

Chapter 15

Cosmogonies: Belly or Brain?

15.1 Reading and Homework

- Readings: Hume, parts 6,7, and 8
- Study questions:
 1. In part 6, Philo proposes a new hypothesis, based on the same kind of reasoning as the design argument. To what does he think the world bear a great resemblance? What is "God" like, if we follow the analogy?
 2. Cleanthes objects to this hypothesis that it implies the eternity of the world. Why does he think that it is absurd to take the world as being eternal? What is Philo's answer?
 3. In Part 7, Philo yet proposes another possible hypothesis for the origin and constitution of the world. What is it? Why does he think that such hypothesis is not "less intelligible or less conformable to experience" than Cleanthes' hypothesis?
 4. Demea objects that such a great vegetative or generative principle cries out for an explanation, most probably in terms of design. What is Philo's answer? Draw a table of Cleanthes' and Philo's systems, putting in parallel, according to each of them:
 1. What the world is like from experience
 2. What the principle of the world's order is
 3. What a further cause or principle would be

5. Explain the last hypothesis that Philo considers concerning the origin and constitution of the world's order in part 8.
6. Why, according to Philo, does the whole discussion between these different systems "prepare a complete triumph for the skeptics"?

15.2 Belly or Brain? Pure Indifference

15.2.1 Alternative hypotheses

- Philo proposes various hypotheses for the origin and constitution of the world's order, that is, he proposes various **cosmogonies**:
 - (1) The world as an organism or animal – god is the soul
 - (2) The world as a vegetable – "god" is a vegetative or a generative principle
 - (3) matter and movement (Epicure) – "god"? "continual motion of matter"
- He generalizes (46):
 - there are four principles : Reason, instinct, generation, vegetation
 - None is more intelligible than the others
 - Four corresponding cosmogonies...
- The claim here is that all these hypotheses are:
 - equally supported** because they are based on the same little evidence;
 - equally explanatory** because they all give as little understanding of the world as the others;
 - equally plausible** because we do not have any sufficient reason to choose between them.

What are our usual criteria to choose between hypotheses?

- The upshot is the "triumph" of skepticism

15.2.2 Equally supported and equal explanatory power

- Demea objects (45) that that such a great vegetative or generative principle cries out for an explanation, most probably in terms of design. His claim is thus that the explanation in terms of generation is not satisfactory for it does not make us understand the process of the organization of the world.
- Philo's answer is that generation or vegetation is **just as much intelligible** as Design for a cause of the world order.
- That is to say:
 - experience gives us too little basis for understanding any of the causal processes, either by a mind or by mere generation;
 - therefore, we understand generation just as little as we understand design (as causes);
 - the demand for a further cause, or a cause of the cause, either applies in both case, or does not apply in any of them.

	Philo	Cleanthes
What the world is like from experience	animal	machine
Principle of the world's order	generation	design
Further cause	design	generation

- That said, note Philo's last point about the advantage of his unexplained principle, generation: At least we have experience of design growing out of generation, not the other !!

15.2.3 Equal plausibility

- Philo argues that, because of the equal evidential support and their equal explanatory power, the hypotheses are **indifferent** (43-46)
 - Experience alone does not give the means to choose.
 - Experience only is the legitimate basis of the choice
 - Therefore: no choice is possible

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- According to Philo (53), the whole discussion does between these different systems "prepare a complete triumph for the skeptics". Indeed, the simple fact that the controversy is endless is interpreted by Philo as a proof that reason, by itself, that is, without further help from experience, cannot help to reach any satisfactory conclusion: All hypotheses are equally CONCEIVABLE in the sense that **none imply contradiction**.

The skeptics answer to such controversies is to admit the limitation of knowledge and to opt for a "**total suspension of judgment**" in these matters.

That said, Philo's hypotheses, from the organism to matter in motion **gradually makes the hypothesis of God superfluous**. That is to say, his series of hypotheses leads to the hypothesis of materialism.

15.3 Materialism

According to Paul Russell ("Hume on Religion", SEP), "the central debate that shapes Hume's views on the subject of religion" is: the "fundamental dispute between philosophical defenders of Christian theology and their atheistic opponents" (much more than the rationalist/empiricist debate).

From Russel's article:

- 17th and early 18th centuries British philosophy gave rise to two powerful but conflicting philosophical outlooks.
 1. "Natural religion" or theism:
 - "This era has been described as the golden period of English theology because of the emerging alliance between philosophy and theology. It was, in particular, a major concern of a number of divines at this time to show that theology could be provided with a rational defence one that would ward off all threat of scepticism and atheism."
 - Leading representatives: Henry More, Ralph Cudworth, John Locke, Samuel Clarke, George Berkeley and Joseph Butler. (More and Cudworth were both Cambridge Platonists.)

2. Skeptical tradition

- Greatest representative: Thomas Hobbes.
- Central doctrines:
 - materialism,
 - necessitarianism,
 - moral relativism and egoism, and
 - scepticism concerning natural and revealed religion.
- Also Spinoza

- Influence of skeptical philosophy of Pyrrho, as presented in the writings of Sextus Empiricus.

”Pierre Bayle describes the significance of Pyrrhonism in his influential *Historical and Critical Dictionary* (1702), a work that we know was read carefully by the young Hume. In his article on Pyrrho Bayle argues:

Pyrrhonism is dangerous in relation to this divine science [theology], but it hardly seems so with regard to the natural sciences or to the state Society has no reason to be afraid of scepticism; for sceptics do not deny that one should conform to the customs of one’s country, practice one’s moral duties, and act upon matters on the basis of probabilities without waiting for certainty It is therefore only religion that has anything to fear from Pyrrhonism. Religion ought to be based on certainty. Its aim, its effects, its usages collapse as soon as this firm conviction of its truth is erased from the human mind. (Bayle, *Dictionary*, art. ”Pyrrho”, Note B; p. 195)

Bayle’s own view that philosophy and theology should be sharply separated, on the ground that the doctrines of theology could not be defended by reason and were therefore a matter of faith alone, brought his work under the suspicion of atheism. In general, it was common among Hume’s immediate predecessors and contemporaries to associate scepticism closely with atheism. (Hume’s writings allude to this at various points. See, e.g., Hume’s ”Early Memoranda”, Sect. II, 40)”

What is the status of materialism in the *Dialogues*?

- It appears at the last of a long series of hypotheses of cosmogonies.
- It is not defended as true.
- But it is still defended as *as plausible as* non-materialist hypotheses.
- That alone could make Hume an atheist in the view of his opponents.