

DAVID HUME: DIALOGUES CONCERNING NATURAL RELIGION IN FOCUS

Edited and
with an Introduction by Stanley Tweyman

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DAVID HUME *DIALOGUES CONCERNING
NATURAL RELIGION*

in focus

Based on the original handwritten manuscript, this book provides a new, accurate edition of Hume's important work, faithful to his original text, marginal notes, and changes. Stanley Tweyman's comprehensive introduction gives an interpretation of the *Dialogues* as a whole, as well as close analysis of each of the work's twelve parts. Hume's views on evil are discussed in four previously published articles and the volume concludes with an extensive bibliography.

Stanley Tweyman is Professor of Philosophy at York University, Toronto, Canada.

DAVID HUME

DIALOGUES CONCERNING NATURAL RELIGION

in focus

*A new edition, edited and with an introduction by
Stanley Tweyman*



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Publishing History

Editions of Hume's *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*

The first mention of the *Dialogues* is in a letter to Gilbert Elliot of March 1751, where Hume sends Elliot a 'sample' of the work.

The first edition was printed in 1779, in Edinburgh, supervised by Hume's nephew, 152 pages.

The second edition was also printed in 1779, 264 pages. According to Price, this edition was entered in the Stationer's Register on 10 May, 1779. (See J. V. Price, 'The First Publication of David Hume's *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*.' *Papers of the Bibliographical Society of America*, 68, 1974, 119-27.)

A third edition was published in 1804, consisting of the second edition text and a new title page.

The *Dialogues* was reprinted as part of Hume's collected works in editions of 1782, 1788, 1821, and 1826 (the last edited by Hume's nephew). The Green and Grose collection was published in 1874-5.

Preface

This edition of David Hume's *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* attempts to provide an accurate reproduction of the handwritten manuscript housed in the National Library in Edinburgh.

With the exception of minor grammatical changes, (e.g. 'tis' to 'it is', 'which' to 'that'), all Hume's revisions are included. Hume's editorial changes are indicated in the text by the use of footnotes, and, in the case of word or phrase substitutions, both the deleted and the added text are given. Major additions to the text are noted by the use of two asterisks at the beginning and end of the added passage, and by a footnote giving Hume's directions for insertion. Hume's own footnotes are printed in italics. The original punctuation has been retained throughout; in most cases, though, spelling has been modernized and his general capitalization of nouns has been omitted. Hume uses Arabic numbers in his text for numbering the twelve Parts, and this style has been retained in this edition in the text of the *Dialogues* and in the Introduction.

The Introduction contains an interpretation of the *Dialogues* which I first began developing in a number of published papers, and in my *Scepticism and Belief in Hume's Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* (Kluwer, Dordrecht, Netherlands, 1986). The current study of the *Dialogues* differs from this earlier work in a number of significant ways. Whereas the earlier book confined itself to a detailed analysis of Parts 1 through 8 and 12 (Cleanthes' Argument from Design and Philo's

criticisms of this argument), this Introduction provides an analysis of all twelve parts of the *Dialogues*. Furthermore, whereas *Scepticism and Belief* attempted to relate the *Dialogues* to Hume's treatment of 'natural belief' in the *Treatise of Human Nature* and to his discussion of 'scepticism' in the *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, the current study omits entirely the treatment of natural belief, and deals only briefly with the material in the first *Enquiry* on scepticism. I continue to believe in the importance of the 'natural belief doctrine in the *Treatise* and of Hume's analysis of scepticism in the first *Enquiry* to a full understanding of Parts 1 through 8 and 12 of the *Dialogues*. However, since I have previously recorded my thoughts on these matters, I can only recommend that the reader consult my *Scepticism and Belief* for a more detailed account than I am able to offer here of Hume's treatment of Cleanthes' Argument from Design. Kluwer has been highly supportive of my work on Hume: I would like to thank the publishers for their encouragement in regard to this edition of the *Dialogues*.

In addition to the text of the *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* and an Introduction, this volume contains a number of articles which should assist the reader in understanding the debate in the *Dialogues*. These papers were originally presented as a symposium at the Edinburgh Hume Conference, 25-30 August 1986, and subsequently appeared in *Hume Studies*, 13, 1987. An extensive bibliography is also included.

I have been extremely fortunate to have had Beryl Logan assisting me at every stage of this project. Her love of

the *Dialogues* and overall philosophic good sense are evident throughout this volume.

My efforts in this book, as always, are dedicated to my parents, Fay and Dave Tweyman, my wife Barbara, my daughter Justine Susan, and my brother Martin.

Introduction

Part 1

The debate in the *Dialogues* is centred around Cleanthes, Philo, and Demea. Of the three, Cleanthes maintains that there can be a religion of nature, that is, that knowledge of God can be obtained by examining what God has designed – the world. Cleanthes holds that God can be understood anthropomorphically, in human terms. Within the *Dialogues*, the two anthropomorphic claims which Cleanthes defends are that the Designer of the world is an intelligent being (discussed in Parts 2 through 8 and Part 12) and that the Designer is benevolent (Parts 10 and 11).

Philo is the main critic of Cleanthes' arguments. Cleanthes interprets Philo's criticisms to be of the extreme sceptical or pyrrhonian variety. According to Cleanthes, Philo's critical arguments generate 'undistinguished scruples with regard to the religious hypothesis, which is founded on the simplest and most obvious arguments, and, unless it meet with artificial obstacles, has such easy access and admission into the mind of man' (D. 104). As well, Philo's objections pay no heed to common sense and the plain instincts of nature (D. 118). As such, Philo's objections are intended more for amusement than for the pursuit of truth.

Philo's attitude to the arguments he puts forth reveals that the arguments are presented in a serious manner, and with a view to dealing seriously with Cleanthes' position in natural religion. At one point in Part 1, Cleanthes compares the extreme sceptics or Pyrrhonians with the

Stoics. The mind, through stoical reflections, can be elevated into a sublime enthusiasm for virtue, such that no bodily pain can triumph over this high sense of duty. But he points out that such a state of mind cannot have a lasting effect upon us. Similarly, Cleanthes urges, pyrrhonian objections can have a momentary effect upon us, but,

thereafter, we will return to our ordinary ways of dealing with the world. Therefore, there is, according to Cleanthes, no lingering effect to pyrrhonism. Philo responds to Cleanthes by saying that the comparison of Sceptics to Stoics is apt. However, Cleanthes fails to understand that there is a lingering effect to each of these: the effects of the Stoic's reasoning will appear in his conduct in common life, and through the whole tenor of his actions; similarly, those who are familiar with sceptical considerations on the uncertainty and narrow limits of reason will be found different in all their philosophical principles and reasoning from those who have never considered pyrrhonian objections on various topics.

The view to be adopted in this Introduction is that our reading of Philo's pyrrhonian objections should be guided by his comments to Cleanthes in various passages on the value of pyrrhonism, and by Hume's views on pyrrhonism when these arguments are constructive in nature.¹ Although pyrrhonian objections may generate undistinguished doubts – in Part 12 Philo characterizes this as a lack of caution in argumentation – nevertheless, the value of such objections is to show that we have gone beyond what human reason and the senses can properly examine. In Part 1, Philo tells Cleanthes that

pyrrhonian objections are intended to counterbalance those arguments which run wide of common life and experience, and are designed to produce a suspense of judgement. In Section XII of the first *Enquiry*,² Hume urges that such counterbalancing arguments should be directed against philosophical dogmatists: ‘... while they see objects only on one side, and have no idea of any counterpoising argument, they throw themselves precipitately into the principles, to which they are inclined; nor have they any indulgence for those who entertain opposite sentiments’ (E. 161). The intent of such counterbalancing arguments is to rid the mind of prejudice: only after this has been accomplished can inquiry be directed to determining whether there is anything on the topic under discussion which is in accordance with either common sense (also referred to at times as instinct) or reason. In the first *Enquiry*, this is referred to as mitigated scepticism – the type of scepticism to which Hume himself subscribes.

Demea, the third member of the dialogue, is characterized as a mystic, as one who holds a belief in God, but who also believes that nothing whatever can be known about God. In Part 9, Demea offers an *a priori* proof of God’s necessary existence. (The place of Part 9 in the debate between Cleanthes and Philo is discussed later in this Introduction, pp. 60–8.)

The narrative of the dialogue is provided by Pamphilus, a student of Cleanthes, who had spent a summer with his teacher. It was during this period that he was present at the discussion which forms the subject matter of the book. Pamphilus relates to Hermippus (we are told

nothing about the latter) the content of the discussion which took place among Cleanthes, Philo, and Demea.

Part 2

As Part 2 opens, we find all three speakers agreeing that the existence of God is certain and self-evident. Of the three, Philo and Demea agree that, beyond this claim, nothing more can be known about God. At one point, Philo asserts: ‘And it is a pleasure to me ... that just reasoning and sound piety here concur in the same conclusion, and both of them establish the adorably mysterious and incomprehensible nature of the Supreme Being’ (D. 108). Only Cleanthes maintains that something can be learned of the nature of God. The argument he presents is the Argument from Design: through this argument he attempts to establish, by analogy, that the cause of the design of the world resembles human intelligence.

Cleanthes’ version of the Argument from Design reads as follows:

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 with an accuracy, which ravishes into admiration all men, who have ever contemplated them. The curious adapting of means to ends, 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. (D. 109)

Since the argument begins with a reference to finding the world ‘to be nothing but one great machine, subdivided into an infinite number of lesser machines’, it is tempting to hold that the claim that the world is a machine is a premise in this argument. However, this is not a correct reading of Cleanthes’ argument. First, when Philo begins his criticism of Cleanthes’ argument, he makes the point that resemblances between human artifacts and the universe are not sufficient to justify the claim that they are effects of the same kind:

If we see a house, Cleanthes, we conclude, with the greatest certainty, that it had an architect or builder; because this is precisely that species of effect, which we have experienced to proceed from that species of cause. But surely you will not affirm, that the universe bears such a resemblance to a house, that we can with the same certainty infer a similar cause, or that the analogy is here

entire and perfect. The dissimilitude is so striking, that the utmost you can here pretend to is a guess, a conjecture, a presumption concerning a similar cause; (D. 110)

Cleanthes, however, does not appear bothered by this; he has recourse to the adaptation of means to ends and coherence of parts which are present in all machines and throughout the design of the world to support his claim:

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)

Second, the principle employed within the Argument from Design to establish the resemblance between the Deity and us is 'like effects prove like causes'. And when Philo puts forth his version of the Argument from Design two pages later (Cleanthes acknowledges that Philo's version provides a fair representation of the Argument), he states clearly that 'the adjustment of means to ends is alike in the universe, as in a machine of human contrivance.' By this statement, he is acknowledging that the comparison within the argument is between the means to ends relations and coherence of parts present in the design of machines and the world, and not simply between machines and the world.

Stated formally, Cleanthes' argument can be put in the following way:

Argument I:

P₁, P₂, P₃ ... P_n have A (means to ends relations),

(human artifacts) B (coherence of parts).

Q (the universe) has A (means to ends relations),

B (coherence of parts).

P₁, P₂, P₃ ... P_n have C (mind or intelligence as their cause of design).
(human artifacts)

Q (the universe) also has C (mind or intelligence as its cause of design).

Argument II:

P₁, P₂, P₃ ... P_n have C (mind or intelligence as their cause of design).
(human artifacts)

Q (the universe) has C (mind or intelligence as its cause of design).

P₁, P₂, P₃ ... P_n have D (an external cause of design).
(human artifacts)

Q (the universe) also has D (an external cause of design).

That the world is a machine is a conclusion to which the Argument leads, and not a premise from which it begins. That is, it is only upon knowing that the means to ends relations and coherence of parts throughout the design of the world have resulted from intelligence that we can infer that the world is a machine. Knowing that the design of the world can be reduced to means to ends relations and a coherence of parts is not sufficient to classify the world as a machine.

A second version of the Argument from Design is put forth by Philo, ostensibly in response to Demea's uneasiness with Cleanthes' version of this argument. (As we will see, this second version is the version against which Philo's objections are directed in Part 8.) Philo's version of the Argument from Design is the following:

Were a man to abstract from every thing which he knows or has seen, he would be altogether incapable, merely from his own ideas, to determine what kind of scene the universe must be or to give the preference to one state or situation of things above another. For as nothing, which he clearly conceives, could be esteemed impossible or implying a contradiction, every chimera of his fancy would be upon an equal footing; nor could

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