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HUME'S FINAL ARGUMENT

Graham Priest

MY purpose is to suggest the resolution of a puzzle concerning Hume's *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*. The puzzle is this. The first eight sections of the book consist of an extended discussion of the Argument from Design. During the discussion Philo, whom there is good reason to regard, for the most part, as Hume's mouthpiece,¹ subjects the argument to many damaging criticisms. Most of the arguments are not satisfactorily answered by Cleanthes, the proponent of the argument, and there can be little doubt that by the end of these sections Philo may reasonably be taken to have disposed of it.² However when Hume sums up his position at the very end of the *Dialogues*, he appears to endorse unreservedly the conclusion of the Argument:

If the whole of natural theology...resolves itself into one simple...proposition, *that the cause or causes of order in the universe probably bear some remote analogy to human intelligence*...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...?³

The problem is how to account for Hume's apparent *volte face*.⁴

The obvious solution is that something has happened between the end of section eight and the conclusion of the *Dialogues* to justify it. Indeed, *prima facie* this is the case. For at the beginning of section twelve Philo, appearing to "come clean," himself restates the Argument from Design and endorses it. This suggests that the solution to the problem is that Hume did not take his attack on the Design Argument in the first eight sections seriously. Indeed, this solution obtains some confirmation since at the end of section ten Philo himself says that his objections are "mere cavils and sophisms."⁵

However this purported solution will not withstand much thought. First one would have to have a very low opinion of Hume to suppose that he would foist on the world a book, the substantive part of most of which contained nothing but cavils and sophisms. Secondly, it is difficult to suppose that Philo's restatement of the Argument is not heavily ironical. "A purpose, an intention, a design strikes everywhere the most careless, the most stupid thinker" (p.264), "...every fact must pass for undisputed, when it is supported by all the arguments which its nature admits of, even though these arguments be not very numerous or forcible: How

much more, in the present case, where no human imagination can compute their number, and no understanding estimate their cogency?" (p.266). This suggests that Hume did not mean us to take the restatement seriously. However, even if he did, the problem is not solved but its location merely transferred. For the version of the Argument Philo offers differs in no essential way from those he has already reduced to rubble. Nor is there a mention of his previous objections, nor a suggestion of what might be wrong with them. Hume's apparent *volte face* is not therefore eliminated but merely magnified. Hence it is not to be explained in this way. How then is it to be explained?

My suggestion is this. The bank of arguments Hume wishes to put against the Design Argument has not been exhausted by the end of section eight: he has saved the most damaging argument to the end. What it is we shall see if we follow through the dialectic of the argument in the first half of section twelve. We have seen that the section starts with a restatement of the Argument by Philo (pp.264-66). This is a shrewd tactical move by Hume. It is the opening gambit of a series of three moves which end in mate. The next move is as follows. The Argument from Design purports to show the existence of "a first intelligent Author" (p.265), "a supreme intelligence" (p.266). But Philo insists (pp.267-68) that by "intelligence" he means something not identical to, but only *analogous* with human intelligence. An appeal to piety is sufficient to secure this point:

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...that their causes have proportional analogy. But as there are also considerable differences, we have reason to suppose a proportional difference in the 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.⁶

The last move in the argument (pp.269-70) is the crucial one and also the one executed with the greatest ingenuity. For under the guise of attacking the atheist and showing that he has no leg to stand on, Philo gains assent to his final point: that any two things are analogous in some respects.⁷

I ask [the atheist]..., whether, from the coherence and apparent sympathy...of this 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. Having obtained this concession, I push him 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 oeconomy of human mind and thought. However reluctant, he must assent.⁸

Let us call this passage (A).

The game is over. The atheist seems to have lost, but a moment's thought shows that, on the contrary, it is the proponent of the Argument from Design who has lost! For the conclusion of the argument is that the designer of the universe bears some analogy to human intelligence. But any two things are analogous. Hence the ordering principle of the universe can be *absolutely anything*. In other words the content of the conclusion of the Argument from Design is absolutely zero. Thus Hume has shown that, even if the Argument from Design has some measure of validity (to make which hypothetical concession is the function of Philo's reinstatement of the Argument) its conclusion is absolutely worthless. In the second part of the section Philo goes on to show that it is morally worthless. This is but a corollary.

We can now sort out our original puzzle. Let us look again at Hume's concluding summary but this time with a passage, omitted last time, replaced.

...the whole of natural theology...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...⁹

Let us call this passage (B). Against the background of the argument just outlined, it is now clear that Hume's endorsement of the conclusion of the Argument from Design is an endorsement of nothing: God may be no more like human intelligence than a rotting turnip or absolutely anything else. This is what the passage I have italicized says. The solution of our puzzle is now clear: there is no *volte face* in Hume's conclusion. Passage (B) just records the conclusion of the final damning argument against the Argument from Design.

The issue now arises of whether my interpretation of the text is correct. In a sense it does not matter: the final argument that I have diagnosed in the text, is objectively there, whether or not Hume intended it to be. However this interpretation does give Hume's thought a certain coherence which it otherwise lacks, and I take this to be a strong argument in its favour. Moreover there is, it seems to me, an important piece of historical evidence in favour of my interpretation. The crux of my claim is that the italicized passage in (B) above refers back to the point about the ubiquity of analogy, i.e. passage (A). Now according to Kemp Smith¹⁰ the *Dialogues* were written in 1750-51. Some revisions were made before 1761 and two (and only two) revisions were made later in 1776. In fact, the paragraph containing passage (B) was one of those. What was the other? The paragraph containing paragraph (A). If the italicized passage in (B) does not refer back to the passage (A) this is an extraordinary coincidence. It would seem that Hume inserted the final argument into the text just before his death in 1776, making it his final argument.¹¹

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NOTES

1. This strikes me as pretty self-evident. However the case is made out by N. Kemp-Smith in part five of the introduction to his edition of Hume's *Dialogues* (Oxford University Press, 1935). Future page references are to the Kemp-Smith edition.

2. Indeed, it is no understatement to say that Hume's attack on the Argument is the most sustained and devastating ever to have been written.

3. *Op. cit.* p. 281. Italics in the original.

4. The problem is not, of course, a new one. As R. J. Butler puts it: "Most critics of the *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* have come away convinced that the work...is enigmatically inconsistent" (p. 73). "Natural Belief and the Enigma of Hume," *Archiv für Geschichte Philosophie* vol. 42, (1960), pp. 73-100.

5. *Op. cit.* p. 248.

6. *Ibid.* pp. 276-78.

7. This is a point which has come into some prominence this century in connection with the problem of induction. Goodman's "grue paradox" and some simple facts about curve fitting show that *anything* that happens is compatible with some regularity implicit in what has gone before, and hence that the future cannot fail to be similar to the past in some respect. Given any two objects, a respect in which they are similar can be produced in exactly the same way.

8. *Op. cit.*, pp. 269-70.

9. See fn. 3. Italics mine.

10. Appendix C of his edition.

11. I am greatly indebted to Selwyn Grave for his encouragement and his constructive criticism.