

## WHO IS THE REAL HUME IN THE DIALOGUES ?

The *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* has three participants, Cleanthes, Philo and Demea with Pamphilus as narrator, who comments on the 'careless scepticism of Philo', 'the accurate philosophical turn of Cleanthes', and 'the rigid inflexible orthodoxy of Demea'. This comment of Pamphilus, coupled with his personal review of the whole conversation 'that Philo's principles are more probable than Demea's; but that those of Cleanthes approach still nearer the truth', has led some to believe that Cleanthes represents the personal views of Hume in the *Dialogues*. I wish to argue that it is Philo who has the highest claim to representing Hume.

### *Claims of Demea*

Of all the participants, Demea is farthest from the real Hume. Demea represents the rationalist approach to religion and is in favour of an a priori argument to God as a necessary existence. Demea is surprised by Cleanthes' argument from design which proceeds from an empirical basis, and retorts: "What? No demonstration of the being of a God! No abstract arguments! No proofs a priori! Are these, which have hitherto been so much insisted on by philosophers, all fallacy, all sophism? Can we reach no further in this subject than experience and probability?"<sup>1</sup> Demea later (Part ix) states his argument which proceeds as: Whatever exists must have a cause or reason of its existence. In proceeding from effects to causes we have two alternatives: either to accept an infinite series of causes and effects or to have recourse to some 'ultimate cause that is necessarily existent'. The first supposition is considered by Demea to be absurd. It is therefore concluded that there is an ultimate cause, the Deity, who is necessarily existent.

It is obvious that with an argument such as this, Demea can hardly claim to represent Hume. For given Hume's principles, the argument falls to the ground. Hume took care of the Demean approach in the *Treatise* where he re-

pudiated the truth of Demea's premise 'whatever exists must have a cause or reason of existence'.<sup>2</sup> For Hume, the idea of cause is distinct, and therefore separable, from that of the effect, so that there cannot be any demonstration that nothing is without a cause. The necessity of any cause cannot therefore be demonstrated, this demonstration being dependent on the previous one. Furthermore the refutation of the argument by Cleanthes is distinctively Humean.<sup>3</sup> "I shall begin with observing", Cleanthes says, "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..'"\*

#### *Claims of Cleanthes*

Cleanthes' claims to representing Hume are without doubt better than Demea's, but not as good as Philo's. Cleanthes produces what is historically known as the argument from design to prove God's benevolence, wisdom, goodness etc., and argues from principles consistent in a large measure with Hume's. Yet he (Cleanthes) does not represent, as I shall try to show, Hume whose position is quite different from Cleanthes'.

Cleanthes, as we have just noted, has some common ground with Philo which each can employ against Demea with the other's complete assent. This is why it did not matter whether Philo or Cleanthes refuted Demea, provided the refutation was acceptable to both. When the *Dialogues* open we find Philo pointing out the benefits and advantages of pursuing principles of scepticism in the sciences as well as in theology. The scepticism Philo is speaking about is not Pyrrhonic scepticism but limited scepticism which does not

\* This should not lead us to think that Cleanthes is Hume, some of whose principles Cleanthes shares with Philo.

recommended universal doubt and suspension of all judgment but only demands that we become 'sensible of the weakness, blindness and narrow limits of human reason' and proportion our assent to the precise degree of evidence. Cleanthes has no objection to following these principles in theology. Indeed both Cleanthes and Philo agree that experience and inferences based upon experience are the sole basis of justified belief. Both are so far following Hume in his views. But there is a big difference between Cleanthes and Philo. Cleanthes believes, as Philo does not, that by the exercise of natural faculties of our sense and understanding we can know or infer the attributes of God. "Our ideas", Philo maintains, "reach no farther than our experience. We have no experience of divine attributes and operations. I need not conclude my syllogism, you can draw the inference yourself".<sup>4</sup> The latter, as I hope to show, represents Hume more truly than the former.

If Cleanthes is Hume, then Hume becomes convicted of a belief in a benevolent, wise and good God. But in view of his considered philosophical position, his opposition to basing morality on religion, his assault on revealed religion in 'Of Miracles' and on the Christian religion in his *Natural History of Religion*, and biographical evidences which point towards an absence of any theistic belief, the above interpretation appears to be highly gratuitous. Hume may not have been a dogmatic atheist, denying with a priori certainty the existence of any God, but he was by all accounts an atheist certainly by Christian standards. Boswell, who held an interview with Hume just before he died, reports: "He (Hume) said he never had entertained any belief in Religion since he began to read Locke and Clarke".<sup>5</sup> Mossner's comment on this interview is that "although Hume had been amusing himself somewhat at Boswell's expense, there is no reason to suspect that he had been telling the strict truth about his own beliefs".<sup>6</sup> Mossner also identifies the 'sceptic' in "Of a Particular Providence and of a Future State" (Sec. XI, *Enquiry*) as "surely Hume

himself".<sup>7</sup> This is very significant, for the argument, also presented in the form of a dialogue between a fellow Athenian and Epicurus, the sceptic who mounts an attack on the argument from design, is the precursor of the Dialogues, not only in form but in content too. Mossner's interpretation appears to me to be absolutely right, being most consistent with Hume's avowed philosophical position.

The fact that Hume had many liberal minded clergymen of Edinburgh as his friends has given rise to some speculation as to his possible theistic leanings. This friendship was possible, not because of religious beliefs shared in common, but, as Carlyle, who used to share this company, explains, because of the fact that "they (the clergymen) best understood his notions and could furnish him with literary conversation".<sup>8</sup> In view of Hume's extremely sociable and amicable nature and his sophisticated literary tastes, such friendship seems quite natural. Hume was a philosopher, but amidst all his philosophy, he was a man too.

If Hume had wanted Cleanthes to represent his personal views, he would not have left Philo's objections to Cleanthes' position unanswered. Pamphilus' favourable review at the conclusion of the conversation fails to replace this requirement. For in the absence of a solid defence of Cleanthes' position, any review, however favourable to Cleanthes, becomes vacuous, particularly when the review is done by one under the tutelage of Cleanthes. When confronted with Philo's serious objection that if it be granted that the cause of the universe is a mind, then a further cause of this mind is also required, Cleanthes fails to provide a fitting answer to the objection but makes an irrelevant remark: "The whole chorus of nature raises one hymn to the praises of its creator. . . . You ask me what is the cause of this cause? I know not; I care not; this concerns not me. I have found a Deity; and here I stop my inquiry". I cannot imagine how such a character possibly can represent so thorough consistent and critical philosopher as Hume.

### *Philo's Claims*

If any of the characters in the *Dialogues* is representing Hume, it is Philo who can put forward some legitimate claim. For it is he who alone argues consistently from Humean principles and beliefs. Philo's philosophical scepticism is precisely Hume's, the principles of which he employs against both Cleanthes and Demea. Tactically, Philo has a superior position to those of Demea and Cleanthes. Philo argues with Cleanthes against Demea and against Cleanthes with Demea. This would not be possible without some measure of common ground with Cleanthes and Demea. We have noted the common principles Philo shares with Cleanthes. Supposing Philo represents Hume, it seems strange that Philo has any common ground with Demea who has Malebranche on his side.

Philo, however, sides with Demea while at the same time subverting his position, subtly though. Philo's alliance with Demea does not detract from his philosophical scepticism, but gives him an ally in his assault on the position of Cleanthes. Philo subverts Demea's position while appearing to be conformable to it, but Demea fails to appreciate the full measure of Philo's assault. Thus when Demea has quoted Malebranche in his favour, Philo replies: After so great an authority, Demea, . . . . as that which you have produced, and a thousand more, which you might produce, it would appear *ridiculous* in me. . . . to express my approbation of your doctrine".<sup>9</sup> Philo deserves to be taken seriously and literally here. It would indeed be ridiculous for a philosophical sceptic like Philo to express appreciation of Malebranche. Philo then goes on to subvert the argument very subtly, without Demea's realizing it. For reasonable people. Philo argues, the question is not about the being but only the nature of the Deity. "The former truth, as you well observe, is unquestionable and self-evident. Nothing exists without a cause; and the original cause of this universe (whatever it be) we call God; and piously ascribe to him every species of perfection".<sup>10</sup> Philo appears to concede this to Demea but immediately subverts what he concedes. "But as all perfection is entirely relative",



Philo continues, "we ought never to imagine, that we comprehend the attributes of this divine Being, or to suppose, that his perfections have any analogy or likeness to the perfections of a human creature. Wisdom, thought, design, knowledge; these we justly ascribe to him". Why justly? Not because the Deity possesses those attributes but "because these words are honourable among man, and we have no other language or other conceptions by which we can express our adoration of him. But let us beware, lest we think, that our ideas anywise correspond to his perfections, or that his attributes have any resemblance to these qualities among men. He is infinitely superior to our limited view and comprehension; and is *more the object of worship in the temple, than of disputation in the schools*" [11, Italics mine].

But what does all this amount to? Philo has reduced the attributes of God to our subjective ascriptions without any basis in experience. For Philo, for whom ideas reach no farther than experience, this means that there is no rational basis for any belief in God. He therefore relegates God to the temple as an object of faith. Demea, who agrees with Philo in denying experience to be any basis for inference concerning the Deity, is satisfied with Philo's apparent declaration of faith and fails to work out the implication of Philo's assertion from principles of his philosophical scepticism. But faith for Philo, as for Hume, is a synonym for superstition. In the concluding paragraph of Sec. X of the *Enquiry* Hume writes:

"We may conclude, that the Christian religion not only was at first attended with miracles, but even at this day cannot be believed by any reasonable person without one. Mere reason is insufficient to convince us of its veracity; and whoever is moved by faith to assent to it, is conscious of a continued miracle in his own person, which subverts all the principles of his understanding, and gives him a determination to believe what is most contrary to custom and experience."

So faith, for Hume, is compatible with what is contrary to reason, experience and custom. So it is for Philo

too, although there are passages where Philo seems to speak in favour of faith and final causes, but, as N. K. Smith shows,<sup>12</sup> Philo has also taken care to subvert such admissions. Here we find a contrast to Kant who really tried to find a way to God through faith after being convinced of the futility of the rational approach to God. When Hume or Philo speaks of faith, he does not mean to, like Kant, take faith as a way to God. Neither Philo nor Hume dogmatically asserts with a priori certainty that God does not exist. Philo characterizes, to the glee of Demea, God as 'incomprehensible' and in so doing represents the personal views of Hume who says :

"The whole is a riddle, an enigma, an inexplicable mystery. Doubt, uncertainty, suspense of judgment appear the only result of our most accurate scrutiny, concerning this subject. But such is the frailty of human reason, and such the irresistible contagion of opinion, that even this deliberate doubt could scarcely be upheld; did we not enlarge our view, and opposing one species of superstition to another, set them aquarrelling; while we ourselves, during their fury and contention, happily make our escape into the calm, though obscure, regions of philosophy".<sup>13</sup>

It seems to me that Philo represents Hume not merely by virtue of his philosophical position and belief, but by virtue of technique as well. This method of subtle subversion of an argument without being too noisy about it is characteristic of Hume. Hume does not start with rejecting ideas prevalent in common philosophical parlance. On the contrary, he creates the false impression of being conformable to them and when the reader has accepted his *bona-fides*; he gradually subverts the ideas he wants to. Hume in this respect presents a contrast to Descartes who starts with doubting only to bring back what he previously doubted. Philo represents Hume so completely that he has emulated Hume's method of subtly subverting an argument.

A word about the claims of Pamphilus, whose appreciation of Cleanthes shows that he endorses the position of

Cleanthes. The claims of Pamphilus therefore collapse with those of Cleanthes.

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#### NOTES

1. *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* (ed. N. K. Smith), p. 143.
2. *Treatise of Human Nature* (ed. Selby-Bigge), pp. 79-80.
3. *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* (ed. N. K. Smith), p. 189.
4. *Ibid.*, pp. 142-143.
5. E. C. Mossner. *The Life of David Hume*, p. 597.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 598.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 288.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 274.
9. *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* (ed. N. K. Smith), p. 142.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 142.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 142.
12. *Ibid.*, pp. 69-70.
13. *The Philosophical Works of David Hume*, Vol. 4 (ed. Green and Grose), p. 363.