

The Nature of the Dispute between Philo and Cleanthes in David Hume's *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*

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Abstract:

In my paper, I examine the source of the disagreement between Philo and Cleanthes in David Hume's *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, beginning in Part 2, in regard to the analogical Argument from Design - the argument which purports to prove, through the principle 'like effects prove like causes', that the similarities between the design of the world and the design of machines, in terms of means to ends relations and a coherence of parts, countenance the conclusion that the cause of the design of the world resembles the cause of the design of machines. I show that Cleanthes and Philo have different interpretations regarding the proper application of the principle 'like effects prove like causes', the central principle employed in Cleanthes' argument. Hume achieves a reconciliation between the disputants in Part 12, which he holds that it is reasonable to accept, although the reconciliation is held to take place, not as we might expect, between Cleanthes and Philo (the principal speakers in this work), but between the theist and the atheist, and (in a footnote in Part 12) between the dogmatists and the sceptics. I explain this change; and show that in Part 12, as in the earlier Parts of the *Dialogues*, Philo remains consistent with his claim to Demea in Part 2, that he argues with Cleanthes "in his own way".

Keywords: argument, design, analogy, reasoning, theist, atheist, dogmatist, sceptic

The first edition of David Hume's *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*¹ was published posthumously by Hume's nephew in 1779 (Hume died in 1776). Hume never speaks in his own person in this work, except in one footnote in Part 12, which I will reference later in my paper. A view that is prevalent in the literature on the *Dialogues* is well-expressed by Keith E. Yandell, who writes: "It is also Hume's view that there is no evidence for any religious belief. Hence, he holds that no one is ever reasonable in accepting a religious belief" (Yandell 1990, 3). My paper will establish that this view is mistaken. I show that in Part 12 of the *Dialogues*, Hume argues that there is one proposition about God that it is reasonable to accept. To reach this point in the dialogue, we must examine the arguments which are put forth in earlier Parts of this work, all of which assist in establishing that this one proposition about God is reasonable.

Although the *Dialogues* involves five characters, my paper centers on only two – Philo and Cleanthes. It is Cleanthes who puts forth the Argument from Design in Part 2, and Philo who criticizes this Argument in Parts 2 through 8, and who then attempts a reconciliation of the opposing sides in Part 12, culminating in the one proposition about God which it is reasonable to accept.

I begin by quoting Cleanthes' version of the Argument from Design:

Look round the world: Contemplate the whole and every part of it: You will find it to be nothing but one great machine, subdivided into an infinite number of lesser machines, which again admit of subdivisions, to a degree beyond what human senses and faculties can trace and explain. All these various machines, and even their most minute parts, are adjusted to each other... The curious adapting of means to ends relations, throughout all nature, resembles exactly, though it much exceeds, the productions of human contrivance; of human design, thought, wisdom, and intelligence. Since therefore the effects resemble each other we are led to infer, by all the rules of analogy, that the causes also resemble; and that the Author of Nature is somewhat similar to the mind of man; though possessed of much larger faculties, proportioned to the grandeur of the work, which he has executed. By this argument *a posteriori*, and by this argument alone, do we prove at once the existence of a Deity, and his similarity to human mind and intelligence. (Cleanthes' version of the Argument from Design, D.109)

In Part 2 of Hume's *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, Cleanthes defends the analogical Argument from Design - the argument which purports to prove, through the principle 'like effects prove like causes', that the similarities between the design of the world and the design of machines, in terms of means to ends relations and a coherence of parts, countenance the conclusion that the cause of the design of the world resembles the cause of the design of machines. Given that the cause of the design of machines is intelligence, he argues that the designer of the world is an intelligent being, who resembles our minds, "though possessed of much larger faculties, proportioned to the grandeur of the work, which he has executed" (D.109).

Philo undertakes a series of criticisms of the Design Argument in Part 2, all centering on (what he regards as) the proper use of the principle 'like effects prove like causes'. He maintains that the proper use of this principle requires that we observe an object of one type constantly conjoined with an object of another type, whereupon when observing a new instance of either type of object, we can infer, by analogy, the existence of the second type of object. The resemblances between the types of objects previously observed and the objects under consideration must be sufficiently specific to enable us to classify the objects under consideration as objects of those types respectively. Philo insists that the design of the world does not bear an adequate resemblance to any type of machine to enable us to classify the world as a machine of a particular type. Accordingly, he maintains that the principle 'like effects prove like causes' cannot be applied to the case under consideration, namely, the design of the world and an intelligent cause of design.

I will now provide greater detail to the dispute between Philo and Cleanthes, including the reason why the debate moves (without fanfare or explanation) from Cleanthes and Philo (in Parts 2-8)

to the views in Part 12 of the theist and atheist (D. 174-176), and in a footnote in Part 12 (D.177) to the views of the dogmatists and sceptics. I will also show how Hume effects the reconciliation between the disputants.

Cleanthes does not think that has to prove the machine - like character of the world, given that these two features – means to ends relations and a coherence of parts - are present throughout the design of machines and the world. Cleanthes and Philo have a fundamental disagreement about the proper use of the principle, ‘like effects prove like causes’. For Philo, this principle requires that we observe an object of one type constantly conjoined with an object of another type. The focus for Philo is the *specific* resemblance(s) that objects bear to each other. In Part 2, Cleanthes takes a different approach to the proper use of the principle ‘like effects prove like causes’, while acknowledging that the world does not bear a specific resemblance to any type of machine. Following Philo’s claim that the universe does not bear a specific resemblance to any kind of object in the world (D.110), Cleanthes responds:

It would surely be very ill received, replied Cleanthes; and I should be deservedly blamed and detested, did I allow, that the proofs of a Deity amounted to no more than a guess or conjecture. But is the whole adjustment of means to ends in a house and in the universe so slight a resemblance? The economy of final causes? The order, proportion, and arrangement of every part? (D.110)

In this passage, Cleanthes focuses on the presence of means to ends relations and a coherence of parts throughout the design of the world and machines (in this passage, a house). Cleanthes regards these resemblances as sufficient to apply the principle, ‘like effects prove like causes’, to the design of the world and the design of machines. It must be emphasized that Philo’s objection about the reasoning in the Argument from Design, that we are dealing with objects – God and the world - that are “single, individual, without parallel, or specific resemblance” (D. 115) would not move Cleanthes because, as we now understand, Cleanthes does not hold to Philo’s view that to apply the principle ‘like effects prove like causes’, we must find objects of one *specific* type constantly conjoined with objects of another *specific* type. So, while Cleanthes agrees that the design of the world cannot be classified as a machine of a certain type (the world does not resemble a house or a ship, etc.), he does hold that the presence of means to end relations and a coherence of parts throughout the design of the world and the design of machines does enable us to classify the world as a machine. The observed conjunction, therefore, involves machines and intelligence as their cause. Cleanthes focuses exclusively on the features of design in machines and the world, rather than on the issue of classification. Cleanthes also holds that the dissimilarities between the design of the world and machines do not weaken the argument.

In Parts 6 through 8 of the *Dialogues*, Philo attacks Cleanthes’ claim that the design of the world resembles the design of machines, by arguing that means to ends relations and a coherence of parts are also the essential features of the design of animals and vegetables (Parts 6 and 7), and of design where there may be no designing *principle* (Part 8). As a result, whether the universe is

compared to an animal or organized body, or held to arise from no organizing principle (through a blind unguided force, Part 8), the essential features of design are identical to the essential features of the design of machines, namely, means to ends relations and a coherence of parts. And, no decision procedure is available to choose intelligence over other causes or sources of design. Philo concludes Part 8 by asserting: "A total suspense of judgement is here our only reasonable resource".

It is in Part 12 that Philo addresses Cleanthes' position first articulated in Part 2 that, despite lacking a specific resemblance to any particular type of machine, the design of the world can be compared to the design of machines, in virtue of the presence of means to ends relations and a coherence of parts. To indicate that this discussion carries on from Part 8, Philo begins by saying that a suspense of judgment in the present case is not possible, and that the disagreement in this case involves "a dispute of words" (D.88).

That the works of nature bear a great analogy to the productions of art is evident; and according to all the rules of good reasoning, we ought to infer, if we argue at all concerning them, that their causes have a proportional analogy. But as there are also considerable differences, we have reason to suppose a proportional difference in their causes; and in particular ought to attribute a much higher degree of power and energy, to the supreme cause than any we have ever observed in mankind. Here then the existence of a Deity is plainly ascertained by reason; and if we make it a question, whether, on account of these analogies, we can properly call him a *mind* or *intelligence*, notwithstanding the vast difference, which may reasonably be supposed between him and human minds; what is this but a mere verbal controversy? (D.174-175)

Philo's argument holds that there is a proportional analogy and difference between the design of the world and the design of machines. In light of the resemblances, Philo insists that if we are not content with calling the first and supreme cause a God or Deity, "what can we call him but *mind* or *thought*, to which he is justly supposed to bear a considerable resemblance?" However, Philo now shows that any attempt to establish the precise resemblance and difference between the human and divine mind is doomed to failure.

But there is a species of controversy, which, from the very nature of language and of human ideas, is involved in a perpetual ambiguity, and can never, by any precaution or any definitions, be able to reach a reasonable certainty or precision. These are the controversies concerning the degrees of any quality or circumstance. Men may argue to all eternity, whether Hannibal be a great, or a very great, or a superlatively great man, what degree of beauty Cleopatra possessed, what epithet of praise Livy or Thucydides is entitled to, without bringing the controversy to any determination. The disputants may here agree in their sense and differ in the terms, or *vice versa*; yet never be able to define their terms, so as to enter into each others meaning: Because the degrees of these qualities are not, like quantity or number, susceptible of any exact mensuration, which may be the standard in the controversy. (D.175)

This passage appears to run counter to a passage in Hume's *Treatise* when Hume discusses degrees in any quality as a source of 'philosophical relations'. Hume writes: "When any two objects possess the same quality in common, the *degrees*, in which they possess it, form a fifth species of relation. Thus of two objects, which are both heavy, the one may be either of greater, or less weight than the other. Two colours, that are of the same kind, may yet be of different shades, and in that respect admit of comparisons" (T.15)

In fact, however, the two passages are compatible. The passage in the *Treatise* concerns qualities which are quantifiable, and the philosophical relations center around determining an equality or inequality between two objects in virtue of a common property. The properties in question are always empirical, and as such, there is always the possibility of calculating how much of a particular quality exists in different objects. On the other hand, the qualities Philo discusses in Part 12 - greatness, beauty, praise - are based on feelings or sentiments, and, therefore, they cannot be measured with any accuracy. For example, in the *Treatise*, Hume has the following to say about our awareness of beauty:

If we consider all the hypotheses, which have been form'd either by philosophy or common reason, to explain the difference betwixt beauty and deformity, we shall find that all of them resolve into this, that beauty is of such an order and construction of parts, as either by the *primary constitution* of our nature, by *custom*, or by *caprice*, is fitted to give a pleasure and satisfaction to the soul. This is the distinguishing character of beauty, and forms all the difference betwixt it and deformity, whose natural tendency is to produce uneasiness. Pleasure and pain, therefore, are not only necessary attendants of beauty and deformity, but constitute their very essence. (T.299)

Accordingly, any attempt to quantify these features will fail, and all disagreements will result in a verbal dispute. We must now attempt to determine why the dispute about God's nature in Part 12 is akin to considerations of greatness, beauty, and praise.

In the Introduction to the *Dialogues*, Pamphilus points out that dialogue form is particularly suited to the topic of natural religion, because of the obscurity and uncertainty of the subject matter, and the fact that human reason can reach no fixed determination with regard to questions concerning the nature of God: "Reasonable men may be allowed to differ, where no - one can reasonably be positive". (D.96) In the part of the debate we are now entering in Part 12, Hume attempts at least a partial reconciliation between the theist and the atheist on the topic of the divine mind. How to explain that Philo's attention now turns to the theist and the atheist? I submit that the shift to the theist and the atheist is not a move away from the characters, Cleanthes and Philo. The theist represents the Cleanthes - type of believer, and the atheist represents the sceptic, given that their atheism "is only nominally so, and can never possibly be in earnest" (D.176). The importance of the shift, therefore, is to move the debate away from the two disputants, Cleanthes and Philo, and render the reconciliation between different *philosophical* positions. Similarly, in a footnote in Part 12 of the *Dialogues* (footnote 18, the only passage in which Hume speaks in his own person) the

dispute is held to be between the dogmatists and sceptics. Again, here, the shift moves the debate away from the two disputants, Cleanthes and Philo, and renders the reconciliation between different philosophical positions. This appears to be Hume's goal: to reconcile different philosophical positions (atheist and theist; sceptics and dogmatists), and, therefore, to go beyond the individual thinkers in the dialogue. Cleanthes can now be understood to be variously classified as a theist and a dogmatist², while Philo can be variously described as a (nominal) atheist and a sceptic.

In effecting the reconciliation, Philo begins with the theist:

That the dispute concerning theism is of this nature, and consequently is merely verbal, or perhaps, if possible, still more incurably ambiguous, will appear upon the slightest enquiry. I ask the theist, if he does not allow, that there is a great and immeasurable, because incomprehensible, difference between the *human* and *divine* mind: The more pious he is, the more readily will he assent to the affirmative, and the more will he be disposed to magnify the difference: He will even assert, that the difference is of a nature, which cannot be too much magnified. (D.176)

The terms to note in this passage are 'immeasurable' and 'incomprehensible', indicating that the theist holds that we can neither measure nor understand the difference between God's mind and our mind.

Philo next turns to the atheist and raises the following question:

...[I] ask him, whether, from the coherence and apparent sympathy in all parts of the world, there be not a certain degree of analogy among all the operations of nature, in every situation and in every age; whether the rotting of a turnip, the generation of an animal, and the structure of human thought be not energies that probably bear some remote analogy to each other: It is impossible he can deny it: He will readily acknowledge it. (D.176)

This concession by the atheist is based on Philo's arguments in Parts 6, 7, and 8, in which he showed that all design, regardless of causal origin (vegetation, generation, a blind unguided force, etc.) is reducible to means to ends relations and a coherence of parts. In the passage above from D.176, Philo extends design to decay as well as to growth: all design in nature possesses the identical fundamental features, namely, means to ends relations and a coherence of parts. Now, utilizing the principle 'like effects prove like causes', Philo claims that the coherence of parts evident in all parts of the world countenances the conclusion that 'there is a certain degree of analogy among all the operations of nature'. However, given that the resemblance which exists among all the effects in nature is extremely general, we cannot achieve any specificity when we attempt to determine the particular resemblance among the operations of nature. Hence, when comparing the rotting of a turnip, the generation of an animal, and the structure of human thought, Philo concludes that these are energies 'that probably bear some remote analogy to each other'.

And now the second part of Philo's argument:

Having obtained this concession, I push him [the atheist] still farther in his retreat; and I ask him, if it be not probable, that the principle which first arranged and still maintains order in the universe, bears not also some remote inconceivable analogy to the other operations of nature, and among the rest to the economy of human mind and thought. However reluctant, he must give his assent. (D.176)

In this passage, Philo extends his argument using the principle ‘like effects prove like causes’ beyond all the operations of nature in the world to cover the principle of order of the whole world. Philo argues that, just as all operations of nature within the world are bound by the features means to ends relations and a coherence of parts, so, too, the principle of design of the whole world is bound by these features of design. Therefore, if all operations of nature within the world bear some remote inconceivable analogy to each other in virtue of the presence of means to ends relations and a coherence of parts in their respective effects (following the principle ‘like effects prove like causes’), then the principle of design of the whole world also bears some remote inconceivable analogy to all other operations of nature, including to human mind and thought. We learn, therefore, that thought has no primacy, when a comparison is attempted between God and the operations of nature. In no case can more be established between God and any operations of nature, including thought, than ‘some remote inconceivable analogy’.

In Rule 5 of ‘Rules by which to judge of causes and effects’ in the *Treatise*, Hume writes: “where several different objects produce the same effect, it must be by means of some quality, which we discover to be common amongst them. For as like effects imply like causes, we must always ascribe the causation to the circumstance, wherein we discover the resemblance” (T.174). Although Philo consents to the fact that there is some remote analogy between the principle of design of the whole world and the various principles of design within the world, he insists on adding the word ‘inconceivable’, because the powers of objects to bring about effects is forever hidden from us.³ Therefore, in no sense have we gained knowledge of God.

The verbal dispute between the theist and the atheist can now be revealed: since neither holds a position for which we can have determinate ideas, the degree of resemblance or difference between God and human intelligence cannot be determined by us⁴.

Relying on the position attributed to the atheist, Philo offers the final pronouncement on the topic of natural religion, which, contrary to Yandell’s view cited earlier, Hume holds that it is reasonable for us to accept:

If the whole of natural theology, as some people seem to maintain, resolves itself into one simple, though somewhat ambiguous, at least undefined proposition, *that the cause or causes of order in the universe probably bear some remote analogy to human intelligence*: If this proposition be not capable of extension, variation, or more particular explication...what can the most inquisitive, contemplative, and religious man do more than give a plain philosophical assent to the proposition, as often as it occurs, and believe that the arguments on which it is established, exceed the objections, which lie against it? (D.184-85)

The irony in this final pronouncement is now clear: since all design is bound by the same features of design, namely, means to ends relations and a coherence of parts, there is no philosophical significance in comparing the cause or causes of order in the universe to human intelligence: as we have seen, some remote inconceivable analogy obtains between, and among, all principles of order, given that the designs they produce are bound by the identical features of design.

In the end, Philo resorts to revelation as the only hope for a fuller understanding of the divine nature:

But believe me, Cleanthes, the most natural sentiment, which a well disposed mind will feel on this occasion, is a longing desire and expectation, that heaven would be pleased to dissipate, at least alleviate this profound ignorance, by affording some more particular revelation to mankind, and making discoveries of the nature, attributes, and operations of the divine object of our faith. (D.185)

Once Philo has reconciled the theist and atheist positions in Part 12 (the end of paragraph 7), he proclaims “These, Cleanthes, are my unfeigned sentiments on this subject; and these sentiments, you know, I have ever cherished and maintained” (D.177). The passage quoted above from D.185, where Philo speaks of a longing desire and expectation for some more particular revelation to alleviate this profound ignorance appears 8 pages later, and, therefore, is not included in his ‘unfeigned sentiments on this subject’. In short, Philo has neither the desire nor expectation that heaven will alleviate our ignorance regarding the divine nature.

One further point. In Part 2, Phil informs Demea that he argues with Cleanthes “in his own way” (D. 111) In this spirit, it is significant that when Philo attempts to reconcile the disputants in Part 12, it is not Philo’s position, first stated in Part 2, which emphasizes that the Argument from Design can only succeed if we are able to classify the world as a particular type of machine, but Cleanthes’ position that the strength of the Argument from Design is based on the presence of means to ends relations and a coherence of parts in all human artifacts and throughout the design in nature which is highlighted. In other words, from the beginning of the dialogue to its conclusion in Part 12, Philo argues with Cleanthes “in his own way”.

Endnotes:

1. All references to David Hume’s *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* are taken from David Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, edited and with an Introduction by Stanley Tweyman, first published in 1991, Routledge, London and New York. References to the *Treatise of Human Nature* are to the P.H. Nidditch/ Selby – Bigge, Second Edition, (OUP), 1978. References to Hume’s *First Enquiry* are to the P.H. Nidditch/ Selby-Bigge, *Enquiries Concerning Human Understanding and Concerning the Principles of Morals*, Third Edition, (OUP), 1975.
2. Cleanthes fits Hume’s definition of the dogmatist in the *First Enquiry*: “...while they see objects only on one side, and have no idea of any counterpoising argument, they throw themselves precipitately into those principles, to which they are inclined; nor have they any indulgence for those who entertain opposite sentiments”. (E. 161)

3. Now nothing is more evident, than that the human mind cannot form such an idea of two objects, as to conceive any connection betwixt them, or comprehend distinctly that power or efficacy, by which they are united. Such a connexion would amount to a demonstration, and wou'd amount to a demonstration, and wou'd imply the absolute impossibility for the one object not to follow upon the other: which kind of connexion has already been rejected in all cases. (T.162)
4. The theist allows, that the original intelligence is very different from human reason: The atheist allows that the original principle of order bears some remote analogy to it. Will, you quarrel, gentlemen, about the degrees, and enter into a controversy, which admits not of any precise meaning, nor consequently of any determination...Consider, then, where the real point of controversy lies, and if you cannot lay aside your disputes, endeavour, at least to cure yourselves of your animosity. (D.176)

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