Skepticism and Philo's Atheistic Preference
David O'Connor

Hume Studies Volume XXVIX, Number 2 (November, 2003) 267-282.

HUME STUDIES
Volume 29, Number 2, November 2003, pp. 267–282

Skepticism and Philo's Atheistic Preference

DAVID O'CONNOR

> [H]owever consistent the world may be . . . with the idea of . . . a very powerful, wise, and benevolent Deity . . . it can never afford us an inference concerning his existence. The consistence is not absolutely denied, only the inference.[1]

> The whole presents nothing but the idea of a blind nature, impregnated by a great vivifying principle, and pouring forth from her lap, without discernment or parental care, her maimed and abortive children. (DNR, 211)

> The true conclusion is, that the original source of all things is entirely indifferent to all these principles, and has no more regard to good above ill than to heat above cold, or to drought above moisture, or to light above heavy. (DNR, 212)

> 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. . . . The fourth . . . seems by far the most probable. (DNR, 212)

David O'Connor is Professor of Philosophy, Seton Hall University, South Orange, New Jersey 07079.
e-mail: oconnoda@shu.edu

> What I have said concerning natural evil will apply to moral, with little or no variation; and we have no more reason to infer, that the rectitude of the supreme Being resembles human rectitude than that his benevolence resembles the human. Nay, it will be thought, that we have still greater cause to exclude from him moral sentiments, such as we feel them; since moral evil, in the opinion of many, is much more predominant above moral good than natural evil above natural good. (DNR, 212)

Thus Philo in part 11 of Hume's *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion*.

I

In the first of these passages, Philo is denying that the existence of "a very powerful, wise, and benevolent Deity" can justifiably be inferred from the facts of good and evil present to our experience. But power, wisdom, and benevolence are essential qualities of the God of traditional theism, thus Philo is here denying that the existence of such a being can justifiably be inferred from the empirical evidence of good and evil. The other passages show us Philo going further than this, indeed all the way to what seems to be a preference for moral atheism. The term is J. C. A. Gaskin's, and he defines it thus: "[moral atheism] will be [the position of] anyone who denies the existence of any god *having moral attributes*."[2] In the second and third passages specifically, this *prima facie* preference is absolute ("[t]he whole presents nothing but the idea of a blind nature . . . without discernment" and "the original source of all things is entirely indifferent," respectively), while it is relative and more cautiously expressed in the fourth passage. And the fifth passage says at least as much as the first and perhaps as much as the second and third.

Yet Philo very early in the book declares himself a skeptic on such metaphysical topics as "the origin of worlds" (DNR, 132), "the existence and properties of spirits" (DNR, 135), "the powers and operations of one universal spirit, existing without beginning and without end; omnipotent, omniscient, immutable, infinite" (DNR, 135). The principal reason he gives is the "weakness, blindness, and narrow limits of human reason . . . even in subjects of common life and practice" (DNR, 131). Considering these limits, surely it is very likely that "we have . . . got quite beyond the reach of our faculties" (DNR, 135) if and when we turn to such metaphysical topics as those he just listed. On these matters, which "run wide of common life . . . [t]he mind must remain in suspense . . . and it is that very suspense or balance, which is the triumph of skepticism" (DNR, 135–6).

While the first of the passages I quoted in the beginning clearly squares with this skeptical outlook, and so does at least part of the fifth, it would seem that the rest of the quoted material does not, or not well. And this raises the questions that I address here, namely, whether Philo's seeming preference for moral atheism fits with his skepticism, and, if it does, how.

My answer has two parts: first, appearances to the contrary notwithstanding, there is good fit between the second, third, fourth, and fifth passages quoted and Philo's skepticism, and, second, those passages show Philo's skepticism to be far from evenhanded insofar as theism and atheism are concerned. The second point is the key to the first. The absence of evenhandedness in Philo's skepticism, insofar as theism and atheism are concerned, is the interesting fact about it which enables him to prefer atheism to theism, as well as to some other theoretical possibilities we will not discuss further, Manichaeanism, for example (DNR, 211, 212).

Gaskin maintains that Hume himself is a moral atheist but not a "total" atheist, that is, he does not deny "the existence of all gods whatsoever."[3] I think that a convincing argument can be made for this interpretation of Hume, that is, an interpretation on which he denies, and does not just decline to accept, that there is a provident deity.[4] The premises in such an argument, surely, would include Hume's conception of morality, for, in Bernard Williams's words,

> Hume has . . . an *a priori* reason for disbelieving in God's moral attributes. On his moral theory, moral attributes are derived from human nature, and only make sense in relation to it—our ideas of moral goodness are necessarily ideas of human goodness, and could not conceivably be applied to a non-human, infinite being.[5]

The same point about an essential connection between moral attributes and human nature would go some of the way to establishing that Hume's character Philo is a moral atheist too, provided two conditions were met. They are, first, that we accept him as the principal voice in the *Dialogues* of Hume himself on the subject of the deity's attributes,[6] and, second, that Philo shares his creator's conception of goodness and other moral properties. As understood by Hume, such properties are rooted in feeling. In light of this, Philo's point that "[i]t is an absurdity to believe that the Deity has human passions" (DNR, 226) suggests a similar view, or rather a view that would be similar if Philo's thinking on the subject were developed in the *Dialogues*. However, in this paper I make no assumption about the extent of Philo's spokesmanship or any inference from Hume to Philo. Accordingly, my case for Philo's atheistic preferences and for the goodness of their fit with his skepticism is entirely an intra-*Dialogues* argument.

I will develop this interpretation and at the same time test its mettle by putting it into competition with two rivals. The first of these is the view that any preference on Philo's part for moral atheism, or for any substantive metaphysical theory, is precluded by his skepticism. Essentially, this reflects an *a priori* argument that Philo's skepticism entails strict agnosticism—call it square agnosticism[7]—about the idea of a deity with moral qualities. The second rival interpretation holds that Philo's concession in part 12 to a weak form of deism can be extended to cover a form of moral theism as well, and that this extension precludes any preference for moral atheism. By "moral theism" I mean the goodness and benevolence clauses in the standard theistic concept of God. Like the first rival interpretation, this argument turns on an aspect of Philo's skepticism, thus making skepticism the fundamental obstacle to the idea that Philo's position includes a preference for moral atheism.

There is in addition a third alternative to the interpretation I will be defending here. It is that Philo's overall position is simply incoherent, that there is indeed a preference for moral atheism in part 11 and that it just does not square with his manifest skepticism throughout much of the rest of the *Dialogues*. This interpretation builds on the same major premise as the first rival interpretation, namely, that Philo's skepticism entails square agnosticism. On this third view, the *Dialogues* itself is incoherent too, given Philo's centrality to it. But the hermeneutical principle of sympathetic interpretation requires that such a despairing view of the text be put off until all reasonable interpretations short of it have been tried and found wanting. My case here being for one such interpretation, I will set aside the idea that Hume's book or its principal character is incoherent in the way described.

II

Let us now take up the first of these rival interpretations, the *a priori* argument for square agnosticism. I will begin by discussing the argument in connection with the fourth of the passages I quoted, the "four hypotheses" passage.

Philo does not say that the fourth hypothesis—the "indifference hypothesis," in Paul Draper's term[8]—is the most probable, comparatively or absolutely, rather that it seems the most probable, albeit "by far." But saying that the fourth hypothesis seems the most probable, while not saying that it is the most probable, falls far short of evidence for square agnosticism, insofar as the "four hypotheses" passage is concerned. This is because of something else that Philo does not do, namely, he does not subsequently weaken or withdraw his claim about the fourth hypothesis. The point is especially notable inasmuch as there is a relevant precedent. In part 8 of the *Dialogues*, in a remarkably prescient

sketch of a kind of Big Bang theory, Philo outlines a mechanism whereby, without a guiding intelligence, but solely "from the eternal revolutions of unguided matter . . . [there could emerge] . . . stability in the forms [of matter] . . . [together with] . . . a real and perpetual revolution or motion of parts."(DNR, 184–5 (the words in square brackets are added here)). This is a hypothesis about how natural order—both as regularity of occurrences and as stability of structures, respectively—could come into being without benefit of design. Philo concludes the hypothesis by observing that this outline "affords a plausible, if not a true solution of the difficulty" of reconciling micro-motion with macro-stability, such that "[e]very individual is perpetually changing, and every part of every individual, and yet the whole remains, in appearance, the same" (DNR, 184).

Now, insofar as the strength of Philo's commitment to it is concerned, this "new hypothesis of cosmogony" (DNR, 183) is for all relevant purposes the equal of his "four hypotheses" argument in the fourth passage I quoted from part 11. But there is a notable difference. It is that, in part 8, Philo subsequently withdraws his endorsement of the "new hypothesis of cosmogony" on skeptical grounds—"[a] total suspense of judgment is here our only reasonable resource" (DNR, 186–7)—whereas in part 11 he does not withdraw his endorsement of the indifference hypothesis as seemingly the most probable by far of those under consideration. Yet the strength of his endorsement of the latter is no less than that of the former.

This raises the question of why Philo does not follow suit in the "four hypotheses" passage in part 11 and withdraw his preference for the fourth hypothesis (as seemingly the most probable of the four that are listed) in favor of a skeptical suspension of judgment. The straightforward answer seems right. It is that he wants this preference "by far" for moral atheism over moral theism (the first hypothesis), as well as over the other two hypotheses listed in the passage, to stand as his considered opinion.

By extension, the same answer holds too for the second and third passages I quoted at the outset, the "blind nature" and "the original source of all things is entirely indifferent" passages, respectively. For the "four hypotheses" passage comes immediately after them, and continues the same investigation of natural evil that Philo is undertaking in them. His data in all three passages are the facts of natural good and evil that become evident when we "[l]ook round this universe" (DNR, 211). The focus in all three passages is on what we see when we set aside *a priori* suppositions about what *must* be the case as well as speculations about what *might* be the case, and instead just look at what *is* the case in actual experience, insofar as natural evil is concerned.[9] Seen against the background of the relevant precedent in part 8, the upshot is that the *a priori* argument for a square-agnostic reading of the second, third, and fourth quoted passages looks forced and implausible.

There is another reason to reject a preclusive reading of Philo's skepticism, insofar as a preference for moral atheism is concerned. It is that Philo's own practice as the *Dialogues* progresses is seriously at odds with it. True, in the beginning, Philo unequivocally maintains that, when we "become thoroughly sensible of the weakness, blindness, and narrow limits of human reason . . . even in subjects of common life and practice . . . [we will rightly wonder] with what assurance . . . we [can] decide concerning the origin of worlds" (DNR, 131–2; the words in square brackets are added here). A little later in part 1, in a passage I partly quoted earlier, he goes on in the same vein;

> When we carry our speculations into the two eternities, before and after the present state of things; into the creation and formation of the universe; the existence and properties of spirits; the powers and operations of one universal spirit. . . . We must be far removed from the smallest tendency to skepticism not to be apprehensive, that we have here got quite beyond the reach of our faculties (DNR, 134–5).

If strictly adhered to, this initial skeptical stance would preclude not just any drawing of substantive conclusions about transcendent things, for instance, "the . . . properties of spirits," but also any justified preference for such hypotheses; indeed even the very discussion of such hypotheses in the first place. For, hanging over all such responses to the facts of good and evil would be the challenge to show that we had not simply strayed beyond "the reach of our faculties." And so, as things stand at the end of part 1, no preference for the indifference hypothesis of moral atheism could possibly fit with Philo's skepticism, thus leaving us to either see the second, third, and fourth passages I quoted at the outset as overstatements needing to be diluted to square agnosticism or to see the book as a whole as incoherent. In effect, the Philo of part 1 seems no less a mysterian[10] than Demea, insofar as the "powers and operations of one universal spirit" are concerned. And Demea, justifiably at that stage in the conversation, takes him to be so.

But Philo's subsequent practice belies the strictness of his initial expression of skepticism. For, subsequent to part 1, most of the *Dialogues* just *is* discussion (with Cleanthes) about properties that we may or may not be empirically justified in attributing to the source(s) or first principle(s) of order in the natural world. True, the thrust of Philo's contributions to that on-going discussion is more often than not negative, as throughout he is very critical of much of Cleanthes's case. But his criticisms do not just re-iterate a general skepticism, based on the limits of our experience, about our capacity to draw justified conclusions concerning the source(s) of natural order. Instead, with two exceptions, DNR 149 and 186–7, his criticisms are specific to

the particular aspect of Cleanthes's design hypothesis under consideration at a particular place in the conversation: for instance, that Cleanthes is exaggerating the domain of intelligence in the universe (DNR, 147–9); that to say that natural order traces to some non-natural (presumably supernatural) being invites the regress of wondering about the source of order in *that* being, and so on (DNR, 160–2); that, even supposing the source(s) of natural order to be (or have been) outside the natural world, how could we justify thinking there was not a succession of trial-and-error universes before ours, or, even granting the supposition of design, a committee of designers (DNR, 167–9); that the "new hypothesis of cosmogony" mentioned earlier seems at least as plausible, given our data, as Cleanthes's design hypothesis (DNR, 184–5), just to list a few of Philo's counterpoints. The upshot is that Philo's skepticism cannot be meant to preclude such discussions as a point of strict principle, and instead must be interpreted to permit them and to mesh with them.

But Philo does more than just discuss or consider hypotheses about the first cause(s) or principle(s) of natural order, he endorses one, albeit weakly. For, in part 12, there is good indication that he acquiesces in a weak version of deism, although, as Gaskin observes, the author of the *Dialogues* himself would not be happy with the term.[11]

The upshot is that a strictly preclusive interpretation of Philo's skepticism throughout the *Dialogues* cannot be right. It excludes too much of what we see Philo actually doing as the conversations go on. But if it is not attached to a strictly preclusive interpretation of Philo's skepticism, the *a priori* argument for a square-agnostic reading of the passages I quoted at the outset from part 11 loses much of its force, and does not retain enough of it to defeat the idea that Philo has a preference for moral atheism over its rivals. Two conclusions follow: that the square-agnostic reading of Philo does not win by default; and that we need another interpretation of Philo's skepticism, one that fits with what he actually does in practice.

How then, on the evidence of the *Dialogues* as a whole, are we to take Philo's skepticism? The answer seems to be that we are to take it as limiting speculations, discussions, preferences, and decisions about transcendent beings and properties to the empirical evidence, granting that (perhaps imprudently) we engage in such speculations and discussions in the first place. On this interpretation, Philo's skepticism and Philo's empiricism (his experimentalism) are two modes of expression of the same philosophical outlook and approach, and as such are not at odds with one another. It is an outlook that promises to abide strictly by the data of experience.

In the *Dialogues*, discussion of transcendent things mostly centers on Cleanthes's analogical case for design as the best, indeed the compelling, interpretation of the facts of order in nature, thus for a transcendent designer

as the source of that order. From his first response in part 2 to Cleanthes's argument, a response emphasizing that analogical arguments can never issue in certainty, through his (apparent) concession of a weak deism in part 12, Philo's emphasis is on the experiential pole of Cleanthes's pivotal analogy and on what experience warrants in regard to it. Throughout this extended discussion, Cleanthes's design argument is the raw material on which Philo's skepticism is put to work. Thus, how Philo engages in that discussion is just what it is for him to be a skeptic in practice.

But still it may be thought that the foregoing point cannot be right. For is it not plainly an oxymoron to say that there can be an empirical discussion of transcendent things and properties? Does it not seem, in other words, that the kind of general skepticism about the limitations of our minds that Philo sets forth in part 1 vitiates the point I have been trying to extract from the fact that, throughout the rest of the book, Philo engages in discussion of the pros and cons of Cleanthes's case for design (and ultimately benevolent design (DNR, 185)) in nature? So, if the *a priori* argument for square agnosticism is to be finally rejected, as my position requires, we must find in Philo a plausible notion of empirical discussion of transcendent things commensurate with his general skepticism about the reach and capability of our minds.

My suggestion is this: when Philo precludes discussion of causation, properties of the gods (including the God of theism), as well as the other items on his list, what he is precluding is discussion of such things, *in their respective intrinsic natures*, that is, as "mysteries of nature . . . [whose] ultimate secrets . . . ever did and ever will remain . . . [in] obscurity," to quote Hume on Newton.[12] Such things as they are in themselves remain beyond the reach of experience. In making this point, Philo is reflecting one strain of his Newtonian influence.[13] But there is also another strain of Newtonianism in the *Dialogues* vying with this first-articulated one. Namely: discussion of things in their essential natures being blocked in principle, it is what, in everyday life, we customarily suppose to be material things, natural order, human minds, causes, effects, and so on, as experienced,[14] that Cleanthes and Philo are discussing to see if they provide a sufficient basis to warrant speculations, or preferences, or conclusions about a source or sources of natural order (as experienced) akin to the human mind (as experienced).[15] And that kind of discussion, as Philo's very practice establishes, is not precluded by his skepticism about the reach of our experience or the scope of our understanding. True, Philo makes it damagingly plain to Cleanthes that, on such topics as the properties of the source (if any) of natural order, analogical arguments from effects to causes—of which Cleanthes's own design argument is one—at best very weakly support very weak hypotheses. But that is not evidence for square agnosticism. Indeed the contrary.

III

Perhaps the idea of Philo's having a preference for moral atheism, even if not blocked by his skepticism itself, is blocked by the combination of his skepticism and aforementioned concession to deism—the combination of which is the basis of the second rival interpretation. Essentially, this is an argument drawing upon the (skeptical) fact that we do not know enough to deny all likenesses between the respective structures of the first cause(s) or principle(s) of natural order, on the one hand, and human intelligence, on the other, inasmuch as just about *any* two things are alike in some respects. For instance, to use one of Philo's own examples from part 12, even "the rotting of a turnip . . . and the structure of human thought . . . probably bear some remote analogy to each other" (DNR, 218). Thus, to accept that any first cause of natural order is mind-like in some way or other fits better with Philo's skepticism than its denial; for we just do not know enough to completely rule out all analogy. Parenthetically, this line of argument is inhospitable to square agnosticism no less than to my idea that Philo has a preference for moral atheism over the other candidate-accounts of the first cause(s) of natural order that he has in mind, but I will not pursue that aspect of it.

True, Philo's general skeptical position means that we do not know enough to rule out all analogy between the human mind and the first cause(s) or principle(s) of natural order, and indeed his concession to deism in part 12 comes to no more than this.[16] Thus, inasmuch as *some* analogy exists between any two things, some analogy exists between moral goodness and benevolence in human beings and the first cause(s) or principle(s) of order in nature. Let us grant the conclusion, as we must if we grant the premise. But this does not help the argument we are considering here, the extended deistic argument. To see that, let us be clear just what analogy that argument claims (and needs). It is that there is an analogy between goodness or benevolence in human beings and *goodness or benevolence* in the first cause(s) or principle(s) of natural order. But, just because there is some analogy between goodness and benevolence in human beings and the first cause(s) or principle(s) of natural order, it does not follow that there is goodness or benevolence in those causes or principles to begin with, or that we are justified to think that there is, even on the most minimal understanding of goodness or benevolence. From the fact that there is an analogy between this laptop computer and my friend's dog—both have complex structures, both have shape and size, both are portable, and so on—it does not follow that Lucky has plastic parts, or metal terminals, and so on, even minimally. The extended deistic argument does not establish, or even provide any reason whatever to suppose, that there is some analogy between goodness or benevolence in

human beings and goodness or benevolence in the first cause(s) or principle(s) of natural order, because the argument gives no reason whatever to suppose that the latter *have* goodness or benevolence in the first place. In sum, just because we cannot rule out all analogy between two things it does not follow that we cannot rule out any analogy between two things.

In the first of the passages from part 11 that I quoted at the outset Philo makes clear his view that there is no evidence to warrant an attribution of goodness or benevolence to the first cause(s) or principle(s) of order in the universe. A few pages later in part 11, immediately before inviting Cleanthes and Demea to "[l]ook round this universe" and see strong evidence of "a blind nature" (our second quoted passage), he repeats the point;

> [L]et us still assert, that as this goodness [i.e. goodness in the first cause(s) of natural order] is not antecedently established, but must be inferred from the phenomena, there can be no grounds for such an inference, while there are so many ills in the universe, and while these ills might so easily have been remedied, as far as human understanding can be allowed to judge on such a subject (DNR, 211 [the words in square brackets are added here]).[17]

If an analogy between goodness or benevolence in human persons and goodness or benevolence in the first cause(s) or principle(s) of natural order cannot be either established or justified on the strength of the evidence available to us, then the extended deistic argument is useless in rebuttal of my case for Philo's having a preference for moral atheism.

IV

When we take our first four quoted passages in their sequence in part 11, we see a certain line of progression in Philo's view of what is indicated by the evidence of natural good and evil. In the first of those passages he grants the logical possibility that, notwithstanding the abundance, variety, and wide distribution of natural evils, moral theism could be true. But as we have seen, he is emphatic and unequivocal in that passage that the available evidence will not justify any inference to moral theism. Any such inference is "absolutely denied" (DNR, 205). But moral theism is an essential part of standard or traditional theism, as noted earlier. Thus Philo's position here (repeated at DNR, 211 and re-invoked in order to restrict his concession to weak deism in part 12 (DNR, 227)) is that any inference to standard theism is absolutely denied. The point may be read with either or both of the following emphases. First, that the philosophical enterprise of natural theology or natural religion—the overall topic

of the *Dialogues*—is bankrupt. So taken, Philo's point is that something widely assumed by philosophers since medieval times, namely, that reason opens a passage to the core propositions of the theistic religions, is false. Think of this as his point's emphasis within the (relatively rarified) world of those who devote serious time and attention to philosophy. But second, professional philosophy[18] aside, Philo's point is that when everyday religious believers suppose from time to time (as I assume they do) that the essential content of what they hold in faith is also, independently, held firm by reason and good evidence, they are mistaken; in such fundamental matters, faith is not securely grounded in evidence or reason at all. That is, Philo's point here (also earlier, part 10 (DNR, 202), and later, parts XI (DNR, 211) and XII (DNR, 227)) is not restricted in its effect to debates among professional philosophers.

But denying that the evidence of good and evil permits a justified inference to moral theism does not entail a preference for moral atheism or even sympathy towards it. A square agnostic, after all, would also deny inference to the God of theism. However, when we take the other quoted passages into consideration as well, we see that Philo is far from evenhanded in regard to moral theism and atheism respectively. For, having made his point that there is no justified inference from the facts of good and evil to a benevolent deity (DNR, 202, 205, 211), Philo goes on to consider what the same evidence *does* suggest. The no-nonsense tone in this transition from negative to affirmative (from the first passage I quoted from part 11 to the others) betokens impatience with those who might be avoiding looking directly at certain plain facts. "Look round this universe," Philo urges; that is, "open your eyes and heed what is before you in plain sight." Which is what? As we see Philo tell it in the other passages quoted at the outset, it is, first, the unmistakable facts of evil and then, second, what those facts call readily to mind about the likely indifference in the first cause(s) of the universe. To Cleanthes, who professes to be following the evidence, Philo seems to be suggesting here that he is not really following it at all; that, instead, perhaps Cleanthes is seeing his data through a filter of preconceived theory. The phenomenologists' motto—"To the things themselves"— might be apt of Philo at this juncture in the *Dialogues*. His point seems to be that to see the facts of evil in the world as *not* indicating indifference in the first cause(s) would be justified only by some superceding evidence or theory, but that none is available. The theory that might be conscripted for that superceding or blocking role is skepticism about the powers of our minds. But this will prove successful as a block only provided that skepticism entails square agnosticism. We saw earlier, though, that Philo's general skepticism does not entail square agnosticism, thereby freeing us to accept the passages from part 11 quoted in the beginning at their face values. And to do that is to affirm Philo's lack of evenhandedness between the two poles of theism and atheism.

So far I have been attempting to harmonize with Philo's skepticism the quoted passages that discuss natural evil. But there is also moral evil—those evils for which human persons have responsibility in the moral sense of the term. So let us now fold moral evil into our mix.

Immediately following the fourth of the quoted passages, the "four hypotheses" text, Philo says this—the fifth passage I quoted initially;

> What I have said concerning natural evil will apply to moral, with little or no variation; and we have no more reason to infer, that the rectitude of the supreme Being resembles human rectitude than that his benevolence resembles the human. Nay, it will be thought, that we have still greater cause to *exclude* from him moral sentiments, such as we feel them; since moral evil, in the opinion of many, is much more predominant above moral good than natural evil above natural good. (DNR, 212, emphasis added)

Coming where it does in the text, directly after the second, third, and fourth passages I quoted at the outset, and thus in closer proximity to those than to the first, the italicized point in this quotation may perhaps with good reason be seen as Philo continuing to make the same kind of point he is making in those passages. If so, he is *denying*, and not just declining to infer, that the source of natural order has moral qualities at all. So read, the passage shows us Philo implicitly affirming moral atheism in a denial of moral theism.[19]

V

In the concluding part of the *Dialogues* Philo repeats his point that there is no justification for an inference to the God of theism (DNR, 227). By contrast, his preference for the indifference hypothesis in the passages that I quoted from part 11—unqualified in the second and third and perhaps the fifth, relativized and more cautiously expressed in the fourth—is not reiterated in part 12. And that is a fact that cannot be overlooked in seeking the balance between Philo's skepticism, on the one hand, and his stated preference in part 11 for moral atheism, on the other. But while not overlooking that fact, it is significant, as I suggested earlier, that neither does Philo weaken or withdraw the preference in the remainder of the *Dialogues*. Given these facts about what he does and does not do in the final part of the book, it would be an over-interpretation to maintain that Philo simply *is* a moral atheist, so far as the evidence available to us goes. But, as I have been arguing, that evidence does justify seeing in Philo a strong preference for moral atheism over the theistic and other alternatives that he considers.[20]

NOTES

I have incurred debts of gratitude in writing this paper: to Anna Muster, Adrian O'Connor, Natalie J. Purcell, and two anonymous referees for *Hume Studies* for helpful commentary on an earlier draft; and to Elizabeth Radcliffe and Kenneth Winkler for the same as well as for encouragement to persevere.

1 David Hume, *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion*, ed. Norman Kemp Smith (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1947), 205. All further references to the *Dialogues* (DNR) will be given in the text.

2 J. C. A. Gaskin, "Hume, Atheism, and the 'Interested Obligation' of Morality," in *McGill Hume Studies*, ed. David Fate Norton (San Diego: Austin Hill Press, 1979), 151. The italics are in the original.

3 Gaskin, 151.

4 On this point I am in disagreement with one aspect of Beryl Logan's position in her "Why Hume Wasn't an Atheist: A Reply to Andre" *Hume Studies* 22 (1996): 198, namely, her point that the "proper conclusion" is that "no claim can be made, based on the evidence, with respect to God's benevolence." I am not, however, in overall disagreement with her point that Hume is not an atheist, that is, not a "total atheist" in Gaskin's terminology, nor with Shane Andre's in the paper to which hers is a reply. See Shane Andre, "Was Hume An Atheist?" *Hume Studies* 19 (1993): 142, 156, 157, 159, 161 The mix of Hume's attenuated deism, his moral atheism, and his not being a total atheist is reflected in Peter Millican's point that "Hume was, *to all intents and purposes*, an atheist, and he certainly did not believe in anything like the Christian God," "The Context, Aims, and Structure of Hume's First *Enquiry*," in *Reading Hume on Human Understanding*, ed. Peter Millican (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2002), 37 (italics added). The same point is made by Bernard Williams in his "Hume on Religion," in *David Hume: A Symposium*, ed. D. F. Pears (London: Macmillan, 1963), 77. Williams puts the point this way; "if 'atheist,' is taken to imply, as it often is today, 'dogmatic atheist,' one who is prepared to assert with certainty that no sort of God or religious principle exists, this Hume was not. However, he fell not very far short of it, and was certainly an atheist by, say, Christian standards: about the non-existence of the Christian God, it seems clear that he felt no doubts." "Attenuated deism" is Gaskin's term for just how little Philo's concession to Cleanthes amounts to. See J. C. A. Gaskin, *Hume's Philosophy of Religion*, 2nd edition (Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Humanities Press International, 1988), 7. On the other side, W. A. Parent, for one, sees more in Philo's concession to the religious hypothesis than a mere attenuated deism. See his "Philo's Confession," *The Philosophical Quarterly* 36 (1976): 63–8.

5 Bernard Williams, "Hume on Religion," 86–7. In a letter to Francis Hutcheson, dated 16 March 1740, Hume himself makes the point thus: "since Morality, according to your Opinion as well as mine, is determin'd merely by Sentiment, it regards only human Nature & human Life," *The Letters of David Hume,* ed. J. Y. T. Greig, 2 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1932), 1: 40.

6 Though perhaps the majority view since Kemp Smith's "Introduction" to his edition of the *Dialogues*, it is not universally agreed that Philo is the principal voice of the author. Perhaps James Noxon is the most widely known among recent adherents to the persistent view that Philo is not the main voice of Hume in the book, but that Cleanthes has at least as good (and maybe a better) claim to the honor as Philo. See James Noxon, "Hume's Agnosticism," *The Philosophical Review* 73 (1964): 248–61. And see Noxon's page 253 for a partial listing of advocates of Cleanthes as the principal representative in the *Dialogues* of Hume's own thinking.

7 The term "square agnosticism" is Stephen John Wykstra's. See his "Rowe's Noseeum Arguments from Evil" in *The Evidential Argument from Evil*, ed. Daniel Howard-Snyder (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 130–2. By square agnosticism Wykstra means a position that, in epistemic terms, is equidistant between theism and atheism. The square agnostic—an idealization, to be sure—holds that theism and atheism are each "a fifty-fifty proposition." Epistemically, then, the square agnostic may be expected to treat both with absolute evenhandedness.

8 Paul Draper, "Pain and Pleasure: An Evidential Problem for Theists" in *The Evidential Argument from Evil*. "Indifference" used in description of the fourth hypothesis and by Philo in the third of the passages I quoted at the outset does not, of course, connote any sort of culpable indifference, that is, the indifference of a being that ought not to be indifferent. As used of the fourth hypothesis by Draper and by Philo in the third quoted passage, it is, for instance, the "indifference" of the North Atlantic to the victims of the Titanic who drowned.

9 Philo's practice here reflects his introduction in part 2 (DNR, 145–6) of the idea that, apart from experience, we would never be able to get from how things might be to how things actually are in the world.

10 Coined by Owen Flanagan to refer to philosophers who think that the problem of consciousness, the central problem in the philosophy of mind after Descartes, may be beyond the capacity of human beings to solve, the word "mysterian" is now part of the *lingua franca* of contemporary philosophy of mind. Briefly, roughly, the problem of consciousness is the problem of understanding how a material thing—the brain, the central nervous system, a cat, a human being—can have feeling and awareness. For Flanagan's origination of the term, see Colin McGinn, *The Making of a Philosopher* (New York: HarperCollins, 2002), 183. I owe the reference to Kenneth Winkler.

11 J. C. A. Gaskin, *Hume's Philosophy of Religion*, 223 and note 14 on 244–5. In addition to Hume's own probable unhappiness about the word "deism" used of himself, there is the fact that, among Hume scholars, it is a contested point that Philo *does* acquiesce in a form of deism. But this paper is not the place to weigh the issue. As my point in the text is that there is good indication that Philo accepts an attenuated deism, not that he *does* accept it (although it is my view that he does), it will suffice for here, I hope, to cite Gaskin in support of the point. In that regard, see Gaskin, *Hume's Philosophy of Religion*, 221–3, and J.C.A. Gaskin, "Hume's Attenuated Deism," *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie* 65 (1983): 160–73. For an argument congruent to Gaskin's, see David O'Connor, *Hume on Religion*

(London: Routledge, 2001), 205–12. Philo's acquiescence in weak deism in part 12 is foreshadowed in parts 5 and 10 (DNR, 168–9 and 202 respectively).

12 David Hume, *History of England*, VIII (Edinburgh, 1792), 334; E. C. Mossner, *The Life of David Hume* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980), 75.

13 Unlike Cleanthes, Philo never explicitly invokes Newton or lays claim to Newtonian credentials. Cleanthes first cites Newton in opposing what he regards as Philo's excessive skepticism (DNR, 136) and then, shortly after (DNR, 138–9), by citing Locke's brand of natural religion, he implicitly seeks Newtonian credentials for his upcoming effort (starting in part 2 of the *Dialogues*) to establish the existence of a deity by empirical means. But the deflationary effect of Philo's application of the experimental method to natural religion represents a form of Newtonianism too, although a form that is far less epistemically optimistic than we find in Cleanthes, thereby reflecting an important sub-text in the discussion from this point on between Cleanthes and Philo. That sub-text is essentially a contest over the meaning and effect of Newtonianism in philosophical investigation.

14 Difficult and contested points of interpretation of Hume on fundamental issues lie barely under the surface here, not least of which is the current debate over the so-called "new" Hume provoked by the causal-realist interpretations advanced by, most notably, J. P. Wright, *The Sceptical Realism of David Hume* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1983), Janet Broughton, "Hume's Skepticism about Causal Inferences," *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 64 (1983), Edward Craig, *The Mind of God and the Works of Man* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), and Galen Strawson, *The Secret Connexion: Causation, Realism, and David Hume* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989) to rival more traditional, and more-or-less positivistic, interpretations. Notable too, as perhaps less in opposition to a causal-realist reading of Hume than it may first appear, is Simon Blackburn's quasi-realist interpretation of Hume's thinking on causation. On this, see Peter Millican's "Introduction" to *Reading Hume on Human Understanding*, ed. Peter Millican, 17–18. Blackburn's position is developed in his "Hume and Thick Connexions," in *The New Hume Debate*, eds. Rupert Read and Kenneth A. Richman, (London: Routledge, 2000), 100–12, among other collections, including Millican's. The Read-Richman collection provides a representative selection of "new" and "old" interpretations of Hume on this issue, fundamental in his epistemology and metaphysics.

15 In this depiction of Philo's thinking, I do not mean that the human mind as experienced is any sort of presumed *res cogitans* operating behind the scenes (i.e. the images, feelings, and thoughts). Instead, I mean something much more prosaic, namely, the human mind (our own or another's) as it is experienced in amusement, for instance, or kindness, or understanding, or wit, or indifference (of the moral sort), or jealousy, and so on. What we experience in such cases is *amusement*, not a *self* feeling amused; or *indifference*, not a *self* being indifferent; and so on. The point is that we do not experience selves as such at all, at least not in the Cartesian (also Platonic) sense.

16 The deflationary example of the rotting turnip cited just above (DNR, 218) makes a good illustration of the weakness and attenuatedness of the analogy, thus of the deism, that Philo concedes.

17 Philo made essentially the same point at the end of part 10, providing context and balance to his concession there of a weak deism; "[T]here is no view of human life, or of the condition of mankind, from which, without the greatest violence, we can infer the moral attributes." (DNR, 202). In part 12, when he agrees to a weak form of the analogy that Cleanthes has been pressing since part 2, Philo again emphasizes that there is no evidence to warrant carrying any such analogy "farther than to the human intelligence . . . to the other qualities of the mind" (DNR, 227).

18 The term "professional philosophy" is not ideal here. For instance, although true in a sense and up to a point of thinkers from medieval to modern times who engaged in natural theology, the term in another sense (i.e. connoting earning a living from philosophy) does not quite fit Aquinas, or Berkeley, or Hume, or Locke, for instance, comfortably. And that list is by no means exhaustive. The term as I am using it here is not, and it is not intended to be, synonymous with "academic philosophy." The truth in the term as I use it here is that those philosophers listed, and others who would belong on the list if it were to be extended, *profess* philosophical views that are *worked-out*, in a rich sense of the terms "profess" and "worked out."

19 I have phrased the point cautiously because Philo's word "exclude," in the context of the quoted passage, may be open to two interpretations of different strengths: first, it may be read as expressing what we mean when we say that *p* does not possess the attribute *q* (the stronger interpretation); or, second, it may be read as expressing what we mean when we decline to say of *p* that *p* possesses the attribute *q* (the weaker interpretation). On the stronger interpretation, the quoted passage about moral good and evil belongs with the second and third passages quoted from part 11, while on the weaker interpretation it belongs with the first passage quoted. I am leaving the point this way because I do not see the *Dialogues*, either in the immediate context of part 11 or overall, as giving us enough to warrant a definitive judgment either way.

20 Three codicils. (1) Preference does not entail commitment, in philosophy or in life. For instance, I prefer the Subaru to the Toyota but I buy (commit to, in one sense) the Honda. (2) The "new hypothesis of cosmogony" of part 8, initially offered as "a plausible, if not a true" account of the origin of natural order, and subsequently retreated from, to skepticism, dovetails with the indifference hypothesis. For, on an account of natural order without mind such as Philo sketches in part 8, natural order cannot be evidence for any kind of thing that could possess moral qualities. Notwithstanding Philo's retreat from it to a skeptical "suspense of judgment" later in part 8, the *Dialogues* still leaves that hypothesis standing as one which, for all we know (in the second half of the eighteenth century), is at least as plausible as any teleological alternative that would be required by moral theism. However, here at the start of the twenty-first century we would, surely, assess the relative plausibilities differently. (3) Philo's preference for moral atheism fits well with his weak deism. In his acquiescence in weak deism in part 12, Philo is careful, as we have seen, to go on to insist that any analogy we might make between the cause or causes of natural order, on the one hand, and human intelligence, on the other, "cannot be transferred, with any appearance of probability, to the other qualities of the mind." (DNR, 227). This foreclosure shows us Philo's adamancy that his concession to weak deism opens no door to any form of moral theism.