Introduction to Philosophy: Knowledge and Reality
Philosophy 100
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David Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* (1779)

Natural Religion seeks to derive certain truths about the nature of God using the same methods as in science and mathematics. The point of the *Dialogues* is to show the bounds of reason in debates concerning religion and theology. In particular, Hume, through the character of Philo, aims to show that we have no grounds for accepting *a prior* and *a posteriori* arguments for the existence and nature of God.

I. The Argument from Design

The bulk of the *Dialogues* is centered around the "Argument from Design" as espoused by Cleanthes:

> 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 designs, 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. (p. 93b-94a, emphasis added)

Philo's main counter-argument involves showing that the principle to which one appeals in this *argument from analogy* – namely, *like effects prove like causes* (p. 94a) – is insufficient to allow one to prove all that Cleanthes wishes to prove and, further, leads one to all sorts of absurdities.

The main complaint:

> The exact similarity of the cases gives us a perfect assurance of a similar event; and a stronger evidence is never desired nor sought after. But wherever you depart, in the least, from the similarity of the cases, you diminish proportionably

> the evidence; and may at last bring it to a very weak ***analogy,*** which is confessedly liable to error and uncertainty. (p. 94a)

How similar are the cases, then? According to Cleanthes, the world resembles a house or a machine, and we are justified in concluding that there is an intelligent designer, because every designed thing we have seen has had a designer. But Philo raises a series of objections:

(1) Although we have seen cases of individual artefacts, we have no experience of the creation of worlds. Therefore, we are not justified in making the inference that Cleanthes wishes us to make. (p. 97a)
(2) If the analogical principle is true, then we are justified in inferring that the cause of the world is similar to the cause of artefacts. But, since the world, as we observe it, is finite, then the cause of the universe must be finite. (p. 104a-b)
(3) Similarly, since we observe imperfections in nature, we have no reason to believe that the cause of the world is perfect. (p. 104b)
(4) In fact, perhaps many worlds have been "botched and bungled." (p. 104b)
(5) Again, given the principle of analogy, we have no reason to infer the unity of God – for the world could have been the product of several deities. (p. 105b)
(6) And we are likewise justified in inferring that the Deity or Deities are corporeal. (p. 105b)
(7) Perhaps the world is "only the first rude essay of some infant Deity, who afterwards abandoned it, ashamed of his lame performance." (p. 105b)
(8) Perhaps the world is the product of some other inferior Deity. (p. 105b)
(9) Perhaps the world is the product of "old age and dotage in some superannuated Deity." (p. 105b)
(10) Perhaps the world does not resemble a machine but an animal or a vegetable (i.e. something living). (Parts VI and VII)

According to Philo, Cleanthes and his ilk make the following illegitimate moves: (a) they observe how the world is, (b) make the inference to a creator, (c) endow that creator with all sorts of properties *that really aren't justified by the observations and analogical principle*, and (d) make additional claims about how the world must be. For example:

(b) God exists → ? (c) God's Essence

↑ ↓

(a) The Way the World Is (d) The Way the World Is (or Must Be) Good, Perfect, Etc.

Philo's point is that we make the inference to the existence of God, stuff God's nature full of qualities like perfection, benevolence and so on, and then make claims about how the world must be ordered for the good. But we really have no evidence for this at all.

II. Against *A Priori* Arguments

Since the *a posteriori* argument that Cleanthes proposes fails, Demea resorts to an *a priori* argument: that there must be a necessary being that is the first cause of the world. This argument is critiqued by Cleanthes, who claims that "there is an evident absurdity in pretending to demonstrate a matter of fact, or to prove it by any arguments *a priori*." According to Cleanthes, "There is no Being … whose non-existence implies a contradiction." And, Cleanthes asks: "why may not the material universe be the necessarily existent Being…?" (p. 110b)

III. The Problem of Evil

Hume also raises the traditional problem of evil in the *Dialogues* – but ties it first to the issue of the attributes of God as understood by "anthropomorphites":

> And is it possible, Cleanthes, said Philo, that after all these reflections, and infinitely more, which might be suggested, you can still persevere in your Anthropomorphism, and assert the moral attributes of the Deity, his justice, benevolence, mercy, and rectitude, to be of the same nature with these virtues in human creatures? His power we allow is infinite: whatever he wills is executed: but neither man nor any other animal is happy: therefore he does not will their happiness. His wisdom is infinite: he is never mistaken in choosing the means to any end: but the course of Nature tends not to human or animal felicity: therefore it is not established for that purpose. Through the whole compass of human knowledge, there are no inferences more certain and infallible than these. In what respect, then, do his benevolence and mercy resemble the benevolence and mercy of men? (p. 114a-b)

Hume goes on to say in Part X:

> Why is there any misery at all in the world? Not by chance surely. From some cause then. Is it from the intention of the Deity? But he is perfectly benevolent. Is it contrary to his intention? But he is almighty. Nothing can shake the solidity of this reasoning, so short, so clear, so decisive; except we assert, that these subjects exceed all human capacity, and that our common measures of truth and falsehood are not applicable to them; a topic which I have all along insisted on, but which you have, from the beginning, rejected with scorn and indignation. (p. 116a)

In Part XI, Hume goes on to ask whether, given an omnipotent, omniscient, and benevolent Deity, we would expect *beforehand* the world to look as it does. Since it doesn't, we're justified in being skeptical of the claims of the theist.

> There may *four* hypotheses be framed concerning the first causes of the universe: *that* they are endowed with perfect goodness; *that* they have perfect malice; *that* they are opposite, and have both goodness and malice; *that* they have neither goodness nor malice. Mixed phenomena can never prove the two former

> unmixed principles; and the uniformity and steadiness of general laws seem to oppose the third. The fourth, therefore, seems by far the most probable. (p. 121a)

In other words, there was no principle of goodness per se involved in the genesis of the world – which is to say, there was no God.

Evolution vs. Design

Charles Darwin says in the final chapter of the *Origin of Species* (1859), "this whole volume is one long argument." But how exactly does the argument work? Below is one reconstruction:

(1) Individual members of species have traits that vary.
(2) There is an exponential rate of growth (reproduction) among species.
(3) Given limited resources, predation, disease, and so on, there will be a constant state of competition among individual members of species.
(4) Some individuals may have traits that are advantageous – i.e., that allow the individuals to gather food better, survive disease, escape predators.
(5) These individuals have a better chance to survive, reproduce, and leave offspring. (They will be objects of "natural selection.")
(6) Traits are heritable.
(7) Favorable traits will tend to be passed down at a greater frequency than other traits.
(8) Over time, this will cause the character of species to change.
(9) Given enough time, descendants from an original ancestor species will differ enough that they can be considered different species. Moreover, there are forces at work that would eliminate intermediate varieties.

Note: there is nothing here that cannot be investigated and confirmed empirically. In fact, every step of this argument *has* been confirmed.

Note, too: Darwin's argument is meant to show the origin of *species*, not the origin of *life*. But in showing that species are, indeed, mutable, Darwin refutes the thesis held by many religious men and women that species are *immutable.*

(The following from Eliot Sober, *The Philosophy of Biology*)

Part of Darwin's argument is also that the Theory of Evolution explains the phenomena better than any other theory, that it accounts for things that other theories cannot, that it accounts for all of the descent of living organisms using the same naturalistic framework. Darwin is *not* saying that things *must* have happened this way – simply that it is the best explanation of the phenomena. In the philosophy of science, an "Inference to the Best Explanation" depends upon the "Likelihood Principle." Suppose there is a statement known to be true by observation. Call this O. Suppose there are two hypotheses H_1 and H_2 that purport to explain why O is true. The Likelihood Principle runs as follows:

> O strongly favors H_1 over H_2 if and only if H_1 assigns to O a probability that is much bigger than the probability that H_2 assigns to O.

Or, as it would be expressed in probability theory:

O strongly favors H_1 over H_2 if and only if $P(O \mid H_1) >> P(O \mid H_2)$

In other words, Darwin is suggesting that the hypothesis of evolution by natural selection is a much more probable explanation of the phenomena than its rival: creationism (and/or intelligent design).

Is this true? Consider the following cases:

> O_1: Living things are complex and well-suited for survival and reproduction.
> $H_{evolution}$: Species evolved from common ancestors by the process of natural selection.
> H_{design}: Species were separately created by an intelligent and omnipotent God...

One *could* argue that evolution does not explain O_1 any better than does the design thesis. But what about a different observation:

> O_2: Organisms are *imperfectly* adapted to their environments.

The standard design hypothesis is that "species were separately created by an intelligent and omnipotent God who wanted to make organisms perfectly adapted to their environments."

As this is the case, we must conclude that $P(O_2 \mid H_{evolution}) >> P(O_2 \mid H_{design})$

Now, we could adopt another hypothesis:

> $H_{Trickster\ God}$: Species were separately created by a God who made them look just the way they would have if they had evolved from common ancestors by the process of natural selection.

In this case, $P(O_2 \mid H_{evolution}) = P(O_2 \mid H_{Trickster\ God})$.

I leave it to you to consider if the "Trickster God" Hypothesis is one we should want.