An outline of David Hume’s *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*

By J. Alexander Rutherford

I. Introduction

*Part one sets the roles, relationships, and begins the discussion with a consideration of skepticism.*

**Demea:** Natural Theology must be built on the foundation of Skepticism towards the natural sciences and religious Piety.

**Philo:** Piety is good and all, but we must be thoroughly skeptic of the possibility of natural theology.

**Cleanthes:** If we are skeptical of natural theology, we needs must be skeptical about the natural sciences—if not life itself—clearly an inconsistent position.

II. The *A Posteriori* Argument

*Part two presents Demea, on the basis of authority, and Philo, on the basis of lack of experience, as skeptical about the knowledge of the nature of God. Cleanthes, on the other hand, hopes to establish both the existence and nature of God a-posteriori with the design argument.*

**Demea:** From authority we know the infinite God to be incomprehensible, let alone from natural theology, and a priori arguments give us a firm foundation.

**Philo:** We have no experiential foundation for analogies with the nature of God, nor do we have analogies to establish an argument from the design of the world. There is too much dissimilarity to be certain in analogous reasoning from world to its cause, we are left only with conjecture or guess. All our practical analogies rely on
experience of the effects and their causes, yet you have no experience of such causes as could bring about the world or analogies to the creation of the world. There could be infinite numbers of possible principles of cause that could have created such a world as we find: there is no experiential basis for favouring an analogy with the human mind.

**Cleanthes:** Design in the universes yields an analogy for the existence of God and his nature, for we know that such features as we observer are caused by the human mind—so an analogous cause must be attached to such an effect. Furthermore, Philo’s reasoning against analogy applies to natural sciences as well: what analogies do we have of the movement of the earth to prove Copernican astronomy?

**Part Three:** Cleanthes responds with an idea called ‘natural belief.’ The semblance is undeniable, so much so that we cannot deny it—therefore the reasonable man is not obligated to.

**Cleanthes:** In Copernicus’ case, blind prejudice made it necessary to prove the likeness of the terrestrial to the celestial. Such can only be the case here, as many illustrations demonstrate, this analogy is self-evident, undeniably so.

**Philo is stumped**

**Demea:** Cleanthes, your idea is presumptuous in that it suggests a close analogy between God’s mind and the frail human mind, something piety cannot allow.

---

1 Here is an interesting turn in the argument, for Philo represents—as far as it is possible to determine—Hume’s position most consistently. Yet, here, Cleanthes seems to be invoking Hume’s concept of *natural belief.* Thus we see that though Philo presents Hume’s conclusion, and is a good guide to follow for understanding what Hume desires as a result of reading this work, now single character in the dialogue fully represents Hume.
Part Four: The dilemma that arises is this, Cleanthes deity is too anthropomorphic and as a result requires an equivalent explanation to man who is its analogy. Demea’s deity is no better than that of an atheist or a deist, an indescribable first cause.

Cleanthes: Your mysticism is no better than atheism, God becomes unknowable. My god is analogous to man: to require an explanation of him is to introduce an unreasonable level of explanation, no progress would attain in reason if all causes needed to be explicated. I will rest with this deity.

Demea: An ad hominem is no argument, and your supposed deity is not theistic, it is anthropomorphic (an analogy to man yields a man-like cause).

Philo: If god, Cleanthes, is so like man and the world, he is as in need of explanation as they are. We have as much reason to postulate the world as self-explanatory as to postulate an ideal behind it: it seems easier to postulate that the world contains within it its own principle of order.

Part five: The design argument, it seems, yields the concession of a designer after all, yet this designer is finite and may be predicated with an infinite variety of features—including plurality.

Philo: the concession of likeness yields an infinite set of possible finite causes.

Cleanthes: Yet the designed/designer conclusion is conceded.

Part six: The foundation Cleanthes has attained is of the weakest sort

Demea: this foundation supports nothing; religion built on this is utterly useless.
Philo: even more unsatisfactorily, the success of the design argument opens the door for any number of potential hypothesis—consider the world as an animal with god as its soul, or an eternal world.

Cleanthes: the world is more akin to a vegetable, and the eternity of the world doesn’t quite fit the temporally recent nature of the spread of agriculture.

**Part Seven: By Cleanthes analogical reasoning, it is better to hypothesis not a personal origin for the world but a vegetative or generative principle.**

Philo: The analogy is closer to animals or vegetables than reasoned design, therefore we could conclude as likely, if not more so, that the world has sprung forth from a vegetative or generative principle like that of the animal or vegetable kingdoms. And Cleanthes cannot argue against this, suggesting that these need a designer, for he has arbitrarily suspended the search for a cause back of his cause.

Cleanthes: I see your error but cannot yet express it.

**Part Eight: By such analogical reasoning, no metaphysic can be proved or disproved, so we should suspend judgment.**

Philo: Imperfect analogies allow endless hypothesis and gives insufficient grounds to reject them on the presence of slight incongruities. We cannot say that matter does not contain the spring of motion in itself, so we do not need a voluntary first mover. The best recourse when it comes to cosmogony is the suspension of judgement.

Demea: Don’t we need a first mover?

Cleanthes: How are the perfections, advantages, of the world explained on such hypotheses?
III. The A Priori Argument

Part Nine: Demea’s A Priori Cosmological Argument

Demea: Instead of this untenable a posteriori argument, I offer my a priori, the cosmological argument. Everything existent has a cause, so the existence of the world depends either on an infinite regress or a necessarily existent ultimate cause. The first position is absurd—for such chain is itself contingent and needs explanation: it exists by chance—which is not a causal force—nothing, or God.

Cleanthes: Facts cannot be proven a priori. Demonstration requires that the contrary is a contradiction; it is not a contradiction to postulate that any fact either exists or does not exist. Could not the world be necessarily contingent? Your reply, that we could conceive its non-existence, also applies to god. Lastly, though the parts of an eternal succession need a cause, this does not necessitate that the whole needs a cause.

Philo: Certain features of numbers are necessary; therefore, could not the world itself be necessary? In the end, such abstraction is simply not convincing.

IV. The Moral Argument

Part Ten: Demeas argues that god is a necessary opiate to the misery of the world, but this gives ground for Philo to press Cleanthes: given misery, supposing god’s attributes compatible with such misery, his attributes cannot be inferred from them.

Demea: the misery of man is utterly undeniable; religion is the necessary opiate for this misery.

Cleanthes: misery exists, but does not outweigh happiness.
Philo: Given misery, accepting the compatibility of god's attributes with this misery, his moral attributes still cannot be inferred therefrom.

**Part Eleven: Even the proposition of a finite deity does not elude the inference problem of evil—other explanations are better. Morality either results in an ineffable first cause or, on the anthropomorphite position, misery is explained by causes in infinitum or the deity itself.**

Cleanthes: I will reject infinite: the deity is finite.

Philo: this still does not answer the inference problem. We either infer a morally vacuous first cause or your first cause is the immediate cause of moral evil—or there is an infinite chain of causes for it.

Demea: I see you are the dangerous enemy Philo. *Walks out.*

**V. Conclusion**

**Part Twelve: In the end, theism seems most rational, but it amounts to an ambiguous and useless declaration about a first cause.**

Cleanthes: A finite god exists and is a good for morality, the end towards which superstitious faith has and should be employed.

Philo: a first cause exists with a remote analogy to man, yet this concession is no better than atheism: atheism claims that he first cause has little resemblance to man, and this natural theism claims there is a close analogy, but these adjectives of comparison—“little” or “close”—are ambiguous and really amounts to the same thing. I will concede that “the cause or causes of order in the universe probably bear some remote analogy to human intelligence,” but this statement can have no effect on human life and cannot be expanded upon. Philosophical virtues are the best impetus for morality.