

Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion

David Hume

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[Brackets] enclose editorial explanations. Small ·dots· enclose material that has been added, but can be read as though it were part of the original text. Occasional •bullets, and also indenting of passages that are not quotations, are meant as aids to grasping the structure of a sentence or a thought. Every four-point ellipsis indicates the omission of a brief passage that seems to present more difficulty than it is worth. Longer omissions are reported with square brackets in normal-sized type.

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Part 2

I must admit, Cleanthes, said **Demea**, that nothing could surprise me more than the light in which you have all along put this argument. By the whole trend and tone of your remarks, one would think you were maintaining *the existence of a God* against the objections of atheists and infidels; and that you felt a need to stand up for that fundamental principle of all religion. But I hope there is no question here about the existence of a God. I am sure that no man—or anyway no man of common sense—ever had a serious doubt regarding such a certain and self-evident truth. The question is not about the *existence* but about the *nature* of God. Because of the infirmities of human understanding, I contend, the nature of God is entirely incomprehensible and unknown to us. The •essence of that supreme mind, •his attributes, •his way of existing, •his way of lasting through time—all these are mysterious to men, as is everything else concerning such a divine being. Finite, weak, and blind creatures such as we are ought to humble ourselves in his august presence; and, conscious of our frailties, stand in silent wonder at his infinite perfections, which eye has not seen, ear has not heard, neither has it entered into the heart of man to conceive. They are hidden from human curiosity by a deep cloud. It is insulting to God to try to penetrate these sacred obscurities. The audacity of prying into God's nature and essence, his decrees and attributes, is second only to the impiety of denying his existence.

Lest you should think that my piety has here overpowered my philosophy, I shall support my opinion—if it needs any support—by a very great authority. I could cite •in my support• almost any writer since the foundation of Christianity who has ever treated this or any other theological subject;

but for now I shall confine myself to just one, who is equally famous for piety and philosophy. It is Father Malebranche, whom I remember as expressing himself thus:

One ought to call God a spirit not so much to express positively what he *is* as to signify that he *is not* matter. He is an infinitely perfect being; this we cannot doubt. But just as we oughtn't to imagine, even supposing him corporeal, that he has a human body (as the anthropomorphites asserted, on the grounds that the human shape is the most perfect of any), so we oughtn't to imagine that the spirit of God has human ideas, or bears any resemblance to our spirit, on the grounds that we know nothing more perfect than a human mind. We ought rather to believe that just as he includes within himself the perfections of matter without being material, he includes within himself also the perfections of created spirits without being spirit according to our conception of spirit. We ought to believe that his true name is *He that is*, or in other words *Being without restriction, All being, the being infinite and universal*.

After so great an authority as that, Demea, replied **Philo**, and a thousand more that you could produce, it would appear ridiculous in me to add my own view or express my approval of your doctrine. But, surely, when reasonable men discuss these subjects their topic is never the existence of God but only his nature. That he exists is, as you well observe, unquestionable and self-evident. Nothing exists without a cause; and the original cause of this universe (whatever it may be) we call 'God', and piously ascribe to him every kind of perfection. Whoever questions this fundamental truth

deserves every punishment that philosophers can inflict on one another, namely, the greatest ridicule, contempt, and disapproval. But all perfection is entirely relative, so we ought never to imagine that we understand the attributes of this divine being, or to suppose that *his* perfections are in any way analogous or similar to the perfections of a human creature. Wisdom, thought, design, knowledge—it is proper for us to ascribe these to him, because those words are honourable among men, and we have no other language or other conceptions by which to express our wonder at his glory. But let us be careful *not* to think that our ideas of wisdom, thought, etc. in any way correspond to his perfections, or that his attributes have any resemblance to these qualities of men. He is infinitely superior to our restricted view and limited understanding, and is more the object of worship in the temple than of debate in the schools.

In reality, Cleanthes, he went on, we can arrive at this position without help from the pretend-scepticism that you so dislike. Here is how:

Our ideas reach no further than our experience.

We have no experience of divine attributes and operations.

I needn't conclude my syllogism: you can draw the inference yourself. And it is a pleasure to me (and I hope to you too) that valid reasoning and sound piety here work together to the same conclusion, and both of them establish the wondrously mysterious and incomprehensible nature of the supreme being.

I shan't beat about the bush, said **Cleanthes**, addressing himself to Demea. Still less shall I reply to Philo's pious speeches. What I shall do is to explain briefly how I conceive this matter. Look round the world, contemplating the whole thing and every part of it; you'll find that it is nothing but one big machine subdivided into an infinite number

of smaller ones, which in their turn could be subdivided 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 so precisely that everyone who has ever contemplated them is filled with wonder. The intricate fitting of means to ends throughout all nature is just like (though more wonderful than) the fitting of means to ends in things that have been produced by us—products of human designs, thought, wisdom, and intelligence. Since the effects resemble each other, we are led to infer by all the rules of analogy that the causes are also alike, and that the author of nature is somewhat similar to the mind of man, though he has much larger faculties to go with the grandeur of the work he has carried out. By this argument *a posteriori*, and by this argument alone, do we prove both that there is a God and that he resembles human mind and intelligence.

I have to tell you, Cleanthes, said **Demea**, that from the beginning, I could not approve of your conclusion about the similarity of God to men; still less can I approve of your ways of trying to establish it. What! No demonstration that God exists! No abstract arguments! No *a priori* proofs! [An *a priori* argument is one that proceeds by sheer thinking, making no use of contingent facts about what the world is like. An argument that *does* appeal to such facts is called *a posteriori*, which is what Cleanthes says that his argument is.] What about the ones that have in the past been so much insisted on by philosophers—are they all fallacious, all mere tricks? Do *experience* and *probability* mark the limit to how far we can go in this subject? I won't say that this is betraying the cause of a God; but, surely, by this show of even-handedness you provide atheists with advantages that they could never have obtained purely through argument and reasoning.

My main reservation about what Cleanthes has said, **Philo** remarked, is not so much that he bases all religious arguments on experience as that his arguments seem not to be the most certain and unbreakable even of that inferior ·experience-based· kind. That a stone will fall, that fire will burn, that the earth has solidity, we have observed thousands of times; and when any new instance of this sort is presented we don't hesitate to draw the usual conclusion—·this stone will fall, this fire will burn, the earth that I am about to put my right foot on is solid·. The exact similarity of the cases gives us a perfect assurance of a similar outcome; and we never want or look for stronger evidence than that. But the evidence is less strong when the cases are less than perfectly alike; *any* reduction in similarity, however tiny, brings a *corresponding* reduction in the strength of the evidence; and as we move down that scale we may eventually reach a very weak analogy, ·leading to a conclusion· that is confessedly liable to error and uncertainty. After having observed •the circulation of the blood in human creatures, we have no doubt that •it circulates in Titius and Maevius. But from •its circulation in frogs and fishes it is only a presumption—though a strong one, from analogy—that •blood circulates in men and other animals. The analogical reasoning is even weaker when we infer •the circulation of the sap in plants from our experience that •the blood circulates in animals; and those who hastily followed that imperfect analogy between plants and animals have been found by more accurate experiments to have been mistaken.

If we see a house, Cleanthes, we conclude with the greatest certainty that it had an architect or builder; because this is precisely the kind of effect that we have experienced as coming from that kind of cause. But surely you won't say •that the universe is so like a house that we can with the

same certainty infer a similar cause, or •that the analogy is here entire and perfect. The unlikeness in this case is so striking that the most you can offer ·on the basis of it· is a guess, a conjecture, a presumption about a similar cause; and I leave it to you to consider how *that* offering will be received in the world!

If I granted that the proofs of the existence of a God amount to no more than a guess or conjecture, replied **Cleanthes**, that wouldn't be well received, and I would deservedly be blamed and detested. But is it such a slight resemblance between how means are fitted to ends in a house and how they are fitted in the universe? The way things are fitted to their purposes? The order, proportion, and arrangement of every part? Steps of a staircase are plainly designed so that human legs can use them in climbing; and this inference ·from how the steps can be used to their purpose· is certain and infallible. Human legs are also designed for walking and climbing; and this inference ·from how legs can be used to *their* purpose·, I admit, is not quite so certain, because of the dissimilarity you have pointed out; but does that downgrade it to mere presumption or conjecture?

Good God! exclaimed **Demea**, interrupting him, what have we come to? Earnest defenders of religion admitting that the proofs of a God fall short of being perfectly evident! And you, Philo, whose help I depended on in proving the worshipful mysteriousness of God's nature—do you assent to all these extreme opinions of Cleanthes? For how else can I describe them? And why should I tone down my criticism when such principles are advanced, supported by such an authority ·as Cleanthes·, in the presence of such a young man as Pamphilus?

You seem not to grasp, replied **Philo**, that I argue with Cleanthes in his own way: I hope that by showing him the dangerous consequences of his views I shall finally bring him

to share *our* opinion. But what bothers you most, I notice, is Cleanthes' account of the argument *a posteriori*. You find that that argument—in his version of it—is likely to slip out of your grasp and vanish into thin air; you think Cleanthes has so disguised it that you can hardly believe he has presented it properly. Now, however much I may disagree in other ways with the dangerous principles of Cleanthes, I must admit that he has fairly presented that argument; and I shall try to set it out for you in such a way that you will no longer view it with suspicion.

If a man were to set aside everything he knows or has seen, he would be entirely unable to work out, merely from his own ideas, what the universe must be like, or to think one state of affairs to be more likely than another. Nothing that he clearly conceives could be thought to be impossible or to imply a contradiction, so every fanciful story his imagination comes up with would be on an equal footing with every other; and he could give no valid reason for sticking to one idea or system and rejecting the others that are equally possible.

Next step in the argument: after he opens his eyes and sees the world as it really is, he can't at first tell what the cause was of any one event, much less of the totality of things or of the universe. He might start his imagination rambling, and it might bring in to him an infinite variety of reports and stories. These would all be *possible*, but because they would all be *equally possible* he could never from his own resources explain satisfactorily why he prefers one of them to the rest. Experience alone can point out to him the true cause of anything that happens.

Now, Demea, this method of reasoning leads to something that Cleanthes himself has tacitly admitted, namely: order, arrangement, or the suitability of things for various purposes (like the suitability of legs for walking) is not of itself any proof that a designer has been at work, except in cases where

experience has shown us that such order, arrangement, etc. is due to a designer. For all we can know *a priori*, matter may have a source of order within it, just as mind does, having it inherently, basically, not acquired from somewhere else. [The interpolation in this next bit is longer than most. To make it easier to recognize, it is flagged by *asterisks rather than small dots.] When a number of elements come together in an exquisite arrangement, *you may think it harder to conceive that

- they do this of their own accord than to conceive that
- some designer put them into that arrangement. But that is too quick and careless. Think about what is involved in a designer's arranging them: it means that he creates the arrangement in his mind, assembling in the appropriate way the *ideas* of the elements in question. But, then, how does *that* happen? I put it to you*, it is no harder to conceive that

- the elements are caused to come together into this arrangement by some unknown cause that is internal to them,

than it is to conceive that

- the ideas of these elements come together in that arrangement in the great universal mind, being caused to do so by a similarly unknown cause that is internal to that mind.

These two suppositions are agreed to be equally possible; but according to Cleanthes experience shows us a difference between them. Throw several pieces of steel together, without shape or form: they will never arrange themselves so as to compose a watch. Stone, and mortar, and wood, without an architect, never erect a house. But we see that the ideas in a human mind arrange themselves so as to form *the plan of* a watch or house, though we haven't the faintest notion of *how* they do this. So experience shows that minds—and not matter—have a built-in principle of order. From similar effects we infer similar causes. The way means are fitted to

ends in the universe at large is like the way means are fitted to ends in a machine designed by a human being. The cause of the machine, therefore, must be similar to the cause of the universe.

I was, I admit, shocked by this assertion of a resemblance between God and human creatures. I can't help seeing it as implying such a *lowering* of the supreme being that no right-thinking Theist could put up with it. With your assistance, therefore, Demea, I shall try to defend what you justly call the worshipful mysteriousness of God's nature, and shall refute this reasoning of Cleanthes, provided he agrees that I have presented it fairly.

When Cleanthes had agreed to this, Philo, after a short pause, proceeded in the following manner.

In the meantime I shan't disagree much with your theses •that all inferences concerning matters of fact are based on experience, and •that all experimental reasoning is based on the supposition that similar causes prove similar effects, and similar effects prove similar causes. But please notice how extremely cautious good thinkers are in transferring a discovered result to a similar case. These thinkers are not perfectly confident in applying their past observation to some other particular phenomenon, unless the •old and new• cases are *exactly* similar. Every alteration in the circumstances •of the cause• raises a doubt about the outcome; and it requires new experiments to prove for sure that the new circumstances have no causal significance. A change in size, position, arrangement, age, disposition of the air or of surrounding bodies—any of these may bring with it the most unexpected consequences. Unless the objects are quite familiar to us, it is much too bold to expect confidently that when a cause has been found to have a certain effect another cause, differing from the earlier one in one of these ways, will have the same effect. The slow and deliberate

steps of scientists, here if anywhere, are in contrast with the precipitate march of common men who, hurried along by the smallest similarity, are incapable of pondering or making distinctions.

•Which group, Cleanthes, have you just shown yourself to belong to?• You are usually cool and philosophical in these matters, but has your usual attitude been preserved in the *stride* you have taken in likening •the universe to •houses, ships, furniture, and machines, inferring from their similarity in some respects a similarity in their causes? Thought, design, intelligence, such as we discover in men and other animals, is just one of the springs and forces of the universe, along with heat and cold, attraction and repulsion, and a hundred others that we observe daily. It is an active cause through which (we find) certain particular *parts* of nature produce alterations in other *parts*. But can it be proper to argue from *parts* to the *whole*? Doesn't the great disproportion •between part and whole• bar all comparison and inference? From observing the growth of a hair, can we learn anything about how men come into being? Would the way a leaf blows—even if we knew this perfectly—teach us anything about how a tree grows?

Anyway, even if we do take the operations of one *part* of nature on another as our basis for a judgment about the origin of the *whole* (which is something we should never do), why would we select as our basis such a tiny, weak, limited cause as the reason and design of animals on this planet seems to be? This little agitation of the brain that we call 'thought'—what special privilege does *it* have that entitles it to serve as the model of the whole universe? It looms large for *us* because *we* are always in the presence of it; but sound philosophy ought carefully to guard against this kind of natural illusion.

So far from admitting, continued **Philo**, that the operations of a part entitle us to draw any conclusion about the origin of the whole, I won't even allow any one part to justify conclusions about another part, if the two are very unlike one another. Is there any reasonable ground to conclude that the inhabitants of other planets have thought, intelligence, reason, or anything similar to these faculties that men have? When nature has operated in such a wide variety of ways on this small planet, can we think that she incessantly copies herself throughout the rest of this immense universe? Also, it seems likely enough that *thought* occurs only in this narrow corner, and even here its sphere of action is very limited—namely, to affecting the movements of the bodies of some animals. So what can justify taking thought to be the original cause of everything? Such a jump is worse than that of a peasant whose idea of the government of kingdoms is based on how he runs his own household!

But even if we were perfectly sure that thought and reason similar to ours is to be found throughout the whole universe, and even if its activity elsewhere in the universe is vastly greater in scope and more powerful than it appears to be on this planet, *still* I cannot see that the operations of a world that is fully constituted, arranged and adjusted can properly be extended to a world that is in its embryo state, and is still moving towards that finished constitution and arrangement. By observation we know a certain amount about how a finished animal moves, is nourished, stays alive; but we should be cautious about transferring that knowledge speculatively to the growth of a foetus in the womb, and still more to the formation of an animalcule in the testes of its male parent. [*'animalcule' = 'tiny animal'*. It was commonly thought that the animal is formed in miniature in the father's body, the mother's contribution being merely to provide it with somewhere to grow.] Even our limited experience shows us that

nature has an infinite number of causes and principles which incessantly reveal themselves as circumstances change. It would be absurdly rash of us to claim to know what new and unknown principles would be at work in such a new and unknown situation as that of the formation of a universe.

A very small part of this great system of the universe, during a very short time, is very imperfectly revealed to us, Do we then pronounce confidently about the origin of the whole?

Admirable conclusion! At this time on this little planet stone, wood, brick, iron, brass are not ordered or arranged except through human artifice and contrivance; therefore the universe couldn't originally attain its order and arrangement without something similar to human artifice. But is one part of nature a rule for another part that is very different from it? Is it a rule for the whole? Is a very small part a rule for the universe? Is nature in one situation a certain rule for nature in another situation vastly different from the former? Is nature at work in our considerably developed universe a certain rule for nature at work in *starting* a universe?

And can you blame me, Cleanthes, if I here imitate the wise caution of Simonides? According to the famous story, Hiero asked him 'What is God?', and Simonides asked for a day to think about it, and then two days more; and in that way he continually prolonged his time for thinking about it, without ever producing a definition or description. Could you even blame me if I answered straight off that I didn't know what God is, and was aware that this subject lies vastly beyond the reach of my faculties? You might cry 'Sceptic!' and 'Tease!' as much as you pleased; but having found the imperfections and even contradictions of human reason when it is exercised on so many other subjects that are much more familiar than this one, I would never expect any success from reason's feeble conjectures concerning a

subject that is so elevated and so remote from the sphere of our observation. When two *sorts of* objects have always been observed to be conjoined together, custom leads me to infer the existence of ·an object of· one ·sort· wherever I see the existence of ·an object of· the other ·sort·; and I call this an argument from experience. But it is hard to see how this ·pattern of· argument can be appropriate in our present case, where the objects ·we are considering don't fall into *sorts*, but· are single, individual, without parallel or specific resemblance. And will anyone tell me with a straight face that an orderly universe must arise from some thought and artifice like human thought and artifice, because we have experience of it? To make this reasoning secure, we would need to have had experience of the origins of *worlds*; it isn't sufficient, surely, to have seen *ships and cities* arise from human artifice and contrivance.

Philo was going on in this vigorous manner, somewhere between joking and seriousness (it seemed to me), when he noticed signs of impatience in Cleanthes, and immediately stopped. What I wanted to cut in with, said **Cleanthes**, is only the suggestion that you stop abusing terms, using common everyday expressions to subvert philosophical reasonings. You know that common people often distinguish 'reason' from 'experience', even where the question relates only to a matter of fact and existence; though it is found that where that kind of 'reason' is properly analysed it turns out to be nothing but a sort of experience. To prove 'by experience' that the universe was originated by a mind is no more contrary to common speech than to prove 'by experience' that the earth moves. A fault-finder could raise against the Copernican system all the objections that you have urged against my reasonings. 'Have you other earths', he might say, 'which you have seen to move? Have. . .'

Yes! interrupted **Philo**, we *do* have other earths. Isn't the moon another earth, which we see to turn round its centre? Isn't Venus another earth, where we see the same thing? Aren't the revolutions of the sun also a confirmation—through analogy—of the same theory? Aren't all the planets that revolve around the sun *earths*? Aren't the satellites of Jupiter and Saturn *moons* that move around the sun along with their primary planets? These analogies and resemblances—and others that I haven't mentioned—are the only evidence for the Copernican system. It is for you to consider whether you have any analogies of the same kind to support your theory.

In reality, Cleanthes, he went on, the modern system of astronomy is now so thoroughly accepted by all enquirers, and has become such an essential a part of the education even of small children, that we are often not very scrupulous about examining the reasons for it. It is now become a matter of mere scholarly curiosity to study the first writers on that subject—the ones who had the full force of prejudice against them, and had to present their arguments in every possible light in order to render them popular and convincing. But if we peruse Galileo's famous Dialogues concerning the system of the world, we shall find that that great genius—one of the greatest who ever existed—first put all his efforts into proving that there is no basis for the distinction commonly made between 'elementary' and 'celestial' substances. The Aristotelian scientists, relying on sensory illusions, had made a great deal of this distinction; they had laid it down that 'celestial' substances cannot be generated, altered, or in any way affected, and they had assigned all the opposite qualities to 'elementary' substances. But Galileo, beginning with the moon, proved its similarity in every detail to the earth—its convex shape, its natural darkness when not illuminated ·by the sun·, its density, its distinction into solid and liquid,

the variations of its phases, the mutual illuminations of the earth and moon, their mutual eclipses, the unevenness of the moon's surface, and so on. After many examples of this kind relating to all the planets, men saw that these bodies were proper objects of experience, and that their similarity to one another entitled us to extend the same arguments and phenomena from one to another.

This cautious proceeding of the astronomers implicitly condemns your argument, Cleanthes; or, rather, it points to the fact that the subject on which you are engaged exceeds

all human reason and enquiry. Can you claim to show any such similarity between the structure of a house and the generation of a universe? Have you ever seen nature in a situation that resembles the first arrangement of the elements at the beginning of the universe? Have worlds ever been formed under your eye; and have you had leisure to observe the whole progress of world-making, from the first appearance of order to its final consummation? If you have, then cite your experience, and deliver your theory.

Part 3

In the hands of an ingenious and inventive person, replied **Cleanthes**, even the most absurd argument can be made to seem plausible! Don't you realize, Philo, that Copernicus and his first disciples had to prove the similarity of terrestrial to celestial matter because various scientists—blinded by old systems, and supported by some empirical evidence—had denied that similarity? but that theists don't in the same way have to prove the similarity of the works of nature to those of human artifice, because this similarity is self-evident and undeniable? The works of nature are made of the same *stuff* as are human artifacts, and the two are alike in *form* also; what more is needed to show an analogy between their causes, and to show that the origin of all things is a divine purpose and intention? Your objections, to put it bluntly, are no better than the elaborate arguments used by the philosophers who denied that anything moves; and they ought to be refuted in the same way as those, by illustrations,

examples, and instances, rather than by serious argument and philosophy. That is how I shall oppose your arguments.

Suppose that an articulate voice were heard in the clouds, much louder and more melodious than any human voice could ever be; suppose further that this voice were heard at the same time in all nations, and that it spoke to each nation in its own language and dialect; suppose, finally, that the words spoken from the sky were not only meaningful but conveyed some instruction that was altogether worthy of a benevolent being who was superior to mankind. If all that occurred, could you possibly hesitate for a moment over the cause of this voice? Wouldn't you be compelled to ascribe it, straight off, to some design or purpose? Yet if you did come to that conclusion, your inference would be open to all the same objections (if they deserve such a label) that are brought against the system of theism.