

Chapter 17

Conclusion

17.1 Readings and Homeworks

- Readings: Hume, *Dialogues*, part 12
- Study questions:
 1. Explain why Philo believes that the battle between atheists and theists is a "verbal dispute".
 2. Explain why Philo does not believe that "the doctrine of a future state is so strong and necessary a security to morals that we never ought to abandon and neglect it" ? And in general, why does he think that "this kind of superstition" is not favorable to morality.
 3. Explain why, according to Philo, skepticism leads to true religion.

UNLESS EXPLICITLY NOTED (COMMENTS IN SLANTED FONT), THE FOLLOWING COURSE NOTES ARE TAKEN FROM PROF. SCHMAUS

17.2 Introduction: Cleanthes comments Demea's departure(77)

Cleanthes:

A. that Demea will not want to argue this topic with Philo anymore

B. and that he would rather argue with each of them alone

Comment:

This is to say that Cleanthes and Demea cannot stand together in front of Philo's attacks. This means that natural religion, defined as philosophically sustained religion, is not consistent in featuring both the argument a priori and the argument a posteriori.

Hume's point here is to show the irreconcilable opposition of two sides of natural religion.

17.3 Does Philo contradict himself?

A. on a first reading, appears to make a profession of faith and to endorse the design argument (77, q.v.)

B. but here, too, his words are carefully chosen:

1. he says he adores "the Divine Being, as he discovers himself to reason in the inexplicable contrivance and artifice of nature"

2. as he makes clear in the following pages, Philo does not think one can derive any conclusions about how we ought to live from it

C. perceiving design or purpose in nature does not necessarily lead to religion: it's both natural and taught in schools

1. that nature does nothing in vain is taught in all the schools, without religious purpose (q.v.)

2. so a scientist will not be satisfied until he has found a purpose for some new organ, etc. he has discovered (77)

3. in astronomy, scientists choose the Copernican system because it is the simplest, and this, too, may lay a strong foundation for religion and piety (77-78)

4. Galen (Greek physician whose works influenced medicine until the 16th century) finds purposes for the 600 muscles and 284 bones of the human body (78)

a. of course Galen was not a monotheist

b. but if even a non-believer like Galen could not resist the idea of design in nature, how could a philosopher today deny it? (q.v.)

5. even Cleanthes admits that "early education" plays a role in our perception of design (79, q.v.)

a. and of course, the occasion of the entire dialogue is a discussion of Pamphilus's education.

- b. Demea "seasons the minds" of his students with "early piety" (3)

Comment: does Philo contradict himself in seemingly defending a version of the Design Argument?

- Arguably, Hume seems to defend himself against the accusations of atheism.
- That said, he does not adopt Cleanthes' view.

*The main point of this conclusive part is to show that **skepticism is the only philosophy which leads to true religion**. In particular, skepticism leads to a form of religion which rejects the superstition and the Church.*

This means that Philo is not defending natural religion as it is defended by Cleanthes. We have to pay attention to the details here.

- It is important to notice that the model taken here is not natural religion, but natural philosophy.

*We have seen that the comparison between natural religion and natural philosophy is pervading the dialogues. Cleanthes stated first his argument as being as well supported as natural philosophy. Accordingly, he challenged Philo right from the beginning in stating a dilemma: either the skeptics accept natural philosophy, but then they have to accept natural religion as well, or the skeptics do not accept natural religion, but then they cannot accept natural philosophy either. **The main premise at the core of the dilemma is that natural philosophy and natural religion have equally supported by experience.***

*Hume has undermined this argument in denying that the main premise. **Philo explained that we have much more experimental evidence in the case of natural philosophy than in the case of natural religion.** This is due to the fact that the way a simple stone falls is indeed experimental evidence for Newton's system.*

- In general, it seems that Hume praises Newton's method and theory. He seems to take himself as an heir of Newton's method: the infamous "hypotheses non fingo", but also, Newton's version of the design argument.

Hitherto we have explained the phenomena of the heavens and of our sea, by the power of Gravity, but have not yet assigned a cause of this power. This is certain, that it must proceed from a cause that penetrates to the very centers of the Sun and Planets, without suffering the least diminution of its force; that operates, not according to the quantity of surfaces of the particles upon which it acts, (as mechanical causes use to do,) but according to the quantity of the solid matter which they contain, and propagates its virtue on all sides, to immense distances, decreasing always in the duplicate proportion of the distances. Gravitation towards the Sun, is made up out of the gravitations towards the several particles of which the body of the Sun is composed; and in receding from the Sun, decreases accurately in the duplicate proportion of the distances, as far as the orb of Saturn, as evidently appears from the quiescence of the aphelions of the Planets; nay, and even to the remotest aphelions of the Comets, if those aphelions are also quiescent. *But hitherto I have not been able to discover the cause of those properties of gravity from phenomena, and I frame no hypotheses.* For whatever is not deduced from the phenomena, is to be called an hypothesis; and hypotheses, whether metaphysical or physical, whether of occult qualities or mechanical, have no place in experimental philosophy. In this philosophy particular propositions are inferred from the phenomena, and afterwards rendered general by induction. Thus it was that the impenetrability, the mobility, and the impulsive force of bodies, and the laws of motion and of gravitation, were discovered. And to us it is enough, that gravity does really exist, and act according to the laws which we have explained, and abundantly serves to account for all the motions of the celestial bodies, and of our sea.

(Newton, *Principia Mathematica*, General Scholium, third edition, 1726, translation by Andrew Motte, my emphasis)

NOTE: For an online edition of the General Scholium, with a guide to read it, see the Newton Project web site: http://www.isaacnewton.ca/gen_scholium/

- Hume says also in a note of the Book I, ii, 5 of the appendix of his Treatise, that his "refined" or modest skepticism is perfectly in agreement with Newton's philosophy.

Again, the idea of the refined skepticism is:

– Usual skepticism:

1. contrast what is observed (phenomena) from what is thought
2. advocate suspension of judgment for anything that goes beyond the phenomena
3. which imply taking superstition and dogmatism as first class enemies

– Hume-type refinements:

1. question the justifications of the certitudes from reason and of the beliefs coming from experience
2. but refuses also a form of radical skepticism (either Descartes hyperbolic doubt or pyrrhonism), which would be to refuse any credibility to these "certitudes" and "beliefs". Such radical forms of skepticism are denounced by Hume as alternative forms of dogmatism. They betrayed the main aim of true skepticism which is to fight any form of dogmatism.
3. instead, takes that the limitations of understanding and reason leave us no choice but to take nature as a guide, believing in what we observe and accept to philosophize, while recognizing that there is no absolute justification for this.

See Treatise, I.

17.4 The problem of meaning

17.4.1 Philo's "design" argument is a "thought" (and not a human-like-God) argument

- Philo argues that:
 1. the works of nature bear some analogy to works of art, and hence the causes must have a "proportional analogy" (79, q.v.)

2. but there are also differences, so there must also be differences in the causes (79)
 3. hence, whether the cause of nature – the "Deity" – is also to be called a mind or intelligence in spite of these differences between him and a human mind is a merely verbal question (79-80)
- Philo will then argue that there is a greater analogy between the works of nature and the effects of human design than to those of human benevolence and justice (81, q.v.)
 1. hence the "natural attributes" of the deity have greater resemblance to those of man than the "moral" ones (81, q.v.)
 2. in other words, in relation to the deity, human moral qualities are more defective than the intellectual

Thus, refined version of the design argument again. One could say: a naturalized version of the Design argument.

17.4.2 Verbal disputes (80)

- Philo argues that the dispute over the design argument is merely a verbal dispute
 1. the only remedy for such disputes is clear definitions and precise ideas (q.v.)
 2. however, there is one sort of dispute that is forever mired in ambiguity and does not admit of such precision: those that turn on degrees of qualities
 - a. e.g., how beautiful was Cleopatra? (80)
 - b. degrees of quality, unlike quantity and number, do not admit of "exact mensuration" (q.v.)
- Philo then argues that the difference between the atheist and theist is only a verbal dispute of this kind: (80-81)
 1. the theist will admit to an "immeasurable, because incomprehensible" difference between the divine and the human mind (80) – in other words, he will **push the theist towards mysticism**

2. the atheist, on the other hand,
 - a. will admit that the operations of nature, including human thought, there is "probably . . . some remote analogy" to each other (80-81, q.v.)
 - b. pushed a little further, will admit that the principle responsible for order in the universe also bears "some remote inconceivable analogy" to the other operations of nature, including human thought (81)
- Philo then asks exactly what the theist and atheist then disagree about
 - a. the theist says the original intelligence is very different from human intelligence (81, q.v.)
 - b. the atheist says the original principle of order in the universe bears some remote analogy to it
 - c. the difference is only one of degree
- the question whether there is a meaningful difference between a theist and an atheist was in fact first brought up by Cleanthes himself when he suggested that there is no difference between the mystic and the atheist (p. 28)

17.4.3 Hume on meaning

This seemingly paradoxical result should not surprise us.

- Hume is an empiricist
 - a. for an empiricist, all meaningful ideas derive from experience
 - b. but a metaphysical idea by definition takes us beyond experience
- the distinction between two metaphysical ideas is then meaningless for an empiricist
- this is true not only for metaphysical ideas in religion, but in science
 - a. take Rutherford's philosophy that there really are electrons in the world
 - b. now compare this to Vaihinger's philosophy that electrons are not real, but that the world behaves exactly as if Rutherford's theory of the electrons were true and electrons were real

- c. if you like, Rutherford is a theist about electrons and Vaihinger is an electron atheist
- d. for an empiricist, this is a meaningless dispute because there is no experimental test to determine which of these physicists is correct

17.5 Criticism of official Religion

17.5.1 Religion and superstition

- Philo distinguishes between "true religion" - the philosophical and rational kind - and "vulgar superstition" (82, 83)
 1. it is because he so hates the latter that he enjoys such skeptical arguments (82)
 2. compare what he says on p. 77 about his arguments against natural religion: no one with any sense will misunderstand him or be corrupted
- Cleanthes disagrees (82)
 1. any religion is better than none at all
 2. religion is necessary as a foundation to morality
 3. if finite rewards have an effect on us, eternal and infinite ones will have a greater one

Comments on this:

Cleanthes, supposedly defender of natural religion, that is, philosophical and rational religion, accepts superstition at the end of the day. This reminds us of the first part, where Cleanthes accepted the inconsistencies of the theologians through history. Whatever philosophizing is involved in official religion, it remains official religion, that is, something dogmatic and which accepts superstition. This is Hume contesting that theism is an acceptable form of religion.

17.5.2 Against superstition and official Religion

Religion and Morality: lessons from History

Philo asks how vulgar superstition can serve as a basis for morality when history shows us that it leads to war, persecution, etc. Cleanthes replies (82,

q.v.):

1. 1.when religion is operating properly, it makes us good
2. but since it is then working silently, only enforcing the motives of morality and justice, it is easily overlooked (82)
3. only when it becomes separated from this role of serving justice and morality does it give rise to the kinds of abuses Philo is worried about

Philo (82-83): the real motives for morality are natural

Philo says that all religion except "the philosophical and rational kind" will have these pernicious consequences.

- PEOPLE: He rejects Cleanthes argument that infinite rewards will have a greater effect on people than finite ones (83)
 - people are more attached to present rewards than those that are "remote and uncertain"
 - 1.. even "divines" complain that common people are more concerned with immediate, earthly rewards than with eternal, heavenly rewards
 - 2.. thus they contradict themselves when they say that religious motives are so powerful that society would fall apart without them
 - people's natural inclinations towards honesty and benevolence have a greater effect on them (q.v.)
 - 1.. works incessantly (83)
 - a. unlike religion
 - b. analogy with gravity
 - 2.. engages on its side "wit and ingenuity," especially when opposed to religion (83, q.v.)
 - also, people are naturally suspicious of those who make a great profession of faith (83, q.v.)
- PHILOSOPHERS do not need religion to restrain their conduct (84)

Comments on this: Hume is displaying his own theory of understanding and of passions (habit, or custom, benevolence etc.), drawing a parallel between his theory and Newton's theory!!

Superstition-based motives for morality are perverting the true motives, working in fact against morality

Religion can actually divert people's attention away from morality and towards "frivolous observances" and "rapturous ecstasies"

- b. can weaken natural motives of justice and humanity
- c. can encourage hypocrisy, through participation in rites when one's heart is not really in it
- d. religion can even be in direct opposition to morality, such as the case where the religious zealot thinks that the sacredness of his cause can justify anything
- e. or lead towards a selfish concern with his or her own salvation

Religion and Politics

- We should limit number and power of priests, separate church and state
 - a. if religion were good for society, this wouldn't be true
 - b. if government were to allow only one religion, this would be to restrict people's freedom
 - c. the wiser course is to allow several, but to restrain the prevailing sect, to prevent endless disputes, quarrels, etc.
- religion unnecessary for oaths - it was not their Epicureanism (atheism) that led people to mistrust the Greeks (86, q.v.)
- True religion, however, has no such consequences (85) – and is popular religion, not theism.

Religion and Happiness

- Cleanthes's warning:
 1. warns Philo lest his zeal against false religion leads him to undermine the true
 2. reminds him that religion is a source of great comfort to people
- Philo argues that religious feelings are more often mingled with fear and terror than with comfort and hope

1.cites, among other things, the belief that more are going to hell than heaven (87)

2.finds the notion of a God who would toss us all into hell unless we flatter him with our praises to be not only absurd but degrading and impious (88, q.v.)

- Thus:

- "terror is the primary principle principle of religion"

- terror, as well as "excessive, enthusiastic joy" are far from the ideal of happiness as a "calm and equable" state of mind

Comments on this: peace of mind as happiness in the antiquity: stoicism and epicurism – Philo is going to cite Seneca. That said, this sounds (religion, superstition and terror) a lot Epicurean !!!

17.6 Fideism?

- quotes the Stoic philosopher Seneca: "To know God is to worship him." (88, q.v.)
- "the whole of natural theology . . . resolves itself into one . . . ambiguous proposition, That the cause or causes of order in the universe probably bear some remote analogy to human intelligence."
 - a. cannot infer anything that affects human life, that is, cannot derive a morality from this (q.v.)
 - b. nor can one extend the analogy from human intelligence to other qualities of mind – that is, to moral qualities
 - c. all one can do is to assent to it, and believe the arguments for it exceed the objections
- Philo then rests with the fideist position that a person has a sense of the weakness of the human reason will turn to **revealed religion** (89)
- This raises the issue as to whether Philo is speaking for Hume here
 1. Hume was certainly not a Christian fideist
 2. but he might have had some sort of fideistic faith in a more deistic sort of god

3. the notion that one has to commit to something in the absence of proof is after all not all that different from the position he takes in regard to both everyday life and science
- Conclusion – Pamphilus awards win, place, and show to Cleanthes, Philo, and Demea, respectively, but note that he ranks them according to the truth of their principles, not the quality of their arguments (89)