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Theodicy in Hume's *Dialogues*

Hume Studies Volume 46, Number 1–
2, 2020, pp. 145-166

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Philo's Second Circumstance: Malebranche and the General Laws Theodicy in Hume's Dialogues

TODD RYAN

Abstract: In Part XI of the *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion*, Philo enumerates “four circumstances” which he claims are the principal sources of pain and suffering in human life. In this paper, I focus on Philo’s second circumstance in which he develops a critique of what I call the ‘general laws theodicy.’ This theodicy, according to which natural evils arise as a result of God’s government of the universe by simple and general laws of nature, is most closely associated with Nicolas Malebranche. However, I argue that Philo’s criticisms badly misfire against Malebranche’s version of the theodicy. I then show how the general laws theodicy was radically reinterpreted by a succession of British philosophers—among them Berkeley, Hutcheson and Butler—and that it is against this reconceived version of the theodicy that Philo’s objections are aimed.

In Part XI of the *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion*, Philo sets out to criticize Cleanthes’s hypothesis of a finite, though “superlatively great” deity.¹ Having argued that natural evil—suffering and misery—vastly outweighs natural good in human life, Philo challenges a number of prominent theodicies, or attempts to justify the presence of evil in a world created by a good, wise and powerful God.² Philo enumerates “four circumstances, on which depend all, or the greatest part of the ills, that molest sensible creatures” (DNR 11.5; 205).³ Philo’s treatment of each of these circumstances is broadly parallel in structure. First, a general source of natural evil is identified. Next, an implicit justification of this circumstance is offered by

calling attention to some greater good that results from it. Finally, the alleged justification is undermined on the grounds that the source of evil appears not to have been either “necessary or unavoidable.”⁴ It is in this pattern of complaint-concession-refutation that Hume couches his response to a number of prominent theodicies.⁵

In this paper, I consider Philo’s critique of what I shall call the ‘general laws theodicy,’ which is the focus of Philo’s second circumstance. The general laws theodicy is an attempt to justify those evils that arise from God’s government of the world by exceptionless laws of nature. Here is how Philo presents the issue:

But a capacity of pain would not alone produce pain, were it not for the *second* circumstance, *viz.* the conducting of the world by general laws; and this seems nowise necessary to a very perfect Being. It is true; if every thing were conducted by particular volitions, the course of nature would be perpetually broken, and no man could employ his reason in the conduct of life. But might not other particular volitions remedy this inconvenience? In short, might not the Deity exterminate all ill, wherever it were to be found; and produce all good, without any preparation or long progress of causes and effects? (DNR 11.7; 206; Hume’s italics)

According to Philo, one of the principal sources of natural evil in the world is that nature is governed by general laws rather than “particular volitions.” Were God instead to bring about each successive state of the universe by means of a particular volition, he might “exterminate all ill, wherever it were to be found.” The contrast Philo draws between a world governed by general laws of nature and one in which God acts by a series of discrete, particular volitions naturally suggests that Philo is here offering a response to Malebranche, whose general laws theodicy was arguably the best known and most influential theodicy of the latter half of the seventeenth century.

Malebranche’s General Laws Theodicy

Malebranche’s theodicy begins with a frank admission of the reality and pervasiveness of evil and imperfection in the world.⁶ Rain falls uselessly in the ocean, while the crops upon which human subsistence depends lie parched and dying. Fruits ripening on trees are destroyed by frost or flood before they can reach maturity. Monstrous births and other imperfections disfigure the order of nature (*Treatise* I, 1, XVIII/OC V 32).⁷ In view of such “irregularities” Malebranche concedes that the actual world is not the most perfect that was in God’s power to create.⁸ Yet, though God is the cause of such evils, he is not blameworthy for having produced them. According to Malebranche, God always acts for his own glory, and therefore he wishes to create a world that befits his infinite perfections. However, in choosing which world to create, God must consider not only the goodness of the world itself, but also the excellence of the means by which it is created and conserved. According to Malebranche, “an excellent workman must proportion his action to his work. He does not do by very complex means

what he can execute by simpler means. He does not act without an end and never makes a wasted effort" (*Treatise* I, 1, XIII/ OC V 28).⁹ God must always act in a way that is worthy of his infinite attributes and, in particular, his infinite wisdom. Now it is the mark of a wise agent always to act in "the simplest, most general, most uniform manner" (*Treatise* I, 1, XII Add/OC V 28). Because God's wisdom requires him to act by the most general means, he must eschew particular volitions in favor of general ones, for "the general cause must not act by particular volitions, nor an infinitely wise being by complicated means [*voyes composées*]" (*Treatise* I, 1, XXIII/ OC V 36). For Malebranche, God acts by a general volition when he acts in accordance with some general law he has established. For example, when in accordance with the laws of communication of motion, God sets one ball in motion upon being struck by another, he acts by a general volition. By contrast, God acts by a particular volition when the content of his volition is not the consequence of a general law.¹⁰ Thus, were God to move a previously stationary ball in the absence of any lawfully established occasional cause, he would act by means of a particular volition. For Malebranche, the non-lawful character of particular volitions implies that every event brought about by their means is, strictly speaking, a miracle.

For Malebranche, it is because God acts by general volitions that he is not blameworthy for the evils and imperfections of the natural world. For God does not will such evils by means of particular volitions. Rather, he brings them about as a consequence of the general laws of nature he has ordained. For example, when a baby is born tragically deformed, this is not because God has formed a particular plan to afflict this infant with such a deformation.¹¹ Nor does God act from a particular plan when he causes rain to fall uselessly in the ocean. Although God is the immediate cause of such effects, he does not will them for their own sake. Such evils when they occur are the necessary consequence of the general laws of motion by which God has chosen to govern the material world. And while it is true that God foresaw all of the various evils that would result from these laws, he did not choose these laws *because* they would produce such evils. As Malebranche puts the point, God "did not establish the laws of the communication of motion in order to produce monsters; he willed these laws for their fruitfulness, not for their sterility" (*Treatise* I, 1, XIX/OC V 32).

Of course, having established the laws of nature, it is fully within God's power to intervene miraculously by means of a particular volition so as to prevent any evils that would otherwise result from them. However, his wisdom prevents him from doing so:

God does not multiply His volitions in order to remedy the true or apparent disorders that are the necessary consequences of natural laws. God must not correct or change these laws, although they sometimes produce monsters. He must not upset the uniformity of His conduct and the simplicity of His ways. He must ignore insignificant things. . . . He must not have particular volitions to produce effects that do not merit them, or that are unworthy of the action of Him who produces them." (*Search, Eclair* 15, OC III 219/LO 665–66)¹²

God's infinite wisdom prevents him from intervening in particular circumstances, since to do so would compromise the simplicity and uniformity of his ways.¹³ Consequently, it would be unworthy of God to forestall these evils by such means. God must have greater regard for his infinite wisdom than for finite creation. Or, as Malebranche succinctly puts the point, "God loves his wisdom more than his work" (*Treatise* I, 2, XXXIX Add/OC V 47).

Thus, God's wisdom requires him to act by general laws, while the same wisdom prohibits him from interrupting the course of nature to prevent the particular evils that arise from them. However, the constraint that God acts by general volitions is not by itself sufficient to justify the imperfections of the natural world. For the mere fact that God must act by uninterrupted general laws does not entail that monsters, droughts, and other natural evils must occur in the ordinary course of events. Whether, and with what frequency, such evils arise will further depend upon the specific laws of nature God chooses to enact. Consequently, if Malebranche's theodicy is to succeed, he must confront the following question. Among the infinite number of ways that God could conceive of executing his plan, was there no set of laws capable of producing a world equal in perfection to ours, yet without its attendant evils?

In response to this challenge, Malebranche argues that God's wisdom requires that he act not only by the most general means, but also by the simplest. For "order demands that the laws of nature by which God produces this infinite variety found in the world be very simple and small in number, as they in fact are, for this conduct bears the mark of an infinite wisdom" (*Search*, Elucid. 8, OC III 88–89/LO 589). For Malebranche, simplicity of action comprises two distinct components.¹⁴ First, to act in the simplest manner is to act by the fewest possible number of volitions relative to a given end. For a general cause such as God, this means acting by the fewest number of general volitions. As confirmation of this requirement, Malebranche affirms that the material world is governed by just two laws of motion (*Treatise* I, 1, XV/OC V 30). Second, to act by the simplest means is to act by laws with the simplest propositional content. While Malebranche says less than one might like about this second criterion, he offers several examples to illustrate his meaning. Thus, for example, the law that all bodies will continue to move in a straight line unless acted on by another body is said to be simpler than a law prescribing that bodies in motion will describe elaborate curves.

For Malebranche, it is because of the simplicity of the laws of nature that imperfections arise in the natural world. Had these laws been greater in number or significantly more complex, God might have brought about a more excellent world with fewer imperfections.¹⁵ As Malebranche puts the point: "Now, the simplicity of these general laws produces in certain cases, due to the disposition of the subject, irregular kinds of motion, or rather, monstrous arrangements of them, and consequently, it is because God wills order that there are monsters"¹⁶ (*Search*, Elucid. 8, OC III 89/LO 589).¹⁶ In sum, God wishes to create the most excellent world possible.¹⁷ However, he is constrained by love of his infinite wisdom to act in a simple and general manner. Unfortunately, these two aims are in conflict in so far as the simpler and more uniform the laws of nature, the greater the imperfection that will result from them. Therefore, in choosing which world to create, God must balance the excellence of the work with the simplicity of the means by which it may be produced. Consequently, the world that

God produces is not the one that is best absolutely speaking. Rather, it is that which exhibits the greatest perfection relative to the simplicity of the means by which it can be brought about and maintained (*Treatise* I, 1, XIII/OC V 28).

Philo's Response to the General Laws Theodicy

At first glance, Philo's second circumstance appears to be a direct response to Malebranche.¹⁸ Philo couches his presentation of the theodicy in terms of the signature Malebranchian contrast between general laws and particular volitions. Indeed, Philo seems to assume that this terminology is sufficiently familiar as to require no explanation or elaboration. Perhaps more strikingly, Philo does not pause to explain in what sense natural evils might be thought to result from the universality and generality of the laws of nature. This suggests that Philo takes himself to be addressing a well-known theodicy. Further evidence that Hume is taking direct aim at the Oratorian might seem to be found in Philo's contention that "the conducting of the world by general laws . . . seems nowise necessary to a very perfect Being"—a claim, as has just been seen, that Malebranche is at pains to deny.¹⁹

However, the immediate sequel suggests that something very different is at work. For Philo follows this assertion with a consideration concerning the utility of general laws for human agency. More specifically, Philo concedes that "if everything were conducted by particular volitions, the course of nature would be perpetually broken, and no man could employ his reason in the conduct of life" (DNR 11.7; 206). It is in this concession that we find Philo's understanding of the justification of evil proposed by the general laws theodicy. Philo portrays his opponent as arguing that governance of the world by particular volitions was not desirable because of the harm that would have resulted to intelligent creatures.²⁰ On this view, God's governance of the world by general laws is justified because it enables sentient creatures to form reliable expectations about the future, and so to pursue their ends according to a rational plan. However, from Malebranche's point of view, this is a complete misrepresentation of the general laws theodicy. Whereas for Malebranche it is God's love of his supreme wisdom that leads him to act in the simplest and most general manner, for Philo's unnamed opponent, the justification of general laws lies rather in their tendency to facilitate rational agency and thereby promote human welfare. On this view, it is God's goodness rather than his wisdom that dictates the use of general laws.

Furthermore, when Philo turns to criticize the theodicy, it is solely against this non-Malebranchian justification of general laws that his criticism is aimed. Philo offers two objections to the general laws theodicy as he portrays it. In neither case does he challenge the proposed benefit of general laws. Instead, he maintains that the benefit could have been achieved without the associated evil. Having granted that in a world governed solely by particular volitions, human beings would be unable to anticipate the future course of events and so provide for their own well-being, Philo contends that God could easily prevent any suffering this might engender by means of further particular volitions. As Philo puts the point, "might not other particular volitions remedy this inconvenience?" (DNR 11.7; 206). A simple

example will help to make Philo's point clear. It is because of the lawful ordering of the world that humans are able to procure nourishment for themselves, for example, by planting in the spring and harvesting in the autumn. If the world were governed by a series of particular volitions, the lawful ordering of events upon which these activities depend would be destroyed. No foresight would be possible and humans would be at a loss as to how to act on their own behalf. Nevertheless, God could provide for our needs by further particular volitions, either by directly willing our bodies to be nourished or by spontaneously producing food "without any preparation or long progress of causes and effects" (DNR 11.7; 206). In this way, Philo contends, God might have secured the acknowledged benefits that result from general laws while avoiding the concomitant evils.

Considered as a response to Malebranche, Philo's first objection clearly misses the mark. For Malebranche, a world governed exclusively by particular volitions would be wholly unworthy of God's infinite wisdom. For it is the mark of a wise agent to act by the simplest and most general means. Additional particular volitions of the kind envisioned by Philo would hardly undo the damage. On the contrary, they would only be so many additional affronts to God's supreme wisdom. From a Malebranchean perspective, the remedy suggested by Philo not only fails to solve the difficulty, it would only serve to aggravate the problem.

Philo's second objection, considered as a response to Malebranche, seems equally ill-conceived. According to Philo,

we must consider, that, according to the present œconomy of the world, the course of nature, though supposed exactly regular, yet to us appears not so, and many events are uncertain, and many disappoint our expectations. Health and sickness, calm and tempest, with an infinite number of other accidents, whose causes are unknown and variable, have a great influence both on the fortunes of particular persons and on the prosperity of public societies. . . . A Being, therefore, who knows the secret springs of the universe, might easily, by particular volitions, turn all these accidents to the good of mankind, and render the whole world happy, without discovering himself in any operation. A fleet, whose purposes were salutary to society, might always meet with a fair wind. . . . A few such events as these, regularly and wisely conducted, would change the face of the world; and yet would no more seem to disturb the course of nature or confound human conduct, than the present œconomy of things, where the causes are secret, and variable, and compounded. (DNR 11.8; 206–207)

Here Philo suggests that even granting that the world is best governed by general laws, nevertheless God might selectively intervene by particular volitions so as to avert the worst evils that would otherwise occur were nature allowed to run its lawful course. According to Philo, many great evils could be avoided in this way without sacrificing the good that arises from governance of the natural world by general laws. For the regularity and uniformity of the laws of nature are beneficial only to the extent that they enable us to reliably predict the future. However, we are not always in a position to do so. On the contrary, the causal structure

of the world is of such complexity that we are often unable to foresee the outcome of a given situation, even though that outcome is strictly determined by the general laws of nature. In such cases, God could violate these laws in such a way that would be completely undetectable to us. Thus, to use Philo's own examples, a slightly higher wave than was strictly determined by the laws of motion might have sunk Julius Caesar's fleet and restored freedom to Rome. A minor alteration to the neurological structure of young Caligula's brain might have rendered him a wise and munificent ruler. Such undetected violations of the lawful order would no more compromise our rational agency than do any natural circumstances whose outcome we cannot clearly foresee. As Philo puts the point, "a few such events as these, regularly and wisely conducted, would change the face of the world; and yet *would no more seem* to disturb the course of nature or confound human conduct, than the present œconomy of things, where the causes are secret, and variable, and compounded" (DNR 11.8; 206–207; emphasis added). Thus, Philo concludes, many of the greatest evils that now result from the government of the world by general laws could be avoided without thereby sacrificing the acknowledged benefit, since in such cases no rational foresight was possible in the first place.²¹

Considered as a response to Malebranche, the appeal to human ignorance and our consequent inability to detect particular volitions is completely beside the point. For, once again, it is Malebranche's contention that God must not act by particular volitions, since to do so would be unworthy of his infinite wisdom.²² Whether such imperfect conduct would be detectable by human beings is irrelevant. As with his previous reply, Philo's second objection presupposes that the greater good at which God aims in choosing to govern the world by general laws is that it makes possible human rational agency and thereby contributes to human happiness. But as we have seen, Malebranche's justification of general laws is based on other considerations.²³ Thus, we must conclude either that Hume has thoroughly misunderstood the basis of Malebranche's theodicy, or that the Oratorian is not the intended target of Philo's second circumstance.²⁴

Furthermore, there can be no question but that Hume had some firsthand knowledge of Malebranche's general laws theodicy. For while there is, to my knowledge, no direct evidence of Hume's having read the *Traité de la nature et de la grâce*,²⁵ the work in which Malebranche's theodicy receives its fullest treatment, the main elements of Malebranche's solution with regard to natural evil were already present in the *Elucidations of the Search After Truth*, a text with which Hume was thoroughly familiar.²⁶ Hume was likewise aware of Bayle's extensive criticism of the general laws theodicy on the grounds that it wrongly subordinated God's goodness to his wisdom in the governance of the world. Thus, in the *Early Memoranda*, Hume takes note of Bayle's complaint that the general laws theodicy of Malebranche (and his follower Isaac Jaquelot) is based on the wrongheaded assumption that God acts out of some other motive than goodness. Hume writes: "20. Those, who solve the Difficultys concerning the Origin of Ill by the Apology of general laws suppose another Motive beside Goodness in the Creation of the World."²⁷ Given his familiarity with these sources, it is exceedingly unlikely that Hume could have so thoroughly misunderstood the basis of Malebranche's theodicy.

Of course, Philo's criticisms are directed at what he refers to as Cleanthes's "experimental theism"—that is, the attempt to arrive at knowledge of the existence and nature of God based solely on causal inferences from empirical data according to the principle 'like effects prove like cases'" (DNR 5.1–2; 165–66). Thus, it is perhaps not surprising that Philo should not have been made to engage Malebranche's theodicy more directly. However, recognition of this fact only serves to sharpen the question. Against whom then is Philo arguing? And, furthermore, what is the point of the general laws theodicy once its underlying suppositions have been discarded? As I shall show, the general laws theodicy underwent a remarkable transformation at the hands of British philosophers and theologians who did not share several of the guiding presuppositions of Malebranche's thought.²⁸ In tracing the reception and transformation of Malebranche's general laws theodicy in eighteenth-century Britain, the pivotal figure is Berkeley.²⁹

The General Laws Theodicy in Britain

The context of Berkeley's initial discussion of God's use of general laws is not theodicy per se, but an objection that can be raised against his idealist system.³⁰ According to the objection, were God the immediate cause of our ideas of perception, there would be no need for complex internal mechanisms in order to bring about such effects as the growth of plants or the motion of animals. God could simply produce such effects directly, without the use of such "round-about methods" (PHK 61). Similarly, the objection continues, why should a craftsman have to go to the trouble of constructing complex mechanisms such as clockworks if it is God himself who moves the hands of the clock by an immediate volition? Why can he not do so without the elaborate efforts of the watchmaker? (PHK 60).³¹ In response, Berkeley argues that the regularity observed in the general laws of nature is of both practical and theoretical benefit to human beings. Berkeley points out that God's production of sensible ideas in accordance with fixed laws of nature "gives us a sort of foresight, which enables us to regulate our actions for the benefit of life. And without this we should be eternally at a loss: we could not know how to act any thing that might procure us the least pleasure, or remove the least pain of sense" (PHK 31). It is because natural events occur in uniform, regular patterns, for example, that we are able to fashion artifacts for use in ordinary life. It is these same patterns that make possible the development of scientific explanations of the workings of nature. In both these ways, the ordering of the world by general laws—or in Berkeley's words, "the regular constant methods of working observed by the supreme Agent" (PHK 62)—evinces the wisdom and goodness of God.

Later, in the closing sections of the *Principles*, Berkeley invokes the same line of reasoning to explain the apparent defects observable in the created world. Berkeley's examples of such imperfections are strikingly similar to Malebranche's own: "monsters, untimely births, fruits blasted in the blossom, rains falling in desert places, [and] miseries incident to human life" (PHK 151).³² Taken together, such occurrences might seem to suggest that the world is not the work of an infinitely wise and good deity. Against this, Berkeley argues that all of these

evils are the result of God's decision to govern the sensible world by "the most simple and general rules, and after a steady and consistent manner" (PHK 151). If the world were not so governed, reason would be of no use in ordinary life—indeed, there could be no such thing as human reason at all. Berkeley writes:

[T]he operating according to general and stated [. . . fixed] laws, is so necessary for our guidance in the affairs of life, and letting us into the secret of Nature, that without it, all reach and compass of thought, all human sagacity and design could serve to no manner of purpose: it were even impossible there should be any such faculties or powers in the mind. . . . Which one consideration abundantly out-balances whatever particular inconveniences may thence arise. (PHK 151)

For Berkeley, the utility that human beings derive from the government of the universe by general laws far outweighs the evil and imperfections that result from them. Consequently, the existence of such evils poses no serious challenge to the wisdom and goodness of God.

However, while Berkeley follows Malebranche in tracing the origin of these evils to God's use of "the most simple and general rules," in reality, it is the uniformity of the laws of nature rather than their simplicity that seems to be doing all of the philosophical work. For Berkeley makes no attempt to show that the actual laws of nature are in fact the simplest, nor even to explain what the simplicity of a law of nature consists in. Moreover, the greater good that lawfulness makes possible is said to be a function of God's "regular constant methods of working"—that is, their generality—rather than their simplicity (PHK 62). Thus, while Berkeley retains the core idea that natural evil results from lawful governance of the world, he transforms Malebranche's theodicy in two fundamental ways. First, the greater good that general laws make possible is understood in terms of their benefits for human beings with regard to both practical affairs and theoretical knowledge.³³ Second, in emphasizing the indispensable role of laws in securing these benefits, it is the generality rather than simplicity of the laws which Berkeley chooses to stress.³⁴

Here, then, is a consideration in favor of general laws that parallels the appeal to rational agency that Philo implicitly ascribes to his unnamed opponent. Philo's concession that "if every thing were conducted by particular volitions, the course of nature would be perpetually broken, and no man could employ his reason in the conduct of life" precisely echoes the benefit of general laws of nature to which Berkeley appeals (DNR 11.7; 206). Thus, there is reason to believe that it is this reconceived version of the general laws theodicy that is the true target of Philo's attack. Nor is it surprising that the argument should have drawn Hume's attention. For Berkeley's recasting of the general laws theodicy exercised a great influence among successive generations of British philosophers and theologians. We find it repeated without significant modification throughout the eighteenth century. Edmund Law, for example, in his English translation of William King's *De Origine Mali*, provides a brief defense of divine action by general laws along the lines proposed by Berkeley. Commenting on a passage in which King

argues that to prevent certain natural evils would require a continuous miracle on God's part, Law contends that were God to act solely by particular volitions,

there could be no general pre-establish'd *Laws of Nature* but God must continually interpose, and effect every thing by his own direct and immediate Power; The bad consequences of which are very obvious. There could be no *Arts* or *Sciences*, no *Skill* or *Industry*; no regular Methods of providing for our Bodies, or improving our Minds in the Knowledge of things. All which evidently presuppose, and are entirely founded on, some settled, certain Laws of the Universe discoverable by us.³⁵

Other prominent defenders of the view include Francis Hutcheson,³⁶ George Turnbull,³⁷ and Lord Kames.³⁸ A similar line of reasoning was still being used by Thomas Reid in his 1780 lectures on natural theology.³⁹

However, this is not the end of the story. For while Berkeley initiates the transformation, he does not complete it. Crucially, Berkeley fails to consider why God does not occasionally intervene so as to prevent the most harmful effects that result from general laws.⁴⁰ To further trace the development of the general laws theodicy, we must look to Joseph Butler.⁴¹ Having established in Part I of the *Analogy of Religion* the probability of God's moral government of the universe, Butler turns to consider objections that might be raised against the goodness and justice of God. Butler attempts to meet all such objections by maintaining that God's government of the world is a "scheme"—that is, a general system—and that our unavoidable ignorance of this scheme vitiates any objection that might be raised against its goodness. Butler writes: "upon supposition that God exercises a moral government over the world, the analogy of his natural government suggests and makes it credible, that his moral government must be a scheme quite beyond our comprehension: and this affords a general answer to all objections against the justice and goodness of it."⁴² While Butler does not claim to be able to offer a complete account of this scheme or system of moral government, he argues by analogy with the natural world, that God's moral government of the world is likely carried on by "general laws" rather than "single unconnected acts" (that is, particular volitions) of goodness and justice. Butler then tries to show how our ignorance of this scheme of government effectively undermines all objections to God's goodness based on observed instances of evil.⁴³ Butler considers two such objections against governance by general laws:

[S]uppose then a person boldly to assert, that the things complained of, the origin and continuance of evil, might easily have been prevented by repeated interpositions; interpositions so guarded and circumstanced, as would preclude all mischief arising from them: or, if this were impracticable, that a *scheme* of government is itself an imperfection; since more good might have been produced, without any scheme, system, or constitution at all, by continued single unrelated acts of distributive justice and goodness; because these would have occasioned no irregularities.⁴⁴

Here Butler clearly distinguishes and puts to himself, in reverse order, the two objections that Philo would later raise against the general laws theodicy, namely that any natural evils resulting from a system of general laws (or as Butler puts it, a “scheme of government”) might be prevented by God “by repeated interpositions” (Philo’s second objection), or that God might have chosen not to govern the world by general laws at all, but rather by a series of discrete, ad hoc (“unrelated”) particular volitions (Philo’s first objection).

In response, Butler maintains that such objections are “mere arbitrary assertions,” since we cannot know that the result of such divine interpositions would on the whole result in greater goodness and justice in the world. For all we know, such miraculous interventions might give rise to evil effects that could not be remedied. Anticipating Philo’s assertion that any bad consequences of these interventions might be rectified by further particular volitions, Butler observes “it may be said, any bad result might be prevented by further interpositions wherever there was occasion for them.”⁴⁵ However, he dismisses this suggestion as “talking quite at random, and in the dark.”⁴⁶

Butler’s charge that those who would claim that God might improve the universe by means of particular volitions are arguing from a position of ignorance has recently been echoed by William Lad Sessions. Sessions charges that Philo “skates on the thin ice of ignorance” when he asserts that the universe could be made better in a piecemeal fashion by particular volitions, since Philo is in no position to know what is and is not possible with regard to “the œconomy of the world.”⁴⁷ However, this ignores the dialectical situation in which the discussion of Philo’s four circumstances occurs. Cleanthes is attempting to infer divine benevolence solely on the basis of experience. The most straightforward way of doing so would be to show that human happiness far outweighs human suffering on the whole. The problem for Cleanthes is that there is a great deal of natural evil in the world—perhaps too much to straightforwardly infer the benevolence of the creator. Consequently, to make good on his inference, the experimental theist must explain away or otherwise justify a good part of the suffering and misery we observe in the world. To do so Cleanthes hypothesizes that the evil producing circumstances are necessary and unavoidable if the deity—now supposed to be of merely finite wisdom and power—is to procure some associated greater good or avoid some greater evil. As Cleanthes succinctly summarizes his position, “benevolence, regulated by wisdom, and *limited by necessity*, may produce just such a world as the present” (DNR 11.1; 203; italics added). In response Philo identifies what he takes to be the four principal sources of natural evil in the world. Philo’s point with regard to each of these evil-producing circumstances is that they do not appear to us to have been in any way necessary. Of course, Philo freely acknowledges that he may be wrong in this.⁴⁸ However, because there does not *appear* to be any necessity in the case, Cleanthes’s hypothesis is shown to be *mere* hypothesis—that is, ungrounded speculation. This is a significant point in Philo’s favor, since the method of experimental theism as defended by Cleanthes eschews all appeal to explanatory hypotheses that go beyond the data of experience.⁴⁹

Thus, the dialectical situation that Cleanthes faces is fundamentally different from that of Butler. Butler invokes ignorance merely to block objections to the goodness of God, which

Butler takes to have been antecedently established. In this situation it is the objector who must prove that the government of the universe by uninterrupted general laws was not necessary to achieve a good and just world. By contrast, Cleanthes, who acknowledges he has no *a priori* proof of God's moral attributes, must *infer* the goodness of God on the basis of the observed facts of good and evil in the world. Consequently, it is Cleanthes who must prove that the evils we observe were in fact necessary to procure the associated good. In this position, appeal to ignorance in the manner of Butler is insufficient, as Philo himself makes clear:

There may, for aught we know, be good reasons, why providence interposes not in this manner; but they are unknown to us: And though the mere supposition, that such reasons exist, may be sufficient to *save* the conclusion concerning the divine attributes, yet surely it can never be sufficient to *establish* that conclusion. (DNR 11.8; 207; Hume's emphasis)

This may also help to explain why Philo believes he can safely ignore Malebranche's version of the general laws theodicy, while at the same time feeling called upon to respond to the reformulated version of Berkeley and Butler. As just noted, Cleanthes is attempting to save the inference to divine benevolence by explaining the presence of natural evils as a necessary, if regrettable, means of achieving some greater good. According to Malebranche, the necessity arises out of the demand that God always act in the simplest and most general manner relative to his ends. While it was within God's power to create a world with significantly less natural evil, to do so would have required him to compromise the simplicity of action that is the mark of a supremely wise being. However, from the point of view of experimental theism, the suggestion that divine wisdom leads God to produce a less excellent world than was in his power to create is an *a priori* hypothesis—that is, an unwarranted assumption about the nature of the first cause of the universe. Such an assumption cannot be inferred solely on the basis of empirical observation. It is for this reason that a Malebranchean-style appeal to divine wisdom need not be addressed by Philo: it is a hypothesis of the kind that Cleanthes in accordance with his experimental theism has already renounced as illegitimate.⁵⁰ Consequently, the only justification for suffering and misery that Philo is willing to countenance is a claim to identify some greater *natural* good—some greater source of happiness—that could only be achieved by allowing the associated evil. This is precisely what the reformulated version of the general laws theodicy attempts to establish.

In sum, the general laws theodicy underwent a major reinterpretation at the hands of eighteenth-century British thinkers. Guided by the conviction that it is God's goodness rather than his wisdom that is his principal motivation for creating and governing the world, these thinkers imagined that the greater good God seeks to achieve in acting by general laws was a fundamentally benevolent one—namely, to make possible the rational agency of human beings. It is against this reinterpreted version of the theodicy rather than the Malebranchean original that the objections of Philo's second circumstance are aimed.

Conclusion

How successful are Philo's objections considered as a response to the reformulated version of the theodicy? Of course, a complete answer to this question can only be attempted as part of a broader analysis of Hume's framing of the problem of evil in Parts X and XI of the *Dialogues*. Here I can offer only a few brief remarks. With regard to the first objection according to which God might have eliminated natural evil by bringing about every event by means of a discrete particular volition, the strength of Philo's challenge will in large measure depend on how one understands the benefit that human beings derive from rational agency. At least for the purposes of the objection, Philo seems to conceive of practical reason as a purely instrumental good. That is, the sole value of practical reason is to provide the means of procuring natural goods and avoiding natural evils so as to preserve our lives and promote our happiness. It is for this reason that Philo can argue that the loss of practical reason could easily be remedied "by further particular volitions."⁵¹ If the value of practical reason lies entirely in its use in procuring the necessities of life, then arguably human beings would suffer no great loss if these necessities were simply provided us more directly without any rational effort on our part.

Against this, one could argue that human happiness is intimately bound up with rational agency in such a way that the loss of such agency could not be rectified on God's part by means of particular volitions. Perhaps the most straightforward way of doing so would be to assert that human rational agency is intrinsically valuable and so makes an independent contribution to human happiness over and above the value of the goods it helps procure.⁵² Alternatively, one could argue that rational agency makes possible certain higher order pleasures that cannot be vouchsafed by God by means of particular volitions. An example of this latter strategy is offered by Hutcheson. As noted above, Hutcheson maintains that one type of pleasure made possible by universal laws of nature is the pleasure we experience in performing benevolent actions. Hutcheson writes:

[A]s to the Operations of the Deity by general Laws, there is still a further Reason from a Sense superior to these already consider'd, even that of Virtue, or the Beauty of Action, which is the Foundation of our greatest Happiness. For were there no general Laws fix'd in the Course of Nature, there could be no Prudence or Design in Men, no rational Expectation of effects from Causes, no Schemes of Action projected, or any regular Execution. If then, according to the Frame of our Nature, our greatest happiness must depend upon our Actions, as it may perhaps be made appear it does, "The Universe must be govern'd, not by particular Wills, but by general Laws, upon which we can found our Expectations, and project our Schemes of Action."⁵³

For Hutcheson, highest human happiness crucially requires the opportunity to develop and exercise the moral virtues and in particular to perform benevolent actions. Indeed, Hutcheson suggests that the pleasure of benevolent action is the highest form of pleasure and so, constitutes

the supreme happiness for human beings. This pleasure would inevitably be lost if the regular order of nature upon which human agency depends were to be eliminated.⁵⁴ Hutcheson's claim is particularly pertinent, since it engages Philo on his own grounds in so far as it suggests a kind of pleasure made possible by general laws and whose loss could not be remedied "by further particular volitions." While Hume might challenge Hutcheson's claim that performing benevolent actions is "our greatest happiness," the fact remains that Philo neglects a very significant kind of pleasure: the pleasure of performing morally good actions.

Philo's second objection is that God could surreptitiously interrupt the laws of nature so as to prevent great natural evils in situations where human beings cannot reliably foresee the lawfully ordained outcome. According to Philo, "there may, for aught we know, be good reasons, why providence interposes not in this manner; but they are unknown to us" (DNR11.8; 207). One obvious problem with this suggestion is that Philo is in no position to say that God does not in fact do so, since by the very nature of the case Philo is considering, any miraculous intervention by God would be undetectable to us. For all we know, Trajan would have been a ruthless and cruel despot had not God surreptitiously intervened to reconfigure his infant brain by means of a particular volition. At most Philo is entitled to infer that God does not *always* intervene in such cases given that calamitous events do sometimes occur in circumstances in which we can see no reason why they might not have been prevented without loss of greater good. Here it is worth noting that when discussing the same issue in his own voice, Hume strikes a more modest tone. He writes,

Every event is alike important in the eyes of that infinite being, who takes in, at one glance, the most distant regions of space and remotest periods of time. There is no one event, however important to us, which he has exempted from the general laws that govern the universe, or which he has peculiarly reserved for his own immediate action and operation. The revolutions of states and empires depend upon the smallest caprice or passion of single men; and the lives of men are shortened or extended by the smallest accident of air or diet, sunshine or tempest. Nature still continues her progress and operation; *and if general laws be ever broke by particular volitions of the deity, 'tis after a manner which entirely escapes human observation.*⁵⁵

Here Hume does not categorically deny particular interventions in momentous conjunctures. Although he initially states that there is no single event that is not the result of the general laws of nature, he subsequently weakens the assertion, limiting himself to the claim that if there are any such miraculous events, we are not aware of them.⁵⁶ As in numerous other instances, Philo appears on this score to be a somewhat less cautious, more "careless" thinker than Hume (DNR Intro.6; 128).

NOTES

1 An earlier version of this paper was presented at the 45th International Hume Society Conference in Budapest, Hungary. I would like to thank the members of the audience, as well as my commentator, Lewis Powell, for their helpful comments and suggestions. I would also like to thank two anonymous referees for this journal for their detailed comments.

2 The term 'theodicy' was coined (from the Greek '*theos*' meaning 'God' and '*dike*' meaning 'justice') by Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, who used it to describe the philosophical defense of divine justice undertaken in his *Essais de Théodicée* (1710). Since then, however, it has acquired the more general sense of an attempt to reconcile the existence of suffering and moral evil with the wisdom, power and goodness of God. It is in this latter sense that I use the term throughout this paper.

3 References to the *Dialogues* are to *Hume's Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, edited by Norman Kemp Smith, cited in the text as "DNR" followed by section and paragraph, and page number.

4 That is, the circumstance in question seems to be neither absolutely nor conditionally necessary in so far as the deity apparently had at his disposal alternative means of securing the same or comparable good while producing significantly less evil. Cf. Tweyman, "Introduction," 76.

5 In his discussion of the four circumstances, Stanley Tweyman oddly writes as though it were Cleanthes who was putting forward these theodicies. However, the striking fact is that in all four cases, it is Philo who presents both the theodicy and its refutation. See Tweyman, "Introduction," 76ff.

6 For a detailed discussion of Malebranche's theodicy, see Andrew Black, "Malebranche's Theodicy"; Denis Moreau, "Malebranche on Disorder and Physical Evil"; Steven Nadler, "Choosing a Theodicy"; and Donald Rutherford, "Malebranche's Theodicy."

7 References to the works of Malebranche are to *Œuvres complètes de Malebranche*, ed. André Robinet, cited in the text as "OC" followed by volume and page number. References to the *Treatise of Nature and Grace* are by Discourse, part and section number. References to the *Méditations chrétiennes* are by Meditation and section number. Quotations from *The Search after Truth* are from the edition of Lennon and Olscamp, cited in the text as "LO" followed by book, chapter and page number. Translations from Malebranche's works other than the *Search* are my own.

8 "Doubtless God could have made a more perfect world than the one we inhabit" (*Treatise* I, 1, XIV/OC V 14).

9 Cf. God "does not multiply his volitions without reason; He always acts through the simplest ways" (*Search*, Elucid. 15, OC III 215/LO 663).

10 How best to understand Malebranche's distinction between general and particular volitions is the subject of on-going debate. On one interpretation, sometimes called the 'general content' reading, the two kinds of volitions differ with regard to the generality of their content. A general volition is one whose content is fully general, while a particular volition has a particular content—one that makes reference to particular objects and times. On this reading, God does not bring about each natural event by means of a distinct volition of the form, 'let *e* occur at *t*'. Rather, God's lawful government of the natural world is limited to issuing a small number of general volitions that establish what Malebranche calls the "general and efficacious laws" of nature (*Treatise, First Elucidation* I/OC V 147). According to the 'particular content' reading, general volitions do not

differ from particular volitions by virtue of their content—all of God’s volitions have particular contents. The difference between the two kinds of volition lies solely in the fact that the contents of general volitions are in accordance with general laws, while the contents of particular volitions are not. On this reading, God directly wills each event in the natural world by means of a distinct volition. Naturally, I cannot hope to resolve this debate here. Nor is it necessary to do so, since as will be clear from what immediately follows, the important point for Malebranche’s theodicy is that general volitions are made in accordance with general laws, whereas particular volitions are not—a point which is not in dispute among commentators. Whether general volitions are general or particular in content is a separate issue. For a recent summary of the debate, see Eric Stencil, “Malebranche and the General Will of God.”

11 Cf. “God produces evil, not because he positively and directly wills to produce it, but because he wants his manner of acting to be simple, regular, uniform and constant, because he wants his conduct to be worthy of him and to clearly reflect the nature of his attributes” (*Méditations chrétiennes* VII, 19/OC X 77).

12 Cf. “it is true that God could remedy these untoward consequences by an infinite number of particular volitions: but his wisdom, which he loves more than his work, will not permit him. The effect that would result from each of these volitions would not be worth the action that produced it” (*Treatise* I, 2, XLIII/OC V 49–50).

13 Cf. “but it would have been unworthy of his wisdom to multiply his volitions in order to prevent certain particular disorders” (*Treatise* I, 1, XXII/OC V 35).

14 This point is also made by Black, “Malebranche’s Theodicy” 31.

15 Cf. “If [God] had been able to create and conserve a more perfect world by ways that were as simple and as worthy of him, he would not have established laws from which such a large number of monsters is the result” (*Treatise* I, 1, XXII Add/OC V 35).

16 Cf. *Search*, Elucid. 15, OC III 217/LO 664.

17 “God wishes all of his creatures to be perfect” (*Treatise* I, 1, XXII/OC V 35).

18 Gianni Paganini, “Hume, Bayle et les *Dialogues*,” 531–37, understands Hume to be offering a direct response to Malebranche. Likewise, Samuel Newlands affirms that Philo’s second circumstance “appears to be a crude version of Malebranche’s theodicy” (“Hume on Evil,” 635).

19 It is not altogether clear whether Philo means that the use of general laws is not necessary to achieve the goods at which God aims or that the use of general laws is not made necessary by God’s nature as a superlatively excellent being. It is in the latter sense that one might be tempted to read Philo’s assertion as an implied challenge to Malebranche’s claim that God must honor his supreme wisdom in choosing the means by which creation will be governed.

20 Although Philo speaks here only of human beings, the same benefit would presumably accrue to animals, though in a more limited sense.

21 Stanley Tweyman, one of the few commentators to have offered a detailed discussion of Philo’s second circumstance, seems seriously to misunderstand the nature of this second objection. On Tweyman’s reading, Philo’s point is that natural evil often arises from our inability to accurately foresee the outcomes of future events even though they occur in conformity with the laws of nature. Thus, according to Tweyman, “[Philo] begins by pointing out that much of the evil that results from the general laws by which the world is governed stems from uncertainties and disappointed expectations which we experience. For example, when we anticipate good health, we sometimes

find sickness and death" ("Introduction," 77). However, this reading is clearly mistaken. For the evils that Philo considers to have resulted from Caesar's voyage were not owing to Caesar's or anyone else's inability to reliably predict marine conditions. Philo's point in introducing human ignorance in the face of complex and hidden causes is not that such ignorance is itself the cause of natural evil. Rather, it is to show that God could violate the laws of nature in such cases *without our realizing it*. Philo's suggestion is that in so far as such violations of the laws of nature are undetectable by us, they would not undermine our rational agency and so, would not imperil the greater good invoked by proponents of the general laws theodicy.

22 "When a house crushes an honest man to death, there occurs a greater evil than when one beast devours another . . . but God does not multiply His volitions in order to remedy the true or apparent disorders that are the necessary consequences of natural laws. God must not correct or change these laws, although they sometimes produce monsters. He must not upset the uniformity of His conduct and the simplicity of His ways. . . . He must not have particular volitions to produce effects that do not merit them, or that are unworthy of the action of Him who produces them" (*Search*, Elucid. 15, OC III 219/LO 665–66).

23 On one occasion Malebranche does call attention to the benefit of universal laws of motion for human beings. Malebranche considers the objection to his occasionalist account of causation that God cannot be the sole and immediate cause of motion in bodies, since if this were the case, he would not allow them to collide, since he knows that they are impenetrable and that he will therefore be obliged to alter their trajectories. In reply, Malebranche asserts that if God did not allow such collisions to occur, three undesirable consequences would follow. The last of these is that "if there were no uniformity in the behavior of bodies and they did not move in straight lines, there would be no certain principle for reasoning in physics, nor for conducting oneself in several actions in life" (*Search*, Elucid. 15, OC III 218/LO 664). However, for Malebranche, this is neither the ultimate justification for God's acting by universal, general laws nor God's primary reason for refusing to interrupt them. Nevertheless, it is not impossible that Malebranche's appeal to the practical benefit of general laws provided some inspiration for the reformulation of the general laws theodicy that I examine below.

24 Hume briefly alludes to the general laws theodicy in the *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, where he observes that some have appealed to the "obstinate and intractable qualities of matter . . . or the observance of general laws" in defense of God's supreme power and benevolence in the face of pervasive evil. However, he does not say enough to make clear whether he has something like the Malebranchian justification in mind (EHU 11.17; SBN 138–39). See also *Natural History of Religion* 6.2, 52.

25 It is worth noting, however, that a copy of the 1712 edition of Malebranche's *Traité* could be found in the library of the College of La Flèche. See Perinetti, "Hume at La Flèche," 66.

26 Thus, Malebranche argues that monstrous births and other natural evils are the result of general laws rather than particular volitions (*Elucidations* 8 and 15); that wisdom demands that God act in the simplest manner possible and in particular, that the laws of nature be simple in content and few in number (*Elucidations* 8 and 15), that the laws of nature are chosen for their simplicity and fruitfulness, rather than their tendency to produce monsters and other imperfections (*Elucidation* 8), that the laws of communication of motion are the simplest we can conceive (*Elucidation* 16), and that it would be unworthy of God to interrupt the laws of nature by means of particular volitions so as to prevent the natural evils that would otherwise result from the general laws of nature (*Elucidation* 15).

27 Mossner, “Hume’s Early Memoranda,” 501.

28 Patrick Riley’s *The General Will*, is a masterful study of the reception of Malebranche’s notion of a *volonté générale*. However, Riley deals almost exclusively with the French tradition. Moreover, his main concern is with the transformation of Malebranche’s concept of general volition from a theological notion into a political one. My interest here is in the reception and transformation of Malebranche’s general laws theodicy as a theodicy in eighteenth-century Britain.

29 The relation between Malebranche and Berkeley has been the object of several studies, including Luce, *Berkeley and Malebranche*, and McCracken, *Malebranche and British Philosophy*. However, to my knowledge, no one has called attention to the influence of Malebranche’s general laws theodicy on Berkeley’s thought.

30 References to Berkeley’s *A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge* are to volume II of Luce and Jessop, *The Works of George Berkeley*, cited in the text as “PHK” followed by section number.

31 Malebranche had considered a similar objection to his occasionalist account of causation. As Malebranche expresses the worry, if God were the sole immediate cause of every event, “it would be useless to plow, water, and dispose bodies in a certain way in order to prepare them for what we hope will happen to them. For God has no need to prepare the subjects on which He acts” (*Search*, Elucid. 15, OC III 214–15/LO 663). An echo of this objection can be heard in Philo’s contention that by opting to govern the world solely by particular volitions, the deity might have produced natural goods “without any preparation or long progress of causes and effects” (DNR 11.7; 206).

32 Indeed, all of Berkeley’s examples of imperfections in nature are routinely cited by Malebranche: monstrous births (*Treatise I*, 1, XVIII/OC V 32), unripened fruits destroyed by hail (*Treatise I*, 1, XIX/OC V 32), and rain falling on fallow land (*Treatise I*, 1, XIV Add/OC V 29–30 and *Treatise I*, 2, XLIV/OC V 50).

33 With regard to the benefit of general laws for human beings, it is possible that Berkeley found inspiration in Henry More’s *Divine Dialogues*. In that work, More considers an objection to divine providence on the grounds that rain falls on roads and travelers as well as on fields. In response, More defends—in somewhat inchoate form—a version of the thesis that general laws of nature make possible rational agency. According to More, “this indifferent and indiscriminating constancy of nature ought to be; it being reckoned upon in those faculties God has endow’d both men and other Animals with, whereby they are able to close with the more usual advantages of these standing laws of nature, and have sense and foresight to decline or provide against any dangerous circumstances of them” (*Divine Dialogues*, 194). Originally published in 1668, More’s *Dialogues* was reprinted in 1713 and again in 1743.

34 It is far from obvious that recasting the general laws theodicy in terms of the possibility of rational human agency should require privileging the generality and uniformity of the laws of nature over their simplicity. One might argue that the simplicity of natural laws is equally necessary for beings such as ourselves to successfully operate in the world. For if the laws of nature were exceedingly complex or large in number, we might well find it beyond our limited cognitive capacity to reliably predict future events, despite the perfect uniformity and generality of these laws.

35 King, *Essay on the Origin of Evil*, 99n37. See also King, *Essay*, 244n91 (Law’s italics).

36 Like Berkeley, Hutcheson observes that “were there no general Laws fix’d in the Course of Nature, there could be no Prudence or Design in Men, no rational Expectation of Effects from Causes, no Schemes of Action projected, or any regular Execution” (Hutcheson, *Inquiry*, 81).

However, Hutcheson goes on to suggest that in addition to making possible rational action on our own behalf, general laws are an equally indispensable condition of performing kind and generous actions, which acts of benevolence constitute the highest happiness for human beings. See also Hutcheson, *System of Moral Philosophy*, 1: 185–88. I shall return to Hutcheson below.

37 Turnbull, *Principles of Moral Philosophy*, 2–4.

38 “The government of the world is carried on by general laws, which produce constancy and uniformity in the operations of nature. Among many reasons for this, we can clearly discover one, which is unfolded in a former Essay [viz. *Knowledge of Future Events*], that were not nature uniform and constant, men and other sensible beings would be altogether at a loss how to conduct themselves. Our nature is adjusted to these general laws; and must therefore be subjected to all their varieties, whether beneficial or hurtful” (Home, Lord Kames, *Essays*, 145).

39 “Besides, that as far as we perceive [natural evils] are necessary consequences of good general laws. I shewed before that it was necessary for the constitution of rational creatures that they should be governed by general laws, for without these they never could pursue any means to the attainment of an end. And in a world governed by general laws occasionally evils will happen” (Reid, *Lectures on Natural Theology*, 102).

40 Berkeley limits himself to the observation that God seems to prefer to use miracles sparingly and even then only “to surprise and awe men into an acknowledgment of the Divine Being” (PHK 63).

41 As is well known, Hume held Butler in high esteem, numbering him among those philosophers “who have begun to put the science of man on a new footing” (T Intro.7; SBN xvii). It is widely accepted that Butler’s *Analogy of Religion* (1736) was one of the main targets of section 11 of the *Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*. Furthermore, at the time of composing the *Treatise* Hume seems to have been aware of the *Two Brief Dissertations* (“Of Personal Identity” and “Of the Nature of Virtue”) appended to the *Analogy*. For evidence of Hume’s critical engagement with the main body of the *Analogy* in the *Treatise*, see Paul Russell, *The Riddle of Hume’s Treatise*, chapter 11. For a discussion of Butler’s *Analogy* in relation to the *Dialogues*, see Penelhum, “Butler and Hume,” 266–74.

42 Butler, *Analogy*, 180.

43 That our ignorance of the system of creation in its entirety undermines objections to God’s goodness and wisdom based on apparent evils is likewise a theme of Butler’s Sermon 15, *Upon the Ignorance of Man*.

44 Butler, *Analogy*, 184–85.

45 Indeed, Philo’s formulation of the objection (“But might not other particular volitions remedy this inconvenience?”) is so close to Butler’s own (“any bad result might be prevented by further interpositions”) as to provide further evidence of a direct influence of Butler’s discussion on Hume.

46 Butler, *Analogy*, 191. More positively, Butler argues that we can be confident that such interpositions would indeed have bad effects, such as encouraging “idleness and negligence.”

47 Sessions, *Reading Hume’s Dialogues*, 171.

48 “What then shall we pronounce on this occasion? Shall we say, that these circumstances are not necessary, and that they might easily have been altered in the contrivance of the universe? This decision seems too presumptuous for creatures so blind and ignorant” (DNR 11.12; 210).

49 A clear example of this is Cleanthes’s vigorous rejection of Demea’s so-called porch theodicy on the grounds that it is unsupported by the known phenomena (DNR 10.30; 199–200).

50 A further consideration may be that Cleanthes is attempting to infer the existence of a perfectly benevolent deity (DNR 12.24; 224). Presumably, a perfectly benevolent being is one who would do everything in its power to procure the happiness and pleasure of other sentient beings. Now a being who would allow considerations of simplicity or generality as such (that is, independently of the natural goods they make possible) to override concern for the happiness of others might still be benevolent to some degree or other, but would not be perfectly benevolent.

51 Arguably, Philo’s second objection is not similarly predicated on a narrow understanding of the value of rational agency as purely instrumental. This is because the second objection concerns only those cases in which God’s intervention by means of a particular volition would be undetectable by us owing to our inability to reliably predict the lawfully determined outcome in the relevant situation. In such cases, human agency would be left untouched by the miracle and so whatever value there is in human reason would be unaffected.

52 The view that active pursuit of one’s ends is an essential part of human happiness finds eloquent expression in Hume’s “The Stoic,” whose titular speaker affirms that “labour itself is the chief ingredient of the felicity to which thou aspirest, and . . . every enjoyment soon becomes insipid and distasteful, when not acquired by fatigue and industry” (“The Stoic,” 149).

53 Hutcheson, *Inquiry*, 81–82.

54 According to Hutcheson, there is a further reason why government of the world by a series of “particular Wills” would deny us the opportunity for the pleasures of benevolence. Were God to act solely by particular volitions, He would effectively remove all natural evil from the world. Consequently, not only would the rational agency necessary to carry out benevolent actions be undermined, but there would be no occasion for such actions, since all pain and suffering would have been eliminated by the direct action of God himself (Hutcheson, *Inquiry*, 82).

55 Hume, “Of Suicide,” 581; emphasis added.

56 Philo’s assertion that “providence interposes not in this manner” is importantly ambiguous (DNR 11.8; 207). On what I take to be the most natural reading, Philo is claiming that God never miraculously intervenes so as to prevent the occurrence of lawfully determined natural evils. Alternatively, he might be taken to mean merely that God does not do so in every case. If Philo is limiting himself to the latter, more modest claim, then he is in substantial agreement with Hume’s own view.

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