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IN HUME'S *DIALOGUES*

*Religious Studies*  
*Volume 25, Issue 4*  
*December 1989, pp. 489-499*

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## PHILO'S FINAL CONCLUSION IN HUME'S *DIALOGUES*<sup>1</sup>

'Truly this is the sweetest of theologies', William said, with perfect humility, and I thought he was using that insidious figure of thought<sup>2</sup> that rhetors call irony, which must always be prefaced by the pronuntiatio, representing its signal and its justification – something William never did. For which reason the abbot, more inclined to the use of figures of speech,<sup>2</sup> took William literally ...

Eco (1984), p. 145.

Substitute Philo for William, Hermippus – not Pamphilus – for the 'I', Cleanthes for the abbot, and we are, once again, facing the problem of Part XII of the *Dialogues*. (We are, of course, facing part of the solution too.)

In my point of view this problem has to do mainly with Philo's final conclusion:

If the whole of natural theology, as some people seem to maintain, resolves itself into one simple, though somewhat ambiguous, at least undefined proposition, *that the cause or causes of order in the universe probably bear some remote analogy to human intelligence ...* (D227)

If this is indeed Philo's final conclusion, what exactly does he mean by it? It is this, on the surface rather simple, question that I will attempt to answer here. In order to give this answer I will have to make a few presuppositions. These presuppositions can be stated in the following manner.<sup>3</sup>

- The characters of the participants in the discussion are of importance; including even Pamphilus and Hermippus. In Part XII the discussion is continued between Cleanthes and Philo, a discussion which is reported by Pamphilus, pupil of Cleanthes to Hermippus, 'pupil' of Philo.
- The dialogue-form plays a decisive role, and not paying attention to its implications has resulted in misinterpretations.

<sup>1</sup> This paper is based on Chapter 5 of my doctorate thesis '*Philo's slotconclusie in de "Dialogues concerning natural religion" van David Hume*'.

I herewith express my indebtedness to Professor G. Nuchelmans of Leiden University, under whose supervision I wrote my thesis and who was kind enough to read, and comment on, this paper too.

Accepting current practice I quote from the edition of the *Dialogues* by Norman Kemp Smith, *David Hume, Dialogues concerning Natural Religion* (Indianapolis, 1947 (<sup>1</sup>1935)).

<sup>2</sup> This quotation is from the Picador-edition, using the original English translation. I have made a small but significant change because the Italian original reads '*... figura di pensiero ...*' and '*... figure di discorso ...*' both of which the original English translation gives as 'figures of speech', a sure way to miss the point.

<sup>3</sup> See my 'The Literary and Dramatic Character of Hume's *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion*', *Religious Studies* II (1987), 387-96.

– Connected with this is Philo's irony, throughout the discussion, which must be taken into consideration.

– Then there is Demea's departure, which is certainly of importance for the ensuing discussion in Part XII. This is immediately felt in Philo's so-called 'confession', which is no confession at all.

– Lastly, I will assume that Philo 'speaks for' Hume.

These presuppositions are here presented as unproved, but by no means unprovable, assumptions.

In the opening of Part XII Demea has left the company and his departure makes itself felt in the way the discussion is continued. Philo speaks in a conciliatory voice to Cleanthes 'with whom I live in unreserved intimacy' (D214), Cleanthes who, already in Part II, made it clear that he did not want to lose time 'in circumlocutions... much less in replying to the pious declamations of Philo' (D143). This insight of Cleanthes' is also, perhaps especially, applicable to Part XII. The actual content of Philo's confession is expressible in the two principles '*That nature does nothing in vain*' and '*that nature acts by the simplest methods, and chooses the most proper means to any end*' (D214). This means that the content of this confession can be connected with the actual content of Philo's final conclusion. To this conclusion I now turn, and, among other things, I will try to show that to an important extent, the answer to my question lies in the connection between the so-called 'verbal dispute' (D216–19) and Philo's final conclusion.

#### I. PHILO'S FINAL CONCLUSION

The essence of this conclusion lies in the 'simple, though somewhat ambiguous, at least undefined proposition, *that the cause or causes of order in the universe probably bear some remote analogy to human intelligence*' (D227). Let's have a careful look at this.

(1) Philo speaks of '*cause or causes*', in other words, 'god or gods', if we are justified to use these terms at all; Philo does not use them.

(2) The conclusion says '*cause or causes of order*', which means that it does not refer to a first cause to explain the transition of non-existence to existence, but to a cause or explanation of the order to be found within the existing world. In my point of view it is important that this includes the possibility of one or more internal principles of order. This is important because Philo, in the preceding discussion, has shown his preference for this possibility (D146, 162, 174).

(3) Apart from this, the conclusion is qualified by '*probably*', '*some*', and '*remote*', which leaves open the possibility that there may be no analogy at all and that if there is an analogy, it is only probable, uncertain, and based on a remote resemblance.

(4) Philo's referring to a possible resemblance with human intelligence

should not lead to rash conclusions: perhaps it is a *structural* resemblance, perhaps – as I think is the case – he is referring to one or more *internal* principles of order.

Obviously, care should be taken in reading and interpreting Philo's final conclusion, and as will become clear, this care is lacking rather often.

### 1.1. *Cause or Causes*

To give an example, J. C. A. Gaskin says that Hume's conclusion, through Philo, is '... that the principle of order may possibly be remotely analogous to human intelligence. It is this modest addition which allows Hume to retain the word "god"... and to regard belief in such a god as reasonable...' (Gaskin, 1978, p. 140) and '... for Hume belief in God is... a weak, rational possibility left open after critical analysis of the design argument' (Gaskin, 1976, 302). Now, the thing is that Gaskin does not pay sufficient attention to Hume's speaking of 'cause or causes', that is, singular *and* plural, which, in view of the prime importance of the passage in question, he certainly should have done. Gaskin does realize this importance since he speaks of this passage as containing 'Hume's final attempt to assess what is left after all the discussion in the *Dialogues*' (Gaskin, 1983, 171). Filling in singular and plural in Gaskin's proposed conclusion of Philo's gives it at once a totally different meaning and makes it less likely to characterize Hume's position as 'attenuated deism' (Gaskin, 1978, pp. 168; 171).

### 1.2. *Cause or Causes of Order*

As to point (2) of my analysis of Philo's final conclusion: one of the striking things in reading the commentaries on this passage is the apparent carelessness with which the text is read and used. As emphasized above, Philo speaks of the cause or causes of order in the universe. Nelson Pike, however, in his commentary, continues to speak of 'the cause of the universe' which, of course, is quite something else. See for example Pike, 1970, pp. 216, 217, 218, 219. Especially 216, 218 and 219 are conspicuous in a negative way since there he paraphrases Philo's final conclusion: 'The cause of the universe is here described as bearing only a "remote analogy" to human intelligence'... 'Philo's last speech in which the cause of the universe is described as bearing only a "remote analogy" to human intelligence'... and... 'there is an analogy (however "remote") between the cause of the universe and human intelligence'. The difference between 'the cause of the universe' and 'the cause or causes of order in the universe' is of almost decisive importance for accurately assessing Philo's final position.

Something comparable happens in the commentary prefixed by G. Gawlick to his German edition of the *Dialogues*. In his commentary on Part XII he speaks of '... dass die Weltursache wahrscheinlich...' (Gawlick, 1980, xxiii, xxix). The translation itself of Part XII, however, reads '... dass die Ursache oder

*Ursachen der Ordnung im Weltall wahrscheinlich...*' (Gawlick, 1980, 120). This, again, is not acceptable in view of the importance of this passage and when I discuss the verbal dispute this will become even more clear.

These two questions, the one for the cause of the universe, the other for the cause or causes of order in the universe, I propose to name 'theistic' and 'non-theistic' respectively, and Hume's denying the possibility of an answer to the first question and his proposed answer to the second one will justify my naming Hume's general position 'non-theism'.

### 1.3. *Internal Principles of Order*

As stated, Philo's conclusion leaves open the possibility of one or more internal principles of order. In an earlier stage of the discussion this possibility is brought forward by Philo. And though he – in accordance with his role in the *Dialogues* – does not defend any particular principles of order, I think his preference is clearly discernible. For instance: in Part II Philo reformulates Cleanthes' argument of design and when discussing whether there could be an 'internal unknown cause' in mind or in matter or both, he says: 'The equal possibility of both these suppositions is allowed', also by Philo, that is; but 'By experience we find (according to Cleanthes) that there is a difference between them' (D146). The latter explicitly 'according to Cleanthes' who claims that experience proves such a principle in mind, not in matter. Not reading this carefully enough leads to false conclusions. S. A. Grave, for one, says that here Hume gives a positive answer to the question whether experience proves there to be an ordering principle in mind, not in matter, concluding that 'From the order in the universe not produced by the human mind, an ordering intelligence is inferred' (Grave, 1976, 72). However, this we find only 'according to Cleanthes', not according to Philo, nor Hume, for that matter. In Part VI Philo will resume this discussion and make his point of view more explicit: '... were I obliged to defend any particular system of this nature (which I never willingly should do), I esteem none more plausible than that which ascribes an eternal, inherent principle of order to the world...' (D174). In other words, Philo does not feel a strong urge to defend any particular theory, but if pressed to do so he would defend an 'eternal, inherent principle of order' as being the most plausible, in matter as well as in mind.

In his comment Stanley Tweyman makes it appear as if Philo would have no preference for either an internal or an external principle. Philo's argument would come down to this: 'An original inherent principle of order seems both necessary and sufficient for explaining the order in the world, but we cannot determine whether this inherent principle is in thought (i.e. in an external principle of order) or in matter (i.e. in an internal principle of order)' (Tweyman, 1982, 38). There is, however, no reason to make the distinction Tweyman makes, as if the principle in mind would be external,

in matter internal. In both cases Philo speaks of an internal principle. His speaking, in his final conclusion, of a possible plurality of causes means no more than that, the possibility of there being more than one principle, not there being one internal and another external principle.

When defending the notion that Philo is not prepared to accept an internal principle of order Tweyman offers a somewhat strange argument. He says: 'There are but two ways to stop the infinite regress which Philo has charged: either the thing designed must be such that order pertains to its very nature, or there must be an internal principle of order... which... does not itself require a causal explanation. If the former is true... all external principles would be impossible' – this is correct – 'but, of course, so would all internal principles,' – and this is not correct (Tweyman, 1986, p. 79). I wonder if Tweyman has the dilemma he thinks he has, that is: what is the difference between order that 'pertains to its very nature' and 'an internal principle of order'? Since Philo uses 'internal' as meaning also 'inherent', does not the presence – in singular or plural, in mind or in matter – of such an 'internal principle of order' mean that 'order pertains to its very nature'? It should be noticed that Philo does not take a definite stand, though he does have, contrary to what Tweyman says, his preferences, as is shown, amongst others, by the passage quoted earlier.

It may be useful here to refer to Charles Echelbarger's description of such internal principles of order. He says: 'it seems most reasonable to construe internal principles as *unobserved causal factors in the structure of the organism*' (Echelbarger, 1975, 22). Connecting this with the *Dialogues* and the discussion of the argument of design therein, the conclusion is that 'Natural organisation or "design" would turn out to be something derivatively necessary in the sense that it is explainable in terms of a set of laws which ultimately flow deductively from the *a priori* principles which describe the "inmost essence" of matter.' (Echelbarger, 1975, 26). It is this 'inmost essence of things' Philo speaks about too (D174) and this makes Echelbarger's remark the more interesting, including, to a certain extent, his characterization of Philo's final conclusion as 'undeniably atheistic', even if it be a 'tacit atheism'. Remember that Philo's atheist is 'only nominally so' (D218).

#### 1.4. *Structural Resemblance*

As to point (4) of my analysis of Philo's conclusion: I have shown that S. Tweyman holds that Philo – as well as Hume – has no preference for either an internal or an external principle. Contrary to this I have defended my opinion that Philo, when pressed, does have a preference, a preference for one or more internal principles. Exactly the opposite seems to be defended by Gaskin, who creates a dilemma, resembling Tweyman's dilemma referred to above. Gaskin says: 'But at the ultimate point of decision in looking for

the source of order in nature – when it could be regarded as an inherent principle in things... *or* as a principle which also warrants very circumspect use of the word “intelligent” – at this point of ultimate ambiguity Hume inclines to the latter of the two possibilities. This is Hume’s “some belief” (Gaskin, 1978, p. 167). This ‘some belief’ is given the name of ‘attenuated deism’. Gaskin’s mistake, and this is central to the problem, lies in the use of ‘intelligent’. The same, but more explicit, we find in the introduction to the *Dialogues*, edited by R. Popkin, who, on comparable grounds, comes to the conclusion that ‘Hume acknowledges an intelligent being’ (Popkin, 1980, p. xiv). Apparently Philo’s speaking in his final conclusion of ‘*some remote analogy to human intelligence*’ is reason, for Gaskin as well as Popkin, to presume that Hume did not conclude to one or more internal principles of order, or considered this as at least as likely a conclusion, but to an intelligent principle, sufficient ‘to retain the word “god”’ (Gaskin) or to an ‘intelligent being’ (Popkin). To what this leads is shown, for example, by C. G. Prado: ‘... the concession of similarity to intelligence is empty if it is not a concession of agency’, and this would imply so much as ‘... an act as the cause of the world or its order’ (Prado, 1981, 159). A comparable opinion is held by S. Grave, who says here that Hume ‘was unable to discard the belief that order on any large scale is the product of intelligence only’ (Grave, 1976, 76). As I said, Hume’s use of ‘intelligence’ plays an important role here; now, Philo’s final conclusion does not read ‘the cause or causes of order in the universe is or are some intelligent being or beings’, in other words, for some reason it is overlooked that ‘*the cause or causes of order in the universe probably bear some remote analogy to human intelligence*’ could, and in my opinion in fact does, refer to the possibility of a structural resemblance between the cause or causes of the order in the universe and our human intelligence. This interpretation makes clear why, as I indicated in point (3) the conclusion is qualified by ‘*probably*’, ‘*some*’ and ‘*remote*’: only as far as we are able to understand the universe, are we allowed to speak of such a structural resemblance. In other words, this structural resemblance depends on the one hand on our being able to understand the universe, on the other hand on the universe being something that can be understood.

Charles Echelbarger’s distinction between several senses of ‘intelligent’ throws additional light on what I want to show here. He says that Philo characterizes the cause of the order in nature as ‘intelligent’ and distinguishes three senses of ‘intelligent’: ‘The first is... the *agential* sense of “intelligent”... the second is... the *artifactual* sense of “intelligent”... The... third sense of the word would make it roughly synonymous with “rational”... something is intelligent or rational in this third sense by describing it as *systematic or a system*.’ (Echelbarger, 1975, 27, 28). This allows us to say that ‘Merely being a system is sufficient to classify an entity as analogous to an intelligent agent’ and applied to Philo’s final conclusion, this leads to the

view that 'So understood Philo's belief in the intelligence of the ultimate cause is nothing more than a belief in its *intelligibility*. It implies not pure faith, but a faith in reason and science.' (Echelbarger, 1975, 29).

If, as I think is indeed the case, Philo comes to the conclusion that the cause or causes of order in the universe show a structural resemblance to human intelligence, a resemblance that is co-extensive with our understanding that order in the universe, then there is no reason any more to think of an external, more personal, cause as, among others, Gaskin, Popkin, Prado and Grave are inclined to do.

## 2. THE VERBAL DISPUTE

'All men of sound reason are disgusted with verbal disputes, which abound so much in philosophical and theological enquiries...' so Philo says (D217). Without doubt Hume shared this feeling and by means of this passage containing the verbal dispute (D216-19) he, therefore, wants to reach a conclusion, the contents of which is set after considering and taking into account the measure of this dispute being verbal too. Point of departure is Philo's question how far '... the dispute concerning theism is of this nature, and consequently is merely verbal, or perhaps, if possible, still more incurably ambiguous...' (D218). The terms in which the position of theist and atheist respectively are then characterized is of the utmost significance. In connection with the position of the theist Philo speaks of 'the *human* and the *divine* mind', 'original intelligence', 'the supreme Being'; speaking of the atheist: 'a certain degree of analogy among all the operations of nature', 'energies that probably bear some remote analogy to...', 'some remote inconceivable analogy', 'some remote analogy', and 'the original principle of order'. This difference fits the distinction I earlier made between a theistic and a non-theistic question. To refresh our memory, the essence of Philo's final conclusion was '*That the cause or causes of order in the universe probably bear some remote analogy to human intelligence...*'

### 2.1. *The Similarity in Wording*

It would be rather foolish indeed to consider the strong similarity in wording between the position of the atheist in the verbal dispute and Philo's final conclusion to be anything like a coincidence. In fact, the verbal dispute contains a clear and meaningful paraphrasing of Philo's final conclusion. The question, characterizing the position of the atheist, and to be answered in the affirmative, is:

...whether the rotting of a turnip, the generation of an animal, and the structure of human thought be not energies that probably bear some remote analogy to each other...if it be not probable, that the principle which first arranged, and still maintains, order in this universe, bears not also some remote inconceivable analogy



to the other operations of nature, and among the rest to the oeconomy of human mind and thought. (D218)

Comparing this with my analysis of Philo's final conclusion, the following striking result appears.

- Here, too, perhaps with a little less emphasis, *singular and plural* are being used: 'principle' and 'energies'.
- Here, too, we are concerned with one or more principles to explain the *order* in the universe, not to explain the step from non-existence to existence.
- Here, too, the possibility of one or more *internal* principles of order is included.
- Here, too, the conclusion is qualified by 'probably', 'some', and 'remote'.
- Here, too, with even more emphasis, we meet with the suggestion of a *structural* resemblance with human intelligence. This is to be found in Philo's speaking of 'the oeconomy of human mind and thought' and, literally, 'the structure of human thought'. This refers to the systematical part of human thought, the structure of which we find, with all due qualification, again in 'the other operations of nature' and finally in 'the principle which first arranged and still maintains order in this universe'.

Making clear the connection with his final conclusion and the importance for a correct interpretation thereof, Philo summarizes the verbal character of the dispute concerning theism as follows. 'The theist allows, that the original intelligence is very different from human reason: The atheist allows, that the original principle of order bears some remote analogy to it.' (D218). These gentlemen – laying aside their disputes and curing themselves of their animosity – should be able, then, to agree on the conclusion '*that the cause or causes of order in the universe probably bear some remote analogy to human intelligence*'.

The importance of the verbal dispute in interpreting Philo's final conclusion should be obvious by now; the more surprising is the little attention that is paid to it. Usually no more than a casual reference is made, such as 'When all the appropriate disclaimers are built in, it is... a merely verbal matter whether one stresses, with the atheist, that the analogy is remote, or stresses with the theist, that even a remote analogy is still an analogy' (Penelhum, 1979, 273). And: 'As Hume points out, by a suitable emphasis and choice of words both the atheist and theist can agree... the dispute between them becomes "merely verbal"' (Gaskin, 1978, p. 167); however, not seeing that Philo dresses up his conclusion in terms borrowed from that very same atheist, Gaskin summarizes Hume's and Philo's view as a 'fundamental assent to the existence of a god...' (Gaskin, 1978, p. 168). To confirm this rule of general neglect there are, of course, the usual exceptions, in this case J. Duerlinger and M. Andic. They are positive exceptions in that they do pay due attention to the verbal dispute. However, since they do not see the all-important correspondence between this verbal dispute and Philo's

final conclusion they do not come to the conclusion that was within their reach. Duerlinger concludes as follows, 'There is ample evidence, therefore, to show that in the *Dialogues* Hume seeks a rational foundation of some sort for belief in the existence of a divine mind...of a divine intelligence...' (Duerlinger, 1971, 29). It may be noted that Duerlinger, too, falls victim to Philo's use of 'intelligence' in his final conclusion. Andic summarizes: 'We can call Philo a deist, though not a theist, in that he acknowledges a divine first cause, though not a consciously intelligent, hence supernatural one.' (Andic, 1974, 255). Even though Andic's paper contains important insights, his conclusion cannot, for the reasons given above, be reconciled with Philo's.

For completeness' sake, let me remark here that Kemp Smith, too, passes this by in undue silence. (See for example K. Smith, 1947, 71, 121.) His reason, perhaps, may be his having already established 'that the teaching of the *Dialogues* is much more sheerly negative than has generally been held' (K. Smith, 1947), vi).

## 2.2 *Some People*

An interesting interpretation of Philo's final conclusion has been offered by Nelson Pike. I will discuss part of it here because, though I certainly disagree, it is worth our attention. According to Pike there are two versions of the argument of design in the *Dialogues*, a 'scientific' and an 'irregular' one; Philo 'confesses' himself to the irregular version. I disagree with this since neither is there a confession of Philo's, nor are there two versions of the argument of design, but this will not concern us here. After having discussed the verbal dispute Pike says that the position ascribed by Philo to the atheist is not his own: '... this should not be taken as a statement of Philo's own view on the issue we are discussing ... His own view was expressed earlier in the same discussion when he declared it "*evident*" "that the works of nature bear a *great analogy* to the productions of art."' (Pike, 1970, p. 218). Next Pike, turning himself against Kemp Smith, comes to speak about Philo's final conclusion, and he offers the following suggestion. 'This view is explicitly characterized in this passage as being what "*some people* seem to maintain"'. Those 'some people' are the atheists of the verbal dispute, presumably, though Pike does not say so, because of the correspondence in wording. Philo's own conclusion we may find elsewhere, 'where he said that the cause of the universe bears a "*considerable resemblance*" to human intelligence' (Pike, 1970, p. 218). In his final conclusion Philo, then, wants to say something like this: 'Atheists, (i.e. "*some people*") agree that we can find an analogy (however "*remote*") between the "*operations of nature*" and the operations of artifacts. These same people thus admit that there is an analogy (however "*remote*") between the cause of the universe and human intelligence' (Pike, 1970, pp. 218/19). In the first place, as I have shown before, Pike is wrong in speaking of 'cause of the universe'; however, his main point here is that

the final conclusion of the *Dialogues* is to be attributed to 'some people', that is, the atheists of the verbal dispute, not to Philo. Now, there is nothing in Philo's conclusion necessitating Pike's interpretation, on the contrary. It is true, as I have shown, that 'some people' refers to the atheists of the verbal dispute. But to suggest that Philo wants to dissociate himself from this conclusion by speaking of 'some people' is untenable. He speaks, a little farther, of this conclusion in terms of 'a plain, philosophical assent to the proposition', in the belief that 'the arguments on which it is established, exceed the objections which lie against it' (D227). These are not the words of one who wants to dissociate himself from a certain conclusion; and if this is not the case, then, even in Pike's own interpretation, Philo is one of those 'some people', accepting a conclusion phrased in atheistic terms.

### 3. CONCLUSION

Summarizing my discussion I consider the following points to be established. (Note that for an overall interpretation the presuppositions stated at the beginning of this paper have to be taken into consideration too.)

- In Part XII Philo characterizes the dispute concerning theism as being, to an important extent, a verbal one. This he makes clear by the way he formulates the position of the theist and the atheist respectively. Here the answer to our question is beginning to appear.
- Philo's final conclusion is given *after* considering the extent to which the dispute is in fact a verbal one. But the dispute is not entirely verbal, a meaningful conclusion is possible.
- This final conclusion of Philo's shows a clear and significant correspondence, both in form and in content, with the position ascribed by Philo to the atheist in the verbal dispute. Here we have our answer.
- Philo's final conclusion then (which can best be named 'non-theism', the atheist of the verbal dispute is, after all, 'only nominally so') is of a predominantly sceptical nature. It says that the cause or causes of order in the universe probably bear some remote analogy to human intelligence. It seems most reasonable to think of *one or more internal principles*, responsible for the *order* which we are able to detect in the universe, and which probably show some remote *structural* analogy to human intelligence.

In Philo's (and Hume's) opinion this is all the argument of design allows us to infer; it is his final conclusion.

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