropomorphic) argument: "A purpose, an intention, a design strikes every where the most careless, the most stupid thinker," a theism based on inclination and not reason. Only a well-disposed mind that recognizes the limitations of human reason, both in its scope and activity, will "fly" to this truth revealed in nature by the Deity. Nature again has not left us to rely upon our uncertain reasonings and speculations.¹²

What of Hume's own theism? Andre claims that Hume was also a limited theist, based on his analysis of Philo as a limited theist. However, in keeping with my comments above, I would state that Hume's theism is not "limited theism" in the sense that Andre has argued for, but is limited only insofar as what we find "on the whole face of nature" (the effect) are the indications of the only thing that can be "known" about the Deity (the cause): that the Deity possesses a feature that, in humans, we call intelligence. But this is not to say that when we use this word we are in fact actually describing what the Deity is really like:

Wisdom, thought, design, knowledge; these we justly ascribe to him; because these words are honourable among men, and we have no other language or other conceptions, by which we can express our adoration of him. But let us beware, lest we think, that our ideas any wise correspond to his perfections, or that his attributes have any resemblance to these qualities among men. (DNR 142/108)

The sense in which Hume's theism is limited is due to the limitations of human reason and experience, not perceived limitations of the Deity. Because "we cannot infer from the empirical evidence alone that [God] is perfectly or even supremely powerful, wise, and good" is no reason to conclude that God

"is limited in some important respect—if not in power and intelligence, then in goodness" (153).

Philo's own version of mysticism is not based on religious orthodoxy as is Demea's, nor is his faith, while read from nature, based on any analogical or anthropomorphic claims as is Cleanthes'. And neither is Hume's.

NOTES

1. Shane Andre, "Was Hume An Atheist?" *Hume Studies* 19.1 (1993): 141–168, referenced hereafter in the text.
2. See P. Stanley, "The Scepticisms of David Hume," *Journal of Philosophy* 31 (1935), and Richard H. Popkin, "David Hume: His Pyrrhonism and his Critique of Pyrrhonism," *The Philosophical Quarterly* 1.5 (1951): 385–407, for discussions of the central role that the suspense of judgment plays in Pyrrhonian scepticism, and Stanley Tweyman, *Scepticism and Belief in Hume's Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* (Dordrecht: Nijhoff, 1986) for a discussion of Philo's "position" of Pyrrhonian sceptic.
3. "By this argument a posteriori, and by this argument alone, do we prove at once the existence of a Deity, and his similarity to human mind and intelligence" (DNR 143/109). References to Hume's *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* are to the Kemp Smith edition, followed by reference to Tweyman, ed., *David Hume: Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion in Focus* (London: Routledge, 1991).
4. See, for example, DNR 142/108: "But surely, where reasonable men treat these subjects, the question can never be concerning the being but only the nature of the Deity. The former truth, as you will observe, is unquestionable and self-evident."
5. See Tweyman, "The Illustrative Value of Part 9 of Hume's *Dialogues*," in his *Descartes and Hume: Selected Topics* (Delmar: Caravan, 1989), for why Cleanthes, rather than Philo, argues against Demea's argument in Part 9.
6. Tweyman, "Some Reflections on Hume on Existence," *Hume Studies* 18.2 (1992): 137–150.
7. In "The Scepticisms of David Hume," Stanley states that one criterion to indicate that a suspense of judgement is appropriate is that one can show "the conceivability of the opposite."
8. See Tweyman, *Scepticism and Belief*.
9. "...it is the only system of cosmogony which can be rendered intelligible and complete, and yet can throughout preserve a strong analogy to what we every day see and experience in the world. 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." (DNR 216/174)

10. See, for example, J. C. A. Gaskin, *Hume's Philosophy of Religion* (London: Macmillan, 1988); Nelson Pike's "Commentary," in his *David Hume, Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* (New York: Macmillan, 1985); and William Parent, "Philo's Confession," *Philosophical Quarterly* 36 (1976): 63–68.

11. For the full expression of these arguments, see my "The Irregular Argument in Hume's *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*," *Hume Studies* 18.2 (1992): 483–500, and my *A Religion Without Talking: Religious Belief and Natural Belief in Hume's Philosophy of Religion* (New York: Peter Lang, 1993).

12. For my arguments concerning the belief in an intelligent designer as a natural belief, see my "God and Natural Belief," in *Studies in Early Modern Philosophy III*, edited by Tweyman (Delmar: Caravan, 1993), 95–112, and my *A Religion Without Talking*.

Received July 1994