

DRAMA AND ARGUMENTS IN HUME'S DIALOGUES CONCERNING NATURAL RELIGION

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Although I have long suspected that the dramatic component in David Hume's *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* can (and is likely intended to) affect the reader's assessment of the various arguments and criticisms which we find in this work, my own thoughts on this matter were developed on the occasion of an invitation I received from Professor Jose R. Silva de Choudens, Chair of Philosophy, at the University of Puerto Rico, to present a number of talks to faculty and students at his university. One of my talks focused on Part 9 of the *Dialogues*: in my presentation, I argued that the impact of Cleanthes' criticisms against Demea's *a priori* argument for God's necessary existence can be interpreted as counterbalancing arguments and, therefore, as not decisive if the *dramatic* role of scepticism is taken into account. On the other hand, I argued that at least one of Cleanthes' criticisms can be regarded as a definitive critique of Demea's *a priori* argument when the role of scepticism as a dramatic or literary feature is abstracted from our assessment of the critical arguments put forth by Cleanthes.

After I presented my talk, a lively and animated discussion followed, with both faculty and students participating. My paper owes much to this discussion, and I am grateful for the insights which I gained from both students and faculty.

THE DRAMATIC READING OF PART 9

One way to read Part 9 of Hume's *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* is to see it as included for completeness.¹ Until this point in the debate, the only argument which has been examined is the *a posteriori* Argument from Design. In light of Philo's criticisms (in Parts 2, 4-8), this argument appears to lose all plausibility. In Part 9, Demea, in proposing his *a priori* argument, is suggesting that of the two available approaches to God through argumentation —the *a posteriori* and the *a priori*— the latter approach is superior to the former in two ways. First, whereas the Argument from Design proceeds by analogy and can, at most, offer a conclusion which is probable, Demea's *a priori* argument, if valid and devoid of any false premises, offers a conclusion which must be true. Second, in Part 5, Philo had shown that the Design Argument cannot establish the infinity or the unity of the Designer. Demea maintains at the beginning of Part 9 that the *a priori* approach will not be subject to the difficulties encountered by the Argument from Design, and that, in fact, it will be found to be acceptable to all. After Demea presents his *a priori* argument, Cleanthes proceeds to offer a number of criticisms of this argument —criticisms which Demea does not attempt to answer. Hence, one way to read Part 9 is to treat it as included in order to show why Hume believed that neither the *a posteriori* approach nor the *a priori* approach can establish claims about God.

Now, while agreeing that Hume has little regard for Demea's argument in light of the criticisms put forth by Cleanthes, I submit that Part 9 has an additional role to play —a role which is supported by the text of this Part, and which reveals that the inclusion of Part 9 is relevant to our understanding of Cleanthes in the context of his dialogue with Philo on the topic of the Argument from Design.

Demea offers the following version of the *a priori* argument:

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. 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: Now that the first supposition is absurd may be thus proved. In the infinite chain or succession of causes and effects,

¹ All references to the *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* are to the edition, edited and with an Introduction by Stanley Tweyman (Routledge, 1991).

each single effect is determined to exist by the power and efficacy of that cause which immediately preceded; but the whole eternal chain or succession, taken together, is not determined or caused by anything: And yet it is evident that it requires a cause or reason, as much as any particular object, which begins to exist in time. The question is still reasonable, why this particular succession of causes existed from eternity, and not any other succession, or no succession at all. If there be no necessarily existent Being, any supposition, which can be formed, is equally possible; nor is there any more absurdity in nothing's having existed from eternity, than there is in that succession of causes, which constitutes the universe. What was it, then, which determined something to exist rather than nothing, and bestowed being on a particular possibility, exclusive of the rest? *External causes* there are supposed to be none. *Chance* is a word without a meaning. Was it *nothing*? But that can never produce any thing. We must, therefore, have recourse to a necessarily existent Being, who carries the REASON of his existence in himself; and who cannot be supposed not to exist without an express contradiction. There is consequently such a Being, that is, there is a Deity. (D. 148-149)

The chief critic of this argument is Cleanthes, and he begins with the following (Humean) criticism:

I shall begin with observing, that there is an evident absurdity in pretending to demonstrate a matter of fact, or to prove it by any arguments *a priori*. Nothing is demonstrable, unless the contrary implies a contradiction. Nothing, that is distinctly conceivable, implies a contradiction. Whatever we conceive as existent, we can also conceive as non-existent. There is no Being, therefore, whose non-existence implies a contradiction. Consequently there is no Being, whose existence is demonstrable. I propose this argument as entirely decisive, and am willing to rest the whole controversy upon it. (D. 149)

This is all well-known criticism which Hume presented in Section XII of the first *Enquiry* and in the first Book of the *Treatise*.² However, if looked at in the context of Demea's *a priori* argument, it becomes somewhat less than compelling. Recall that Demea had said in the course

² David Hume, *Enquiries Concerning the Human Understanding and Concerning the Principles of Morals*, edited by L.A. Selby-Bigge, third edition, with text revised and notes by P.H. Nidditch (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1975), 163-164; *A Treatise of Human Nature*, edited by L.A. Selby-Bigge, second edition, with text revised and notes by P.H. Nidditch (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1978).

of presenting his *a priori* argument, that the deity “cannot be supposed not to exist without an express contradiction.” In other words, if we accept Demea’s claim that (at least for him) the non-existence of the deity is inconceivable, then he would have satisfied the condition in Cleanthes’ argument that a proposition is demonstrable provided that its denial is inconceivable. One is also reminded of Descartes who writes in the fifth Meditation:

But, nevertheless, when I think of it with more attention, I clearly see that existence can no more be separated from the essence of God than can its having its three angles equal to two right angles be separated from the essence of a (rectilinear) triangle, or the idea of a mountain from the idea of a valley; and so there is not any less repugnance to our conceiving a God (that is, a Being supremely perfect) to whom existence is lacking (that is to say, to whom a certain perfection is lacking), than to conceive of a mountain which has no valley.³

The upshot of this is the realization that the most Cleanthes has accomplished with his argument is to show that, in the case of those who find the non-existence of the deity conceivable, the argument offered by Demea should be rejected as a demonstration of God’s necessary existence. On the other hand, those who find the non-existence of the deity inconceivable can reject Cleanthes’ initial criticism as being without force against Demea’s argument. In fact, for these people, his first criticism actually countenances a proof like Demea’s *a priori* proof.

Cleanthes’ second criticism achieves no greater success than the first. He argues:

It is pretended that the Deity is a necessarily existent Being; and this necessity of his existence is attempted to be explained by asserting, that, if we knew his whole essence or nature, we should perceive it to be as impossible for him not to exist as for twice two not to be four. But it is evident, that this can never happen, while our faculties remain the same as at present. It will still be possible for us, at any time, to conceive the non-existence of what we formerly conceived to exist; nor can the mind ever lie under a necessity of supposing any object to remain always in being; in the same manner as we lie under a necessity of always conceiving twice two to be four. The words, therefore, *necessary existence*

³ René Descartes, *Meditations On First Philosophy*, in *Focus*, edited and with an Introduction by Stanley Tweyman, Routledge, London and New York, 1993. Page 82.

have no meaning; or which is the same thing, none that is consistent.
(D. 149)

However, as in the case of his first criticism, this criticism presupposes that the non-existence of the deity is conceivable. However, for those, like Demea, who find that the non-existence of God is inconceivable, this criticism supports the view that necessary existence is as meaningful when applied to the deity as it is when applied to a mathematical equation.

Cleanthes' third criticism appears to be no stronger than the previous ones we have examined:

But farther, why may not the material universe be the necessarily existent Being, according to this pretended explication of necessity? We dare not affirm that we know all the qualities of matter; and for aught we can determine, it may contain some qualities, which, were they known, would make its non-existence appear as great a contradiction as that twice two is five. I find only one argument employed to prove, that the material world is not the necessarily existent Being; and this argument is derived from the contingency both of the matter and the form of the world. "Any particle of matter," it is said, "may be *conceived* to be annihilated, and any form may be *conceived* to be altered. Such an annihilation or alteration, therefore, is not impossible." But it seems a great partiality not to perceive, that the same argument extends equally to the Deity, so far as we have any conception of him; and that the mind can at least imagine him to be non-existent, or his attributes to be altered. It must be some unknown, inconceivable qualities, which can make his non-existence appear impossible, or his attributes unalterable: And no reason can be assigned, why these qualities may not belong to matter. As they are altogether unknown and inconceivable, they can never be proved incompatible with it. (D. 149-150)

Cleanthes is arguing that, even if we accept Demea's conclusion that the contingent can exist only if a necessary being exists, this cannot establish that the necessary being must be external to the totality of contingent beings, and, therefore, the material world may be the necessarily existent being. But, for those like Demea, who find the non-existence of Deity inconceivable, Cleanthes' criticism loses all force, since it is not the case, to use Cleanthes' words, "that the same argument extends equally to the Deity so far as we have any conception of him." The hypothesis of an external necessary being as the ultimate cause of the universe, on this view, has a decided advantage over the hypothesis of an internal neces-

sary being as the ultimate cause of the universe. On the other hand, for those who find Demea's argument compelling insofar as it shows the need for an ultimate necessary cause of the world, but who, nevertheless, find the non-existence of an external ultimate necessary cause of the world inconceivable and the non-existence of an ultimate internal necessary cause of the world equally inconceivable, Cleanthes' third criticism shows that there is no decision procedure by which to select one of these over the other.

Cleanthes' fourth criticism makes the point that if the chain of causes and effects is eternal (and Demea maintains that it is), then "it seems absurd" to require a First Cause for the chain: "How can any thing, that exists from eternity, have a cause, since that relation implies a priority in time and a beginning of existence?" (D. 150) In this criticism, Cleanthes is utilizing elements of Hume's account of causation, namely, that causes must exist prior to their effects, and that an effect is a new existent. However, to bring this analysis to bear on the *a priori* proof, as Cleanthes has done, is question-begging. For, if Demea is correct, that the chain of causes and effects and the matter out of which this chain is formed are contingent, then the fact that the chain is eternal may not remove the need to provide a causal account as to why it (and no other possible chain, or no chain at all) exists. If matter is contingent, then the chain may require a causal explanation, regardless of how far back in time it reaches. It is logically possible for there to exist two eternal beings with one being necessary and the cause or ground of the other. It can be argued that it is a concern with modality, and not how long something has existed, which reveals whether a cause is required. Cleanthes' (Humean-type) criticism would be acceptable only if we were assured that the eternity of matter precludes its having a cause, and Cleanthes offers no argument to support this. Cleanthes' hesitation in putting forth this criticism can be discerned by the words 'it seems absurd' which preface his remarks.

In Cleanthes' last criticism, he argues:

In such a chain too, or succession of objects, each part is caused by that which preceded it, and causes that which succeeds it. Where then is the difficulty? But the WHOLE, you say, wants a cause. I answer, that the uniting of these parts into a whole, like the uniting of several distinct counties into one kingdom, or several distinct members into one body, is performed merely by an arbitrary act of the mind, and has no influence on the nature of things. Did I show you the particular causes of

each individual in a collection of twenty particles of matter, I should think it very unreasonable, should you afterwards ask me, what was the cause of the whole twenty. This is sufficiently explained in explaining the cause of the parts. (D. 150)

Cleanthes is arguing that the 'world' or 'whole' which is formed by the succession of causes and effects is not a thing in the way that the individual members of the chain are things. The 'world' is a concept or 'arbitrary act of the mind' and, as such, needs only so be explained through concept formation. Rather than providing a decisive criticism of Demea's argument, Cleanthes has shown Demea a competing interpretation of the succession of causes and effects, but he has not provided a means of deciding between his position and Demea's. That is, Demea has argued that the modality of the chain is identical to the modality of the members of the chain, and, therefore, a causal account of each member of the chain through contingent predecessors in the chain can never account for why the chain exists. Causal accounts within the chain assume the existence of the chain, and provide causal explanations for individual members. Cleanthes argues that the question of a cause for the chain is not well-formed, given that all that exists are individual members of the chain, and these are adequately explained through the contingent causes which precede them. However, beyond asserting his position and providing an illustration ("Did I show you the particular causes of each individual in a collection of twenty particles of matter, I would think it very unreasonable should you afterwards ask me, what was the cause of the whole twenty") which may or may not be accurate, Cleanthes offers no means of deciding whether Demea's position or his position is the correct one.

Having now gone through Cleanthes' five criticisms of Demea's argument, we are able to see a pattern in his approach. In no instance has he been able to demonstrate or prove that an error is present in Demea's proof. Rather, in each instance, he has revealed to Demea — and to Philo who is also in attendance — that Demea has failed to examine alternative views to the ones he is presenting and attempting to defend in his *a priori* argument.

This approach of Cleanthes' regarding Demea's *a priori* argument is analogous to Philo's approach to Cleanthes' *a posteriori* Design Argument which the latter introduced in Part 2. When Cleanthes argued by analogy that the Designer of the world is an intelligent being, he emphasized the resemblance between the world and machines in terms of

means to ends relations and a coherence of parts. Philo argued that these features are present, not only in those cases where intelligence is the cause of design, but also when non-intelligent causes (e.g., generation, vegetation) are the source of design. Hence, to show that the design of the world has an intelligent cause, Cleanthes must establish that the design of the world bears a sufficient resemblance to a particular type of machine, so that the world can be classified as a machine of a certain sort. Only in this way, Philo insists, can the principle *like effects prove like causes* be employed to prove that God resembles human intelligence. Within the discussion, Philo shows that the features of design present in the world are insufficient to classify the world as a (particular kind of) machine, and, for that matter, as any kind of object whose cause of design is known. Accordingly, Philo argues that all arguments by analogy fail to establish the nature of the cause of the design of the world. And, therefore, when he puts forth any arguments of this sort (Parts 6, 7, 8), it is not done to support a particular hypothesis about the design of the world, but to argue against Cleanthes' Design Argument.

Cleanthes' efforts in Part 9 are similar to Philo's in the earlier sections of the book, namely, his aim is to show Demea that the causal chain, portions of which we are able to observe, can be accounted for in ways other than the way in which Demea has proceeded —by having recourse to matter if we adhere to the view that a necessary being is required as the cause of the chain, and by eliminating a First Cause altogether, if the chain is held to be eternal, and if every member of the chain can be accounted for causally by some precedent member(s) in the chain. Cleanthes also argues that the demonstrability and intelligibility of a First Cause who is necessarily existent is not in any way convincing to those, like himself, who are able to conceive the non-existence of whatever can be conceived to be existent.

As I argued fully in my book *Scepticism and Belief in Hume's Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*,⁴ Philo's aim in providing counter arguments against Cleanthes' Design Argument was to loosen Cleanthes from his philosophical dogmatism. When the *Dialogues* opens, Cleanthes is represented as a dogmatist, and, therefore, as one who is likely to err in his reasoning because he lacks the necessary preparative to the study of philosophy —the inculcation of sceptical considerations on the uncertainty and narrow limits of human reason. Cleanthes admits no role

⁴ Dordrecht: Martinus Nijhoff, 1986.

for scepticism in enquiry, exhibits no doubt, caution, or modesty in defining his position, and lacks an impartiality in putting forth his argument—the latter being exhibited through his claim that the Argument from Design tends to the confirmation of ‘true religion’ (D. 106). In short, Cleanthes fits the pattern Hume finds in all 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). Hume’s suggested cure is that the dogmatist be exposed to the arguments of the Pyrrhonian, which takes place in Parts 2 through 8. Philo urged that he was arguing with Cleanthes “in his own way” (D. 111), and showed the latter that the Argument from Design, insofar as it seeks to establish analogically the intelligence of the Deity and his externality to what He has designed, is indefensible. The Argument from Design was shown to involve an infinite regress (Part 4), to be susceptible of reduction to absurdity (Part 5), and to utilize data which are equally supportive (and therefore not supportive at all) of an open-ended list of alternative hypotheses to a Designer of the world who is intelligent and external (Parts 6-8). Cleanthes has no answer to Philo’s Pyrrhonian objections; at the end of this sceptical attack, Philo proclaims a complete victory for the Pyrrhonian: the only reasonable response, he urges at the end of Part 8, is a total suspense of judgement. Once this suspense of judgement is reached, and, therefore, Cleanthes’ dogmatic approach has been removed, Hume is able, in Part 12, to assess Philo’s Pyrrhonian objections and reach the position of mitigated scepticism—the position which he himself endorses in the first *Enquiry*.

If Cleanthes has been turned from his dogmatic stance, and is now able to appreciate ‘counterpoising’ arguments, how would Hume proceed to show this to us? Since all arguments leading to a suspense of judgement in regard to the Design Argument have already been presented by Philo in Parts 2 through 8, Cleanthes cannot be expected to provide additional objections against this argument. An alternate means of revealing this change in Cleanthes is to have him respond to a *different* argument in a manner similar to Philo’s response to the Design argument. I submit that this is, at least part of, Hume’s motivation in including the *a priori* argument in Part 9, and in having Cleanthes serve as its main critic. None of Cleanthes’ criticisms in Part 9, as I showed earlier, can refute Demea’s argument. At most, they reveal the one-sidedness of Demea’s argument, and the fact that he has not taken into account any

'counterpoising' arguments. The starting-point of Cleanthes' *a posteriori* Argument from Design calls attention to the design present throughout the world (means to ends relations and a coherence of parts), and Philo's efforts are directed to showing that this in itself will never be adequate to establish how the design came about; the starting-point of Demea's *a priori* argument calls attention to the succession of causes and effects throughout the world, and Cleanthes' efforts are directed to showing that this in itself will never be adequate to establish how this succession came about. In other words, Cleanthes' criticisms in Part 9 serve to illustrate to Philo, and to the reader, the success which Philo has achieved with Cleanthes through his sceptical objections in Part 2 through 8.

In Part 2 of the *Dialogues*, Cleanthes argued that the cause of the design of the world is an intelligent being. After hearing Philo's criticisms in Part 2, Cleanthes proceeds in Part 3 to address Philo's criticisms through two imaginary illustrative analogies —the Articulate Voice speaking from the clouds and the Vegetable Library. That Cleanthes utilizes imaginary examples is understandable in light of the fact that in his Design Argument, he is concerned with the cause of the design of *all* there is in nature. Since the scope of the argument and of Philo's criticism is all there is, Cleanthes cannot, in attempting to illustrate his position, have recourse to (any part of) what there is. Hence, the propriety of imaginary examples. Similarly, since Philo's objections to Cleanthes' Design Argument continue to the point where a suspense of judgement has been achieved (and, therefore, no further counterpoising arguments are available), if Hume wanted to illustrate the impact which Philo's arguments have had on Cleanthes, he could not do so through the Design Argument. A new argument is needed with which Cleanthes can proceed to deal in a manner similar to the way in which Philo has dealt with his Design Argument.

To help confirm the interpretation offered here regarding the illustrative value of Part 9, I call attention to two additional passages —the first appears in the last paragraph of Part 1 (i.e., prior to Philo's criticisms of Cleanthes' Design Argument), and the second is found in the second paragraph of Part 9 (the first time that Cleanthes speaks in Part 9). In the last paragraph of Part 1, Cleanthes, who is about to offer his *a posteriori* argument, asserts:

It is very natural, said Cleanthes, for men to embrace those principles, by which they find they can best defend their doctrines; And surely, nothing can afford a stronger presumption, that any set of principles are

true, and ought to be embraced, than to observe, that they tend to the confirmation of true religion, and serve to confound the cavils of atheists, libertines, and free thinkers of all denominations.

In this early Part, Cleanthes urges that the argument he will offer (in Part 2) should be accepted, because it tends to confirm (what he regards as) the true religion. Accordingly, Cleanthes begins the dialogue without the features which Hume holds "ought for ever to accompany a just reasoner," namely, "a degree of doubt and caution, and modesty" (E. 162). Furthermore, he begins without the type of impartiality in judgement, and lack of prejudice, which Hume holds is a necessary preparative to the study of Philosophy. Therefore, Cleanthes does not begin the *Dialogues* with the philosophic disposition which Hume holds we require, if we are to achieve accuracy in our reasonings.

On the other hand, once Demea has extolled the advantages of his *a priori* argument at the beginning of Part 9, Cleanthes interjects with the following:

You seem to reason, Demea, interposed Cleanthes, as if these advantages and conveniences in the abstract argument were full proofs if its solidity. But it is proper, in my opinion, to determine what argument of this nature you choose to insist on; and we shall afterwards, from itself, better than from its useful consequences, endeavour to determine what value we ought to put on it. (D. 148)

This response by Cleanthes offers a clear indication to the reader (and to Philo) that the Cleanthes we encounter in Part 9 (and beyond) has been affected by Philo's arguments in the previous Parts: Cleanthes is now prepared to examine arguments on their own merits, regardless of the consequences they would have, if they were accepted. In short, he now exhibits the impartiality in judgement and lack of prejudice which Hume holds is a necessary preparative to the study of Philosophy.

THE NON-DRAMATIC READING OF PART 9

I turn now to a reading of Part 9 which ignores entirely any dramatic or literary elements in the text. In order to deal with this interpretation in its entirety, it will be necessary to repeat some portion of Cleanthes' criticisms, already discussed, in the first section of this paper.

In Part 9 of Hume's *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, Demea offers his *a priori* argument for God's existence, an argument, I suggest,

which appears to have a *prima facie* plausibility. Consider the structure of the proof. Any object which currently exists is related causally to a chain or succession of objects which extends back to infinity. Demea argues that, although particular members in the chain or succession can be accounted for by reference to earlier members in the chain, nevertheless, two questions remain unanswered. One question is, "Why is there something rather than nothing?", and the other question is, "Why does this particular succession of causes exist rather than some other?" Demea contends that these are legitimate causal questions which can only be answered by making a modal leap. Since no contingent being can account for an eternal (backward) chain of causes and effects (any such contingent being would be a member of the succession and, therefore, part of the problem), and since we cannot explain the chain through either Chance (chance for Hume means no cause, and this is unintelligible) or Nothing (*ex nihilo nihil fuit*), Demea concludes that we can explain the infinite or eternal succession only by having recourse to "a necessarily existent Being, who carries the REASON of his existence in himself; and who cannot be supposed not to exist without an express contradiction". (D. 149) According to Demea, therefore, the eternally contingent must be grounded in the eternally necessary.

When Cleanthes undertakes his critique of Demea's argument, he begins with the well-known Humean criticism of his argument, and says of his criticism: "I propose this argument as entirely decisive, and am willing to rest the whole controversy upon it." (D. 149) The criticism at issue is the one which concerns the Humean point that nothing is demonstrable, unless the contrary implies a contradiction. This criticism, in full, reads as follows:

I shall begin with observing, that there is an evident absurdity in pretending to demonstrate a matter of fact, or to prove it by an arguments *a priori*. Nothing is demonstrable, unless the contrary implies a contradiction. Nothing, that is distinctly conceivable, implies a contradiction. Whatever we conceive as existent, we can also conceive as non-existent. There is no Being, therefore, whose existence is demonstrable.

Cleanthes' point centers around the Humean view that since the premises in a sound deductive argument offer conclusive support for the conclusion, the only type of statement which can be demonstrated is one which is *necessarily* true, that is, where the relata are inseparable from each other. Mathematics, of course, offers the paradigm for the type of

demonstrative proof which Hume has in mind. The example from Descartes' *Regulae* illustrates the point extremely well.

1. Axiom of Equality
2. $2 + 2 = 4$
3. $3 + 1 = 4$

Conclusion: $2 + 2 = 3 + 1$

Statements which are contingently true, that is, where the relata are separable from each other, can never be proved *a priori* or deductively, and, at most, require an inductive argument for support.

Hume has a test for determining whether the relata in a statement are connected necessarily or contingently: the first relatum is affirmed in thought, while the second is denied. If the first cannot be thought once the second has been denied (as is the case with, for example, $2 + 2 = 3 + 1$), then the relata are necessarily connected, and are inseparable from each other; on the other hand, if the first can be thought once the second has been denied (as is the case with, for example, 'strawberries' and 'red'), then the relata are contingently connected, and are separable from each other.

Now, Cleanthes' point is that since 'God exists' functions in the way 'All strawberries are red' functions, in that the test of inseparability does not succeed in either case (if I think of strawberries and deny they are red, I can still think of strawberries; similarly, if I think of God and deny that He exists, I can still think of God), a demonstrative proof of God's existence is (logically) impossible. But Demea will hardly find this a decisive criticism regarding a demonstrative proof of God's existence, since he claims to be unable to think of God's nature, if God's existence is denied. For Demea, as we have seen, God "carries the REASON of his existence in himself; and ... cannot be supposed not to exist without an express contradiction" (D. 149). As I showed in my paper "Some Reflections on Hume on Existence"⁵, for Cleanthes to make his criticism 'entirely decisive', much of Hume's discussion of distinctions of reason, belief, and the idea of existence would have to be introduced in order to convince Demea that the sentence 'God exists' does not involve two relata, but only one—the thought of God—and that, therefore, the test of

⁵ This paper appears in *Hume Studies*, XVIII, 2, (November 1992)

inconceivability can never be applied to an existential claim, including 'God exists'. In any case, paragraph 5 of Part 9 of the *Dialogues* (Cleanthes' first criticism of Demea's *a priori* argument) cannot be regarded as offering a decisive criticism of Demea's argument. Furthermore, since the next two criticisms offered by Cleanthes (paragraph 6 and 7) also depend upon the test of inconceivability, we can conclude that they, too, as stated, cannot offer a decisive blow to Demea's argument.

It does seem to me that the criticism of Cleanthes' which, as stated, is devastating to Demea's effort in his *a priori* argument is the criticism in paragraph 8. The criticism reads as follows:

Add to this, that in tracing an eternal succession of objects, it seems absurd to enquire 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?

Although Demea fails to use modal language other than the reference to God as a 'necessarily existent Being', the general thrust of his position is that the succession of causes and effects, despite its being eternal, at least in the sense of not having had a beginning, is also contingent. And it is this contingency which leads Demea to ask, why anything at all exists, and why this succession exists and not some other. The criticism in paragraph 9 makes it clear that if the causal succession exists from eternity, then following Hume's analysis of causality, wherein causes must be temporally prior to their effects, it follows that the succession itself does not, better cannot, have a general cause or first author.

As everyone knows, Hume is adamant that we never understand the powers of objects through which they act as causes of certain effects. Hume is equally adamant that designating an object as cause and another as effect requires seeing objects of those types constantly conjoined. How does constant conjunction assist us in understanding causes and effects? In one respect, constant conjunction assists us by generating the habit or determination of the mind, so that we naturally associate the cause with the effect (this is causality as a natural relation).⁶ In so far as causality is viewed as a philosophical relation, the importance of constant conjunction is this: even though we lack any insight into causal power, the constant conjunction between objects convinces us of the

⁶ See Hume's *Treatise*, especially p. 170.

causal *relevancy* of one object to another. The powers of the first object, although unknown, appear to be directed to the production of, or a change in, the second object.

Applying this analysis of the importance of constant conjunction to ascriptions of causality to our discussion, we can understand the full weight of Cleanthes' criticism in the ninth paragraph of Part 9. If the succession of causes and effects is eternal, then *even if there is an eternal necessary Being*, there is no way to establish the causal relevancy of this necessary Being to the production of the causal chain. So Cleanthes' point must be that, even if there is a necessarily existent Being and an eternal succession of causes and effects, it is impossible for us, using Demea's premises, to show that one is causally relevant or responsible for the other. Each would exist in a manner which appears to be incompatible with its having been caused. What exists in what we call the world might someday cease to exist, and in this respect we might be tempted to say that what exists exists contingently. But even if this is true, Cleanthes' point is that the eternity of the world, at least in terms of not having had a beginning, rules out its having been caused. Accordingly, it may be the case that the causal chain of which Demea speaks is both uncaused and contingent.

Cleanthes is, therefore, arguing that the two questions which Demea insisted required an answer which only a necessarily existent Being can provide —'why is there something rather than nothing?' and 'why is there what there is rather than something else?'— are, in fact, not questions which can be answered. The fact that the world (according to Demea's argument) is eternal, rules out any causal explanation which can accurately and justifiably address either question.

CONCLUSION

In light of the two interpretations of Part 9 of the *Dialogues* I have put forth, it is reasonable, it seems to me, to ask the author of this paper which interpretation he thinks Hume accepts (assuming, of course, that Hume would be sympathetic to the author's efforts in this paper). Does Hume want us to understand the work with its literary dramatic components, or is he only interested in the arguments and criticisms, despite the fact that they are presented in a literary context?

At the very beginning of the *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, Hume offers his reasons for presenting the *Dialogues* material in dramatic

form.⁷ However, nowhere in this material does Hume urge that that dramatic component should affect our understanding and appreciation of *the arguments and criticisms* which are presented by the speakers.

On the other hand, there are at least three dramatic interventions, which are universally taken to have a bearing on the arguments presented. The first occurs in Part 3 after Cleanthes has presented his two illustrative analogies —the Articulate Voice and Living Vegetable Library. Rather than providing a response from Philo, we learn the following from Pamphilus:

Here I could observe, HERMIPPUS, that PHILO was a little embarrassed and confounded: but while he hesitated in delivering an answer, luckily for him, DEMEA broke in upon the discourse, and saved his countenance. (D. 120)

⁷ There are some subjects, however, to which dialogue-writing is peculiarly adapted, and where it is still preferable to the direct and simple method of composition.

Any point of doctrine, which is so *obvious*, that it scarcely admits of dispute, but at the same time so *important*, that it cannot be too often inculcated, seems to require some such method of handling it; where the novelty of the manner may compensate the triteness of the subject, where the vivacity of conversation may enforce the precepts, and where the variety of lights, presented by various personages and characters, may appear neither tedious nor redundant.

Any question of philosophy, on the other hand, which is so *obscure* and *uncertain*, that human reason can reach no fixed determination with regard to it; if it should be treated at all; seems to lead us naturally into the style of dialogue and conversation. Reasonable men may be allowed to differ, where no-one can reasonably be positive: Opposite sentiments, even without any decision, afford an agreeable amusement: And if the subject be curious and interesting, the book carries us, in a manner, into company, and unites the two greatest and purest pleasures of human life, study and society.

Happily, these circumstances are all to be found in the subject of NATURAL RELIGION. 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 so important as this, which is the ground of all our hopes, the surest foundation of morality, the firmest support of society, and the only principle, which ought never to be a moment absent from our thoughts and meditations? But in treating of this obvious and important truth; what obscure questions occur, concerning the *nature* of that divine being; his attributes, his decrees, his plan of providence? These have been always subjected to the disputations of men: Concerning these, human reason has not reached any certain determination: But these are topics so interesting, that we cannot restrain our restless enquiry with regard to them; though nothing but doubt, uncertainty and contradiction have, as yet, been the result of our most accurate researches. (D. 95-96)

That Philo is presented as “a little embarrassed and confounded”, and “hesitated in delivering an answer” —these are always regarded by commentators as relevant to our understanding of the interpretation and impact of Cleanthes’ two illustrative analogies.

The second dramatic intervention occurs at the end of Part 11 where we are told:

Thus PHILO continued to the last his spirit of opposition, and his censure of established opinions. But I could observe, that DEMEA did not at all relish the latter part of the discourse; and he took occasion soon after, on some pretense or other, to leave the company. (D. 171)

The philosophic significance of Demea’s departure has fascinated all commentators who seek to understand the arguments in Part 12.

Or again (the third dramatic intervention), at the end of Part 12, it falls to Pamphilus —the auditor to the dialogue, and student of Cleanthes— to assess all three speakers’ arguments. However, before he does so, Philo offers advice to Pamphilus on the importance of scepticism in the following passage:

To be a philosophical sceptic is, in a man of letters, the first and most essential step towards being a sound, believing Christian; a proposition, which I would willingly recommend to the attention of PAMPHILUS: And I hope CLEANTHES will forgive me for interposing so far in the education and instruction of his pupil. (D. 185)

There are, therefore, points in the discussion in which Hume explicitly countenances a reading consistent with the literary and dramatic elements which he has included. But, as we have also seen, in a passage early in the *Dialogues*, the arguments and criticisms are spoken of as primary, with the dramatic elements accorded a merely stylistic role in light of the material to be presented.

It seems to me that the lesson from this discussion is that the literary and dramatic elements should influence our understanding of the book, the *Dialogues*, wherever and whenever this presents itself as appropriate. The book is a philosophical discussion in a literary and dramatic setting, and our appreciation of the book cannot be divorced from these elements. Accordingly, when in Part 9, Cleanthes’ criticisms of Demea’s argument fail to take into account all that Hume has written on the topic of “existence” and the question: “Is existence a predicate?”, we must ask about this from a literary and dramatic perspective, and its philosophic importance.

On the other hand, when one of the arguments in Part 9—as I showed—contains sufficient Humean elements to enable us to say that, without the dramatic components, this argument is a decisive refutation of Demea's *a priori* argument, then we must regard this as a philosophic contribution of tremendous importance, given the attention Demea's *a priori* argument has received in the history of philosophy.

But I go one step further: my paper shows us something about arguments which, in my experience, is rarely, if ever, taken into account. As my paper analyzes Demea's and Cleanthes' arguments, it becomes clear that arguments can be regarded as being "presented in a context", and this makes our understanding of arguments relative to a possible host or multitude of non-argumentative factors. In fact, even when we elect to ignore these non-argumentative factors, there is, by definition, the fact that arguments are regarded as being "presented in a context". If I am correct about this, then there are no *pure* arguments. I am reminded of the well-known "duck/rabbit" figure which, in the end, we realize is neither a duck nor a rabbit, or maybe both a duck and a rabbit. I submit that in the *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, Hume has painted his own "duck/rabbit".

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