

Reformed Theological Seminary

An Examination and Critique of David Hume's *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*

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David Hume's definitive work *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* is widely considered a philosophical classic, particularly in regards to the relationship between philosophy and the knowledge of God. I was quite eager to read this work, as Hume is not only commonly referred to in the letters and writings of giants like C.S. Lewis, but was the subject of much deliberation in the classic debate between Doctors Gordon Stein and Greg Bahnsen in 1985. In this interaction with the text through a discussion of its characters and thoughts, it will be seen that this book fails to accomplish the devastating critique on religion that it attempted to prove.

I. A Brief Background

It would first be helpful to understand a brief background of Hume and his work now being discussed. David Hume was a British Philosopher who lived from 1711-1776. The *Dialogues* are one of a handful of popular texts Hume wrote that have had profound impact on modern philosophy. Hume is cited as having large influence in the lives of renowned thinkers such as Immanuel Kant, Charles Darwin and Thomas Huxley.

The *Dialogues* are a unique text in that they were published posthumously. After finding out he had intestinal cancer, Hume arranged for the work to be published after his death. This task was ultimately carried out by his nephew in 1779, three years after Hume.¹

The text largely focuses on arguments from empirical observations and statements of fact. The latter quarter of the book takes a slight turn to some discussion on the "Problem of Evil", but for the most part Hume spends a majority of his time attempting to dismantle any sort of cosmological argument from design. This argument is heralded as a "devastating critique" to cosmological arguments, and has been the basis for conclusions by many succeeding philosophers and theologians writing after Hume's death.²

This text is also unique for another reason in particular. Harkening back to Plato's many dialogues, Hume's *Dialogues* employs the classic Philosophical system of a fictional dialogue between two or more characters. This system is meant to be the authors attempt at best communicating complex ideas through relatable (yet stereotyped) characters representing opposing views. The *Dialogues* are then written as if they are the recordings of one Pamphilus in an address to his friend Hermippus. The dialogue observed by Pamphilus takes place between three characters, Cleanthes, Demea and Philo.

II. A Discussion of Main Characters and Arguments Made

a. Cleanthes

The first prominent character of Hume's *Dialogues* is accurate and rational Cleanthes. Hume wastes no time communicating to the reader that Cleanthes primarily thinks and argues from rational thought and empirical observation. It is clear throughout the text that Cleanthes is the equivalent chief-opponent of Hume, and it is his attempt to completely dismantle the arguments of someone like Cleanthes.

It is Cleanthes' belief that "students of philosophy ought first to learn logics, then ethics, next physics, last of all the nature of the gods" (Page 5). As the book progresses, Hume portrays Cleanthes evermore as a philosopher at the far end of a spectrum, where only rationalism and empirical data can belong. Cleanthes is certain that because we use evidence in the realms of all natural, mathematical,

¹ *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, s.v. "David Hume," accessed July 20, 2013, <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/hume/>

² *Ibid.*

moral and political science, we therefore ought to in theology and religion as well (Page 12). Cleanthes echoes the argument of Francis Bacon when he says “A little philosophy makes a man an Atheist: A great deal converts him to religion” (page 13).

Cleanthes’ major argument relies on the classic anthropomorphic argument from design. He argues that the universe is “one big machine”, made up of many smaller machines and parts, that have been adjusted to such an accuracy that they surely point to a grand designer. These parts and machines resemble the thoughts and contrivances of man, so therefore we ought to conclude that the author of nature ought to be somewhat similar to the mind of man at a much larger scale. It is “by this argument alone” that Cleanthes proves the existence of a deity (Page 19). He will continue to say later that the intricacies of the universe, such as the way males and females fit together, as well as “millions and millions” of other instances are natural and convincing arguments that cannot be rejected (Page 31).

Cleanthes’ ultimate downfall in his argument is his confession that his argument only goes so far, and then must stop lest he continue on *ad infinitum*. When he is backed into a corner by Philo, Cleanthes’ concedes that he relies on his empirical evidences to point to an author, and so therefore he stops at the idea of a divine rather than continuing past the material world and into the metaphysical realm when asking the question “...and who made that?” This confession ultimately becomes Philo’s sticking point against Cleanthes, as well as Philo’s seeming victory over him.

When the argument takes a turn towards discussing the “problem of evil”, Hume portrays Cleanthes as a man who is so logically and rationally based that he cannot concede any sort of argument from emotion or feeling. Philo begins his argument based on a universal understanding of human wickedness and misery, a sentiment that Demea shares with Philo. However, Cleanthes says that he does not understand the argument being made, “I can observe something like what you mention in some others, but I confess I feel little or nothing of it in myself, and hope that it is not so common as you represent it” (Page 76). It is Cleanthes’ belief that human misery and divine benevolence are contradictory, and only if you deny universal misery can you believe in divine goodness (Page 79).

b. Demea

The second character of Hume’s *Dialogues* is the orthodox and religious Demea. Demea is portrayed as arguing purely *a priori*, and that we must have assumed presuppositions to know anything about God. He is the polar opposite, on the opposed end of the philosophical spectrum from Cleanthes. Demea does not really argue from any particular religious perspective, although it is hinted he is supposed to be Christian which is likely. This character gets the least amount of text in the book, a rough estimate probably being about ten percent or less. Demea is also portrayed as being incapable of keeping up philosophically, and often resorts to shouting or quick retorts which are dismissed even quicker. Ultimately unsatisfied with the direction of the conversation, Demea storms off before the conversation is even over (Page 93).

This character is uncertain of any part of philosophy or science, and regards the principles of religion as the starting point for all matters of discussion (Page 5). The existence of the divine is assumed, and Demea therefore raises the argument that the supreme question is not concerning the being but the nature of God (Page 17). The interesting thing about Hume’s portrayal of Demea is that Demea at times appears to be more of a skeptic than either of the other two characters, yet is supposed to be the most committed to religion. Because God is so much higher than us, says Demea, his mind and attributes are completely unknowable to us (Page 17). It is in this regard that I question whether we can critically say that Demea is supposed to be the Christian character, a topic which I will address in my criticisms later in this paper.

Unlike Cleanthes, Demea believes that we ought not to imagine God with any resemblance to man (Page 18). Demea proclaims that knowledge of God must be argued *a priori*, to do otherwise is to give the advantage to Atheists. It is our infirmities in our nature that our untrustworthy, as our thoughts are “fluctuating, uncertain, fleeting, successive, and compounded” so we are therefore unable in our own reasoning and understanding to reach any understanding of the Divine (page 33).

There are a few points in the text that Demea and Philo seem to somewhat agree. The chief religious character of the *Dialogues* concedes that much of his understanding comes from the idea that each man feels deep within him the truth of religion, which is bred from universal misery amongst men (Page 71). It is a similar argument that Philo argues from shortly thereafter. As the conversation on misery and evil continues, Demea becomes progressively unhappy with the direction of the conversation and storms off (Page 93). The last sixth of the book is then left to what is portrayed as the first-fruits arguments of Philo and Cleanthes, meant to be too lofty of Demea’s understanding.

c. Philo

The final character in Hume’s famous text is Philo the philosophical skeptic. It is widely regarded that Philo most likely is meant to be Hume writing himself into this fictional dialogue, as Philo’s views most closely resemble much of Hume’s other writings. Ever the skeptic, Philo believes it is impossible to trust our senses, thoughts or empirical observations but ultimately sees *a priori* arguments as equally unsatisfying.

Philo’s character gets the significant majority of screen time in this text, likely at least sixty percent of the book is Philo’s dialogue. He has something to say about everything, but never actually lands on any solid ground. Philo is much better at critiquing Cleanthes and Demea rather than actually making any statements of belief. But it is this idea that really sums up Philo’s character, critical and skeptical of everyone to the point that he has no foundational truths himself. Philo’s views are much more based on probability, so while one idea can be more probable than another, it can never be absolutely certain.

Like Demea, Philo believes that human reason has contradictions and imperfections and cannot be trusted (Page 6). It is actually this initial agreement that fools Demea into thinking that the two of them are in agreement. Demea’s realization that this is not the case is a contributing factor to his departure early from the conversation. A post-modern hipster, Philo believed that perfection was relative and therefore we cannot comprehend the attributes of the divine (page 18).

Most of Philo’s hot air is spent refuting Cleanthes, the chief argument being the argument from design. Upon Cleanthes’ initial statement of his argument, Philo responds with the typical house analogy – if we see a house we conclude there was a builder, therefore when we see a universe we conclude a designer. However, as Philo reasons, a house and the universe are so different that there is no way we can make this analogy work between the two, inferring the same kind of certainty about a designer as we would about a house builder (Page 20). Philo also refutes Cleanthes’ idea of the universe resembling a machine made up of many small parts when he says “I will not allow any one part to form a rule for any other part” (Page 24). Ultimately, Philo says, there is no ground to suppose a divine plan for the universe as an architect draws up a plan for a house (Page 37).

As I said before, the lynchpin in Cleanthes’ argument would be his admission of needing to stop his argument with the idea of a divine, otherwise he would have to go on *ad infinitum*. This confession of Cleanthes comes shortly after Philo argues that Cleanthes must take his anthropomorphic arguments into infinity, continually questioning the matter of existence of the forces behind subsequent forces

(Page 38). Philo basically argues that if we suppose a designer, we must then ask “Who designed the designer?”

As Cleanthes believes that the universe is entirely uniform and obviously pointing to a designer, Philo believes that the more we study in biology, anatomy and chemistry the more we should see that the universal cause of life is vastly different from mankind and not uniform at all (Page 42). Since Philo observes the universe to be more of a system of connected but different parts rather than a well-oiled machine, he asserts that the universe much more resembles a plant or animal than a designed machine (Page 53). The universe therefore most probably arose from a process of generation or vegetation, rather than design. However, even on this supposition Philo seems more intent on just arguing with Cleanthes rather than asserting it as fact, as even Philo confesses this is a new argument that he just thought of during the course of the conversation.

During the discussion on wickedness and evil, Philo does argue from a universal feeling of misery and wickedness amongst man. Man, he says, is the greatest enemy of man (Page 73). However, true to form, while he concedes this is the best argument for a deity, Philo also sees it to be inconclusive. Bringing up the classic “problem of evil” credited to Epicurus, Philo says Epicurus’ questions remain unanswered and thus Philo remains a skeptic (Page 77). Therefore, because man universally agrees on wickedness and evil, which could point to some divine, this divine being, or “original source of all things” must be entirely indifferent to good or evil (Page 91).

Now that a survey and foundation of the three primary characters and the arguments have been conducted, I will continue into my interactions and criticisms with the text.

III. Criticisms of the Text

David Hume’s *Dialogues* is a text that has piqued my interest for quite some time, and I was very eager to finally have a reason to sit down and read it. I knew that this was a text that I would ultimately not agree with, but I was hoping to get a taste of “the other side”, a chance to really understand arguments made against orthodox faith, and to be intellectually challenged. Unfortunately, while this text did make some interesting points and at times was challenging to understand, the *Dialogues* failed to make the point that it intended to make. While I understand the argument Hume was trying to make, it ultimately failed for three reasons: 1) because it categorically straw-man’s its characters and arguments, 2) because it does not adequately and completely address the subject matter, and 3) because its skeptical undertones completely undercut any reliability of the authors arguments.

While it is widely recognized that the skeptical Philo is playing the part of Hume in this text, the other two characters are completely stereotyped and straw-manned into two completely unrealistic and irrational people. The first rule to any good response and debate is to never straw-man the ideas of your opponent as it makes you appear rude and uneducated, yet this is something Hume fails to accomplish throughout his text. Cleanthes is a character that has no tolerance for any argument other than that from observed, rational thought and has no conception of the moral or emotional realities of humanity. On the opposite end of the scale, Demea is an orthodox religious character who is neither orthodox nor very religious. His apparent lack of foundation on any characteristics or attributes of God is surprising, and he really belongs in more of a new age/mystic camp than any orthodox Christianity that I am aware of. Even more frustrating is the depiction of Demea’s character, who is not only quick to fly off the handle but appears unable to respond to any of the more intellectual arguments made by either Philo or Cleanthes. Ultimately, Demea is fooled by Philo into a false sense of security and must storm off from the conversation before it even ends. This picture of a religious person does have some truth to it, but it is not the entire story nor is it appropriate to paint a false picture that it is so.

More to the point, with such opposite characters standing in contrast to Philo, one would be led to believe that the third character Philo would play the part of the middle ground where the two polar opposites could dialogue and interact. Instead, Philo is skeptical and critiques both sides but never really lands anywhere himself. This leads to a false sense that there is no blend between the religious thinker (Demea) and the philosophical, rational thinker (Cleanthes).

This brings me to my next criticism of the text, and that is that Hume did not adequately nor sufficiently address the subject matter. Based on the primary subject of the book, attempting to address whether or not men can come to know and understand the divine on their own merit, one would think there would be more room given to the vast considerations that should and need to be made. As Hume even states in his opening pages, "What truth so obvious, so certain, as the being of a God, which the most ignorant ages have acknowledged, for which the most refined geniuses have ambitiously striven to produce new proofs and arguments? What truth is as important as this...?" (Page 2).

If then this truth is so important, where are the considerations of morality? Where is there discussion on blending the rational and theological minds together? After all, God created us to be rational beings who all have a common sense of God we "feel within ourselves" (Page 71). If this is true, there must be more room allowed for discussing the intersection of faith and philosophy. Regrettably, the *Dialogues* fails to accomplish this in any way.

Further, Hume only dedicates approximately one-fourth of a very short book to the lofty discussion of pain and evil in the world. When countless volumes of the subject have been written by philosophers and theologians alike, how can such a large conversation be sufficiently squeezed into such a short space? Hume brings up the classic Epicurean problem, "Is he willing to present evil, but not able? Then is he important. Is he able, but not willing? Then is he malevolent. Is he both able and willing? Whence then is evil?", but then he blows right through those high questions and never addresses them. I fail to see how this is an ample argument for any reader to buy into when it is not even expounded upon.

Further, why is Demea unable to respond to these charges? If he is meant to play the orthodox Christian (which is questionable at best), how can he not echo similar words as Augustine says, "Since God is the highest good, He would not allow any evil to exist in His works, unless His omnipotence and goodness were such as to bring good even out of evil" (Kerr, 114)? Is this not what we see in Christ's victory over death on the cross? Hume's silence in this area is staggering and causes me to lose respect for him as a fair author or thinker, unable to adequately depict the argument he is trying to deconstruct.

Finally, Hume makes it clear in this book that he is trying to push the ideas of Philo as the strongest and most realistic. This is seen in the fact that Philo gets the large majority of text to speak, and also in the way neither Cleanthes nor Demea are able to adequately respond to Philo's charges. Philo himself is skeptical of Cleanthes' rational thinking, as well as Demea's weak attempt to argue the common sense of the divine. While he originally makes an argument for the divine from the common sense of wickedness and evil in men (Page 71), he then contradicts himself by saying "But there is no view of human life, or the condition of mankind, from which, without the greatest violence, we can infer the moral attributes, or learn that infinite benevolence, conjoined with infinite power and infinite wisdom, which we must discover by the eyes of faith alone" (Page 81). So are the common senses of man adequate, or are they not? Philo's shaky ground gives him no place to stand, leaving his arguments unconvincing nor impactful in any tangible way.

In the closing pages of Hume's work, Philo asks the rhetorical question "Who can explain the heart of man?" (Page 102). There is a Christian response to this question, and that is of course through

the illumination of truth via the Holy Spirit through His Holy Scriptures. If I could, I would love to awaken Hume for a short conversation and complete the Scripture he is no doubt invoking, "The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?" (Jeremiah 17:9). I would like to explain to Hume that his skepticism is no better than a house built on sand, and that he needs the Rock (Matthew 7:25-26) to firmly stand on in order to be led into "all truth" (John 16:13). Regrettably so, this is a conversation that will never take place. Praise God for taking the skeptic, lost Hume in all of us and redeeming us, giving us blood-bought sinners a place to stand firm on in truth and righteousness.

Bibliography

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