

Hume, Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion

91-124

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Participants in the conversation: Demea, Philo, and Cleanthes

Fundamental question: Can we prove God exists using reason, or, given that he exists, must his nature be mysterious to us?

God exists, but he is infinitely mysterious (Demea and Philo)

Demea's argument (100):

1. Our emotions (gratitude, resentment, love, friendship, approbation, blame, pity, emulation, envy, *etc.*) "have a plain reference to the state and situation of man.
2. All our ideas are derived from the senses, and subject to error.
3. Our thoughts are "fluctuating, uncertain, fleeting, successive, and compounded."
 - "[W]ere we to remove these circumstances, we absolutely annihilate its essence, and it would, in such a case, be an abuse of terms to apply to it the name of thought or reason."
4. Our emotions and ideas compose what we are.
5. God does not exist in the same state as man; he is not part of the human condition.
6. God has no and can have no false ideas; he is never in error.
7. God does not have fluctuating, uncertain, fleeting, *etc.* thoughts; he is complete.
8. Thus, whatever God is, he is utterly unlike what we are.

Philo's argument (93):

1. Our ideas reach no farther than our experience.
2. We have no experience of divine attributes and operations.
3. Thus, we have no idea of divine attributes and operations.

He is not mysterious: The Argument from Design (Cleanthes)

Cleanthes' response to Demea and Philo: We do have experience of divine attributes and operations, and so can know something about God.

Question: How?

Answer: The Argument from Design, an *a posteriori* argument from analogy

- *The general point:* Just like we can investigate a house and discover facts about what the architect must be like, we can investigate the universe and discover what the architect of the universe is like; we can discover his "attributes and operations."

Cleanthes' Argument from Design (93-4, 98-9)

1. Objects of human contrivance (watches, houses, *etc.*) are constituted by ordered parts.
2. The ordered parts /imply the mind's design for those previously unordered parts.
3. The universe is/looks to be a set of ordered parts.
4. Thus, ordered parts of the universe imply a mind's design for those previously unordered parts.

Additional argument, as presented by Philo and assented to by Cleanthes (95):

- i. The universe is ordered.
- ii. "Throw several pieces of steel together, without shape or form; they will never arrange themselves so as to compose a watch: Stone, and mortar, and wood, without an architect, never erect a house."
- iii. Ideas in a human mind, we see, by an unknown, inexplicable economy, arrange themselves so as to form the plan of a watch or house.
- iv. Thus, there is an original principle of order in mind, not in matter.

- v. Thus, the universe must have been ordered by something with a mind (or something that just is a mind).

Philo's Objections to the Argument from Design

Objection #1: The inference from (3) to (4) is unjustified

1. What justifies our inference that some house or watch (or whatever) has a designer is that each time we search for a designer of a house or watch we find one.
2. Each time we find a designer for a house or watch, we are further justified in inferring that a new house we come across also had a designer.
3. We have only seen one universe (and we didn't even see the origin of the universe, as we can with a house).
4. Thus, we cannot infer that the universe had a designer in the way we infer that a house had a designer.
 - Such an inference is no inference at all, but really a "guess, a conjecture, a presumption" (94).

Objection #2: (3) and (i) are true only of a very small part of the universe, and so the analogy fails.

1. One should not assume that what is true of a part is true of the whole.
 - "From observing the growth of a hair, can we learn anything concerning the generation of a man? Would the manner of a leaf's blowing, even though perfectly known, afford us any instruction concerning the vegetation of a tree?" (96).
 - Stone, wood, brick, iron, brass, have not, at this time, in this minute globe of earth, an order or arrangement without human art and contrivance.
2. Some parts of the universe look designed, especially the constitution of animals.
3. But a lot of the universe does not look like it was designed, but rather like it was formed by various forces acting on it: heat and cold, attraction and repulsion, gravity, and so on.
4. The argument from design assumes that what is true of part of the universe is true of the whole.
5. Thus, the argument from design is flawed.

And a closely related argument:

1. Even granted that we know that our corner of the universe is organized – the corner including human thought and the constitution of humans and animals.
2. To believe that the universe as a whole is organized requires believing that our small corner is representative of the whole.
3. But we have no reason for thinking our small corner is representative of the whole.
4. Therefore you ought not believe that the universe as a whole is organized.

And another:

1. The operations of the world, let us grant, are now "constituted, arranged, [and] adjusted."
2. But the operations of a mature world may not mirror the operations of an immature (young) world.
 - The origin and operations of an adult human do not shed light on the origin and operations of a fetus; we may explain the generation of a fetus by reference to various forces of nature.
 - "Nature, we find, even from our limited experience, possesses an infinite number of springs and principles, which incessantly discover themselves on every change of her position and situation. And what new and unknown principles would actuate her in so new and unknown a situation as that of the formation of a universe, we cannot, without the utmost temerity, pretend to determine" (96).
3. We ought not to assume that truths about a mature object hold for truths about that object when it is immature.
4. Thus, we ought not to assume that the universe could only be ordered by a mind.

Objection #3: “A mental world, or universe of ideas, requires a cause as much as a material world, or universe of objects” (102).

- An ideal system, arranged of itself, without a precedent design, is not a whit more explicable than a material one, which attains its order in a like manner; nor is there any more difficulty in the latter supposition than in the former” (103).
1. You attempt to explain the order of the material world by appeal to a mental world.
 2. But the order of a mental world needs explanation.
 3. Thus, you have not explained anything after all.

Possible objection to that argument: Ideas, and so the ideas of God, just fall into order, “of themselves and by their own nature.”

Reply to the objection to the argument: Why not think the same of matter? We see this happen in instances of “generation and vegetation.” True, there is such a thing as decomposition, or falling apart of matter, but in the realm of thoughts there is madness (102).

Objection #4: The argument does not lead us to conclude God is perfect.

1. The machine of the universe is too great for us to determine whether it is perfect.
2. If we cannot know that the product is perfect, we cannot know that the designer is perfect.
3. Thus, we cannot know that the designer is perfect.

Objection #5: “In a word, Cleanthes, a man who follows your hypothesis is able perhaps to assert, or conjecture, that the universe, sometime, arose from something like design: but beyond that position he cannot ascertain one single circumstance; and is left afterwards to fix every point of his theology by the utmost license of fancy and hypothesis” (105).

Grant the truth of the following: The universe was designed.

But this is *compatible* with:

- The universe was very poorly designed (**104 & 105**).
- The universe was designed by a team of gods.
 - Finite Gods are a better fit for the analogy (105).

Objection #6: The workings of the universe are just as analagouse to the workings of an animal and to the workings of a vegetable as it is to the workings of a watch (**106**).

- The world is a) an animal, and God is its soul or b) a vegetable that sprouted into existence.

Objection #7: Perhaps matter has always been in motion. Suppose that the universe just is matter in motion; couldn't it be perpetually in motion until, at times, it starts to form cohesive wholes (which will eventually break down again)? Aren't bodies in general like this? (107-8).

We must abandon the argument from design and endorse the Argument from First Cause (Demea)

1. Whatever exists must have a cause or reason of its existence; it being absolutely impossible for any thing to produce itself, or be the cause of its own existence.
2. In mounting up, therefore, from effects to causes, we must either go on in tracing an infinite succession, without any ultimate cause at all; or must at last have recourse to some ultimate cause, that is necessarily existent.
3. If we posit an infinite chain of cause and effect, we simply ask ‘where did that infinite chain come from?’.
4. But this question is unanswerable; we have been led to absurdity.
5. Thus, there is some necessarily existent being

Cleanthes' Objections to the Argument from First Cause

Objection #1: Unless the idea is self-contradictory, there is nothing wrong with thinking some being not to exist. But it isn't impossible to think of any particular thing not existing, including God; his non-existence does not imply a contradiction (110).

Objection #2: Why may not the material universe be the necessarily existent Being (110).

- Philo adds: we see necessity in the realm of numbers, so perhaps, if we knew more, we would find necessity in the realm of matter.

Objection #3: If the chain of events goes back infinitely, "it seems absurd to inquire for a general cause or first Author. How can any thing, that exists from eternity, have a cause, since that relation implies a priority in time, and a beginning of existence?"

The Problem of Evil (Philo)

Demea on the non-rational root of belief in God (111) and Philo's and Demea's listings of the ills of life (113).

Claim: We have no reason for thinking that God is benevolent.

1. If God is both willing and able to prevent evil, then there would be no evil in the world.
2. But there is evil.
3. Thus, God is either a) able to prevent evil but unwilling, in which case he is malevolent, or b) willing to prevent evil but is unable, in which case he is impotent (114)

Demea responds: "The present evil phenomena...are rectified in other regions, and in some future period of existence" (115).

Cleanthes' objection to Demea: "No! these arbitrary suppositions can never be admitted...the utmost we ever attain, by these conjectures and fictions, is to ascertain the bare possibility of our opinion; but never can we, upon such terms, establish its reality" (115).

Cleanthes' response to the problem of evil: "Health is more common than sickness; pleasure than pain; happiness than misery. And for one vexation which we meet with, we attain, upon computation, a hundred enjoyments" (115).

Philo responds: Pleasures are ephemeral, pain is the gift that keeps on giving (115).

- Further, Cleanthes is now resting religion on the supposition that pleasure outweighs pain in this world, which is a very uncertain supposition indeed.

Philo's general position: If God is perfect and benevolent, we should expect him to make a better world (117).

- We cannot infer, from examining this world, that a benevolent being made this world.

Four causes of evil, all of which seem avoidable, and the presence of which utterly block an inference to the belief that we are created by a supremely benevolent god.

1. We are motivated by both pain and pleasure, and the lessening of pleasure could serve as a motive for acquiring the necessities of life, but we experience pain instead when we don't get them.
 - We avoid pain more than we pursue pleasure, but we could have been made otherwise.
 - Why *must* we have a capacity for pain at all?
2. We are subject to laws of nature that result in great harm to all animals; couldn't God instead keep a watch over things, stopping these things from happening?

- Why must there be illness? Why could he not “produce all good?” (118).
 - We are subject to various of the universe’s laws that subject us to great misfortune. Earthquakes, hurricanes, *etc.* Couldn’t we not have these? **(118)**.
3. “The great frugality with which all powers and faculties are distributed to every particular being...we have just what we *need for survival*, and if we lose just some of our natural capacities, we are at a great disadvantage.
 - Some animals excel in speed but then lack in strength, and vice versa; why not both? A human has brains, but is in comparison with all other animals weak in body.
 - If we had to assume the benevolence or lack thereof from this, we would infer that a “rigid master” not a benevolent or “indulging parent” created us.
 - But we don’t even need *every* virtue (the strength of an ox, the wings of an eagle, *etc.*), but why do we not have a “greater propensity to industry and labour...a more constant bent to business and application? Why aren’t we harder workers, why so lazy?
 - “But it is hard; I dare to repeat it, it is hard, that being placed in a world so full of wants and necessities, where almost every being and element is either our foe or refuses its assistance . . . we should also have our own temper to struggle with, and should be deprived of that faculty which can alone fence against these multiplied evils” (119).
 4. Some things, which are necessary, are disproportionately “bestowed”: it rains too much, the winds blow too hard, some parts are too dry, others too wet or too cold or too hot. Ambition, vanity, love, and anger help us live well, but “how oft do they break their bounds, and cause the greatest convulsions in society.” All these excesses and deficiencies are “often sufficient to involve the individuals in ruin and misery” (120).

Possible reply: There are good and evil forces that affect the world.

Response: The “uniformity and steadiness of general laws seem to oppose this.”

1. Because we have both good and evil, we cannot suppose a creator infinitely benevolent or infinitely malicious.
2. But nor can we suppose that the universe is the struggle between two opposing forces.
3. When we look in the world, we don’t see a combat of good and evil, but the presence of various contraries interlocked in a causal chain: pleasure and pain, hot and cold, moist and dry, light and heavy, and so on.
4. Thus, the universe, if created at all, was done by a force neither benevolent nor malicious.

Some Final Claims

Cleanthes: Religion is necessary for morality.

Philo responds: But whenever we look in history and find religion strong, we also find “factions, civil wars, persecutions, subversions of government, oppression, and slavery (123).

Philo: It is an absurdity to believe that the Deity has human passions, and one of the lowest of human passions, a restless appetite for applause. It is an inconsistency to believe, that, since the Deity has this human passion, he has not others also; and, in particular, a disregard to the opinions of creatures so much inferior.