

# David Hume on the cosmological argument and the argument from design in the *Dialogues*

## *A systematic exposition*

### Abstract

In the *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion* (1779), published a few years after his death, David Hume discusses the cosmological argument and the argument from design in dialogue form, allegedly because the subject matter is both very obvious and important but also very obscure and uncertain. Although the work is highly readable and entertaining in its current form, it is the aim of this paper to put the arguments regarding the cosmological argument and the argument from design that are presented in the *Dialogues* in a rather scattered and sometimes somewhat incomplete way into a systematic form, supplementing them where considered appropriate with arguments from other of his works or with my analysis of what certain missing arguments could be, so that their pros and cons can be assessed much more easily than they can from a reading of (a part or the whole of) the *Dialogues* in its current form. In doing so, it is hoped that the present paper may provide an illuminating view of what Hume has written on these matters, a useful addition to the field of the philosophy of religion, and perhaps even an enlightening introduction to Hume's overall epistemology resp. philosophy.

<i>Institute</i>	University Utrecht	<i>Student</i>	Joris Hehenkamp
<i>Programme</i>	Philosophy: Ed. and Com.	<i>Studentnr.</i>	3138682
<i>Course</i>	Master Thesis Philosophy	<i>Words, excl.</i>	12.850
<i>Supervisor</i>	Dr. E.-O. Onnasch	<i>Words, incl.</i>	14.675
<i>Second reader</i>	Dr. J.P.M. Philips	<i>Date</i>	2014.07.03

Introduction	3
1. The cosmological argument	5
1.1. The universe has a cause, for <i>Ex nihilo, nihil fit</i>	6
1.1.1. Hume's epistemology, a brief discussion	7
1.1.2. The universe has a cause, for <i>Ex nihilo, nihil fit</i> -- continu'd	10
1.1.3. Consequences for the cosmological argument	10
1.2. An infinite chain of contingent, external causes without overall support	12
1.3. Internal cause	13
1.4. A necessary resp. necessarily existing, external cause, viz. God	14
1.4.1. Consequences for the cosmological argument	16
1.5. Saving the cosmological argument from Hume	17
2. The argument from design	18
2.1. The argument from design	19
2.2. Formal argument: Improper reasoning from part to whole	20
2.3. Substantial arguments against the argument from design	21
2.3.1. The design-analogy on itself	21
2.3.2. The design-analogy compared to alternative analogies	22
2.4. Cleanthes' response to the substantial arguments	24
2.4.1. The design argument resp. analogy is self-evident and undeniable	26
2.4.2. The 'irregular argument' argument	27
2.4.3. The 'abstruse cavil' argument	27
2.4.3.1. The <i>voice in the clouds</i> case	28
2.4.3.2. The <i>natural volumes</i> case	30
2.5. Reasoning from experience and divine attributes ascribed by theism	32
Conclusion	35
References	37

## Introduction

In the *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion* (1779), published a few years after his death, David Hume discusses the cosmological argument and the argument from design in dialogue form, primarily via the characters of Cleanthes, Demea and Philo. In what might be called the foreword of the work (for it is already in dialogue form), Hume remarks - via the character of Pamphilus, the narrator (from memory) of the whole *Dialogues* - that a dialogue-form, as opposed to a systematic ('methodical and didactic') exposition, is suited to a topic from natural religion, because such topics are, in a way, very obvious and important, but are also very obscure and uncertain.<sup>1</sup> Although the work is highly readable and entertaining in its current form, it is the aim of this paper to put the arguments regarding the cosmological argument and the argument from design that are presented in the *Dialogues* in a rather scattered and sometimes somewhat incomplete way into a systematic form, supplementing them where considered appropriate with arguments from other of his works or with my analysis of what certain missing arguments could be, so that their pros and cons can be assessed much more easily than they can from a reading of (a part or the whole of) the *Dialogues* in its current form. As Hume's writings on religion, amongst which most notably the *Dialogues*, are widely considered to be pioneering and still-relevant works in the field of philosophy of religion,<sup>2</sup> such a systematic exposition of the arguments contained therein may also provide a useful addition to that field. Furthermore, the arguments that Hume presents in the *Dialogues* regarding the cosmological argument and the argument from design, when put into a systematic form as the present paper has aimed to do, are considered to be a very enlightening and elaborate introduction into Hume's overall epistemology resp. philosophy, which can, when gathered solely from the *Treatise* or the first *Enquiry*, be rather difficult to understand. Presumably, Hume's discussion of the cosmological argument and the argument from design in the *Dialogues* is the most extensive application of Hume's philosophical principles to one or more cases written in Hume's own hand.

---

<sup>1</sup> D. Hume (2007, orig. 1779), *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion: And Other Writings*, ed. D. Coleman, New York: Cambridge UP, part 1. By natural religion is meant the practice of supporting religious beliefs, primarily those regarding the existence and attributes of (one or more) God (-s), by the use of reason (-s), instead of e.g. by faith or (personal or public) revelation.

<sup>2</sup> To mention just a few (noted) authors (and their judgements): Gaskin judges Hume to be 'the founder of the philosophy of religion', Russell writes that "David Hume's various writings concerning problems of religion are among the most important and influential contributions on this topic", and Coleman writes, more specifically regarding the *Dialogues*, that "David Hume's *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion* (1779) is one of the most influential works in the philosophy of religion". J.C.A. Gaskin (1988, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed.), *Hume's Philosophy of Religion*, London: MacMillan Press, p.230; P. Russell, 'Hume on Religion', in E.N. Zalta (ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2013 Edition), <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2013/entries/hume-religion/> (last consulted 2014.07.02), introduction; Hume, *Dialogues*, ed. by Coleman, p.xi.

As regards the form of this paper, it deserves to be noted that in this paper, no position is taken on the question of which argument(s), position(s) or character(s) Hume personally identifies himself with. For that reason, as well as to be accurate, for every (pro or con) argument that is taken from the *Dialogues*, it is noted in which character Hume has put it forth.

The first chapter of this paper deals with Hume's reflections, as presented in the *Dialogues*, on the cosmological argument. In the second and last chapter of this paper, Hume's reflections, again as presented in the *Dialogues*, on the argument from design will be discussed.

# 1. The cosmological argument

The cosmological argument, one of the two well-known so-called *a priori* arguments for the existence of a God, has been around, in one form or another, ever since the start of Western philosophy. In Hume's days, it had recently been forcefully propounded by Samuel Clarke in the influential Boyle lectures for 1704 and 1705, which were subsequently published as *A Discourse concerning the Being and Attributes of God*.<sup>3</sup> Hume explicitly presents (in the person of Demea) and discusses (chiefly in the person of Cleanthes) the argument in part ix of the *Dialogues*, but his discussion of the argument in that place is only very brief, and even misses some remarks that he has made on parts of the argument in other of his works, most prominently in the *Treatise* and the *Enquiry*. These remarks will be supplied in the following analysis of the argument. At the start of the discussion of every part of the argument, it will be indicated from what source or sources Hume's response to that part is primarily drawn.

The cosmological argument that Hume presents in the *Dialogues*, which is based on Clarke's then recent account of it, can be divided in the following parts.

- 1) The universe as we know it has to have had a cause (resp. have been caused), for *Ex nihilo, nihil fit* (from nothing, nothing comes; resp. nothing comes from nothing).
- 2) The cause of the universe cannot have been a contingent resp. contingently existent, external cause, for that would have to have been caused as well, leading to an infinite chain, which would still need support as a whole.
- 3) The cause of the universe cannot have been an internal cause (i.e. something internal to the universe), for something cannot be the cause of resp. cause itself.
- 4) Therefore, the cause of the universe has been a necessary resp. necessarily existent, external cause (resp. Being), who carries the reason of his existence in himself, and who cannot be supposed not to exist without an express contradiction, *viz.* God.<sup>4</sup>

Before examining what Hume, in his published writings, has said regarding this argument, it deserves to be noted that even if this argument were found to be valid, it would only provide the

---

<sup>3</sup> D. Hume (2008, orig. 1779), *Dialogues and Natural History of Religion*, ed. with intro. and notes by J.C.A. Gaskin, New York: Oxford UP, p.207. In this chapter, written prior to the rest of this paper, I refer to Gaskin's edition of Hume's *Dialogues*, instead of to Coleman's edition, to which I refer in the rest of this paper. When I started writing on the second chapter, I realized that I would use many and long quotes, so I looked for a digital edition of the *Dialogues*, and found Coleman's edition. The texts of the two editions are identical, apart from some very minor differences in spelling, so I did not feel the need to replace the quotes from and references to Gaskin (in the first chapter) with quotes from and references to Coleman (used in the rest of this paper).

<sup>4</sup> As noted, the entire argument is presented in part 9 of the *Dialogues*.

barest basis for either deism or theism, for it only states that (what we call) God is a necessary (resp. necessarily existing resp. uncaused), external something which has caused (created) the universe as we know it.<sup>5</sup> Theism in particular would still need to provide one or more proofs for the other attributes that it ascribes to God, such as his benevolence and his omniscience, which attributes lie at the heart of its system of belief. Turning now to what Hume has written on the cosmological argument, we find that he has attacked every part of it except for the third, and that he has responded most vehemently to the first part, which response will be considered first.

### 1.1. The universe has a cause, for *Ex nihilo, nihil fit*

- 1) The universe as we know it has to have had a cause (resp. have been caused), for *Ex nihilo, nihil fit* (from nothing, nothing comes; resp. nothing comes from nothing).

In the *Dialogues*, Hume does not explicitly discuss this part of the cosmological argument. He does discuss it in part 1.3.3 of the *Treatise* and in part 12 of the *Enquiry*, but that discussion draws heavily on his overall epistemology, which is set out in the beginnings of both of the works. After an introductory comment on Hume's response to the first part of the cosmological argument, his overall epistemology will therefore be discussed briefly in the following sub-section.

In the last note to *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (orig. 1748), attached to one of the final paragraphs of the work, Hume writes:

That impious maxim of the ancient philosophy, *Ex nihilo, nihil fit*, by which the creation of matter was excluded, ceases to be a maxim, according to this philosophy. Not only the will of the supreme Being may create matter; but, for aught we know *a priori*, the will of any other being might create it, or any other cause, that the most whimsical imagination can assign.<sup>6</sup>

By 'this philosophy' Hume refers to his own philosophy, as presented in the *Treatise* and the *Enquiry*, a fundamental distinction of which philosophy is very relevant to the considerations at hand, and will therefore be discussed in the following sub-section.

---

<sup>5</sup> By deism is meant the belief that there exists a supreme being resp. intelligence resp. deity that is responsible for the creation of the universe and/ or the order that we perceive in it. By theism is meant the belief that there exists one supreme being resp. intelligence resp. Deity with several supreme attributes such as omnipotence and omniscience, who is responsible for the creation of the universe and the order that we perceive in it, and who actively continues to govern resp. governs the universe.

<sup>6</sup> D. Hume (2007, orig. 1748), *An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*, ed. with intro. and notes by P. Millican, New York: Oxford UP, endnote [Q] to 12.3.29 [chapter, part, paragraph; if there are only two numbers, then it is chapter, paragraph (as not all chapters contain multiple parts)], p.131.

### 1.1.1. Hume's epistemology, a brief discussion

The relevant distinction, also known as Hume's fork, is the distinction between what Hume calls *relations of ideas* and the related *a priori, demonstrative reasonings* on the one hand, and what he calls *matters of fact (and existence)* and the related *a posteriori, moral reasonings* on the other.<sup>7</sup> Before explaining both of these categories, however, something needs to be said about the epistemological fundament of all of Hume's philosophy. Hume, following Locke, and opposing certain well-known rationalists such as Descartes, argues that all our ideas ultimately derive from our experience, earning him the title of empiricist.<sup>8</sup> That argument, as will become evident shortly, has large consequences on the quantity and strength of the knowledge claims that one can make while upholding it. If one, for example, would argue or assume that we do not derive all of our ideas from experience, but receive some of them in a non-experiential way, e.g. from an omnipotent, omniscient and benevolent God who has created and governs the universe, than one will be able, on the basis of that argument or assumption, to justify more and/ or stronger knowledge claims than one can on the basis of Hume's strictly empiricist philosophy.

Coming now to the aforementioned distinction, let us examine what kind of knowledge claims one can make in either category. As regards the relations between our ideas, Hume argues that we may achieve relative certainty (most notably in the field of mathematics), so that *a priori* reasonings concerning such matters may be called capable of demonstration resp. demonstrative. I write *relative* certainty, for Hume argues that we, the ones performing the reasonings, are fallible, so that even in the field of demonstrative reasonings, we may only reach relative certainty.<sup>9</sup> That certainty, however, despite not being absolute (but only relative), is the greatest certainty that we can achieve in any of our intellectual endeavours. The defining quality of demonstrative reasonings is formed by the law of contradiction, or put another way, by the inconceivability resp. unintelligibility of the opposite of the reasoning resp. proposition under consideration. An easy example of a demonstrative proposition is 'a triangle does not have four angles', with the opposing proposition 'a triangle has four angles'. Since the idea of a triangle is incompatible with resp. contradicts the idea of four angles, the combination of these two ideas into one idea entails a contradiction resp. is

---

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 4.1.1-2. As regards the first kind of reasonings, Hume also speaks of *intuitive* [ibid.] and *abstract* [ibid., e.g. 4.1.13] reasonings. As regards the second kind, Hume also speaks of *experimental* [ibid., e.g. 9.1] reasonings and of *reasonings from experience* [ibid., e.g. 5.1.2]. I have put '(and existence)' between brackets because Hume regularly but far from always adds this phrase to the phrase *matters of fact*.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., ch.2; or *Treatise*, 1.1.1. D. Hume (2003, orig. 1739/40), *A Treatise of Human Nature: Being an Attempt to Introduce the Experimental Method of Reasoning into Moral Subjects*, New York: Dover. For an enlightening treatment of the debate between rationalists and empiricists (such as Hume), see P. Markie (2008), 'Rationalism vs. Empiricism', in E.N. Zalta (ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2013 Edition), <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2013/entries/rationalism-empiricism/> (last consulted 2014.06.06).

<sup>9</sup> *Treatise*, 1.4.1.

inconceivable resp. is unintelligible, so that the proposition ‘a triangle does not have four angles’ is demonstratively certain, since its opposite, the proposition ‘a triangle has four angles’, entails a contradiction resp. is inconceivable resp. is unintelligible.<sup>10</sup>

As regards the relations between our ideas and our experience, Hume reaches a much more sceptical conclusion than he does with regard to the relations between our ideas, where we might reach a relative certainty. Here, we may only reach varying degrees of probability. Hume argues that since our ideas ultimately derive from experience, and since we do not experience the ultimate springs or principles of resp. cause(s) of resp. (nature’s) secret powers underlying our experience (but only our experience itself), we cannot be certain of (the cause or causes of) any future matter of fact, since it entails no contradiction to assume resp. is perfectly conceivable resp. is not demonstratively false that our future experience will not resemble our past experience. Hume himself, in a paragraph in which he briefly summarizes what he has argued for up to that point, concisely puts the foregoing in the following words:

All reasonings may be divided into two kinds, namely demonstrative reasoning, or that concerning relations of ideas, and moral reasoning, or that concerning matter of fact and existence. That there are no demonstrative arguments in the case, seems evident; since it implies no contradiction, that the course of nature may change, and that an object, seemingly like those which we have experienced, may be attended with different or contrary effects. May I not clearly and distinctly conceive, that a body, falling from the clouds, and which, in all other respects, resembles snow, has yet the taste of salt or feeling of fire? Is there any more intelligible proposition than to affirm, that all the trees will flourish in December and January, and decay in May and June? Now whatever is intelligible, and can be distinctly conceived, implies no contradiction, and can never be proved false by any demonstrative argument or abstract reasoning *a priori*.

[new paragraph] If we be, therefore, engaged by arguments to put trust in past experience, and make it the standard of our future judgment, these arguments must be probable only, or such as regard matter of fact and real existence, according to the division above mentioned.<sup>11</sup>

In sum, Hume argues that only in demonstrative reasonings boundaries are placed on what *can be* resp. *is possible* and what *cannot be* resp. *is impossible*, for “every proposition, which is not true, is

---

<sup>10</sup> I write ‘entails a contradiction resp. is inconceivable resp. is unintelligible’ because Hume varies his use of one or more of these three formulations. [See e.g. *Enquiry*, 4.1.1-2.] From now on, I will mostly use the contradiction and/ or inconceivability formulations.

<sup>11</sup> *Enquiry*, 4.2.18-19.



there confused and unintelligible".<sup>12</sup> In all other reasonings - which Hume collectively calls moral reasonings, experimental reasonings, or reasonings from experience - the reasonings itself, and their opposites, (by definition, for otherwise they would be demonstrative reasonings) do not entail a contradiction resp. are conceivable resp. *can be* resp. *are possible* resp. cannot be (demonstratively, for there is no other way to *prove* anything, for in non-demonstrative reasonings, one can only show something to be more or less *probable*) proven not to be possible. In Hume's words, very near the end of the *Enquiry*, and leading up to the footnote on the *Ex nihilo, nihil fit* phrase from which we departed into this detour concerning some relevant parts of Hume's epistemology:

It seems to me, that the only objects of the abstract sciences or of demonstration are quantity and number, and that all attempts to extend this more perfect species of knowledge beyond these bounds are mere sophistry and illusion. [...]

[new paragraph] All other enquiries of men regard only matter of fact and existence; and these are evidently incapable of demonstration. Whatever *is* may *not be*. No negation of a fact can involve a contradiction. The non-existence of any being, without exception, is as clear and distinct an idea as its existence. The proposition, which affirms it not to be, however false, is no less conceivable and intelligible, than that which affirms it to be. The case is different with the [abstract resp. demonstrative] sciences, properly so called. Every proposition, which is not true, is there confused and unintelligible. That the cube root of 64 is equal to the half of 10, is a false proposition, and can never be distinctly conceived. But that Caesar, or the angel Gabriel, or any being never existed, may be a false proposition, but still is perfectly conceivable, and implies no contradiction.

[new paragraph] [...] If we reason *a priori*, any thing may appear able to produce any thing. The falling of a pebble may, for ought we know, extinguish the sun; or the wish of a man controul the planets in their orbits.<sup>13</sup>

To be absolutely sure: according to Hume's philosophy, the falling of a pebble may extinguish the sun because it does not entail a contradiction to assume resp. is perfectly conceivable resp. is not demonstratively false that it does. Of course, also in Hume's philosophy, such an event will be proclaimed to be highly *improbable*, for we have a lot of experience to the contrary. However, and this is really Hume's point, we cannot *rule out* resp. (demonstratively) *prove* that a pebble may not extinguish the sun, for the reasons just stated (no contradiction entailed, etc.). Therefore, however improbable such an event may be, for ought we know, it may have been the case, currently be the case or be the case at some future point in time.

---

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.3.28.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.3.27-29.

### 1.1.2. The universe has a cause, for *Ex nihilo, nihil fit* -- continu'd

Now, let us return to what Hume writes on the *Ex nihilo* phrase:

That impious maxim of the ancient philosophy, *Ex nihilo, nihil fit*, by which the creation of matter was excluded, ceases to be a maxim, according to this philosophy. Not only the will of the supreme Being may create matter; but, for aught we know *a priori*, the will of any other being might create it, or any other cause, that the most whimsical imagination can assign.<sup>14</sup>

I reckon, and hope, that this remark now makes perfect sense. To be sure: anything may create matter, and anything may come from nothing, because these propositions do not entail a contradiction resp. are perfectly conceivable resp. are not demonstrably/ *a priori* false, however improbable - as based on our experience - they may be. The *Ex nihilo, nihil fit* phrase may therefore be taken as an *a posteriori* resp. moral resp. experiential probability, but not as an *a priori* resp. demonstrative (relative) truth.

A final remark that Hume makes on the first part of the cosmological argument, which remark is implied in the foregoing analysis but deserves to be made explicit, is that it tacitly assumes that 'nothing comes into existence without a cause'. As regards this proposition, same as with the 'nothing comes from nothing' proposition, Hume notes that the opposite of this proposition, namely 'something can come into existence without a cause (resp. without being caused)', does not entail a contradiction resp. is perfectly conceivable resp. is not demonstratively/ *a priori* false.<sup>15</sup> So, as a matter of fact (and existence), something can come into existence without a cause, even though that may be, again as a matter of fact (and existence), rather improbable.

### 1.1.3. Consequences for the cosmological argument

- 1) The universe as we know it has to have had a cause (resp. have been caused), for *Ex nihilo, nihil fit* (from nothing, nothing comes; resp. nothing comes from nothing).

As we have seen, according to Hume's philosophy, which is strictly empiricist in nature, something need not have a cause (resp. have been caused) to come into existence, for this proposition does not entail a contradiction resp. is perfectly conceivable resp. is not demonstrably false. As the above argument, the first part of the whole cosmological argument, plays a fundamental role in that whole argument, and as it has now been proven to be unsound on the basis of Hume's philosophy, the whole argument *a priori* already turns out to be unsound according to Hume's philosophy. Hume

---

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, endnote [Q] to 12.3.29, p.131.

<sup>15</sup> *Treatise*, 1.3.3.

has, however, also attacked the other parts of the argument, save for the third part. In the following sections, his responses to those other parts will be discussed in turn.

## 1.2. An infinite chain of contingent, external causes without overall support

- 2) The cause of the universe cannot have been a contingent resp. contingently existent, external cause, for that would have to have been caused as well, leading to an infinite chain, which would still need support as a whole.

Hume briefly discusses this part of the cosmological argument in part ix of the *Dialogues*. In the person of Cleanthes - who “would not leave it to Philo [...] to point out the weakness” of the cosmological argument (then just advanced by Demea), though he “know[s] that the starting [of] objections is his chief delight” - Hume writes that “in tracing an eternal succession of objects, it seems absurd to inquire for a general cause or first Author”, for “how can any thing, that exists from eternity, have a cause, since that relation implies a priority in time and a beginning of existence?”<sup>16</sup> In the same spirit, and still in the person of Cleanthes, Hume adds that is it very unreasonable to ask for the ‘overall’ cause of an (infinite) chain of events, for such a chain “is sufficiently explained [or unexplained] in explaining [or not explaining] the cause[s] of the parts”.<sup>17</sup> In effect, this means that the cause of the universe might very well reside in an infinite chain of contingent, external causes. There is nothing unreasonable about that proposition.

Besides the foregoing response, which treats this part of the cosmological argument at face value and so attempts to defeat it at its own terms, one might add, on the basis of Hume’s response to the first part of the cosmological argument (see previous section), that - according to Hume’s philosophy - the cause of the universe might very well be a contingent, external cause, for that cause *need not* (in turn) have been caused; it might just have sprung into existence. (Just as, as discussed in the previous section, the entire universe need not have been caused, and might just have sprung into existence.) This means that the infinite chain of which the argument speaks could be stopped short at any (contingent, external) cause, and so need not be an infinite chain.

Both on its own terms and on the basis of his (empiricist) philosophy, Hume denotes this part of the cosmological argument as unsound. As Hume has now argued that both of the first two parts of the argument are unsound, and as the third part is not really an argument but more of a verbal point, the fourth and concluding part of the argument is now left hanging in suspense. Nevertheless, Hume has also critically discussed that last part on its own terms. After very briefly quoting what Hume has said regarding the third part of the entire cosmological argument, just to be complete, his response to that last part will be discussed.

---

<sup>16</sup> *Dialogues*, part 9.

<sup>17</sup> *ibid.*, part 9.

### 1.3. Internal cause

- 3) The cause of the universe cannot have been an internal cause (i.e. something internal to the universe), for something cannot be the cause of resp. cause itself.

In part ix of the *Dialogues*, this part of the cosmological argument is presented, in the person of Demea, in the following words: “Whatever exists must have a cause or reason of its existence; it being absolutely impossible for any thing to produce itself, or be the cause of its own existence.”<sup>18</sup>

In that (nor in another) part of the *Dialogues*, no arguments are given to support this claim, nor is this claim discussed in that or another part of the work. In the *Treatise*, part 1.3.3, an argument in support of the foregoing claim is presented, to which Hume subscribes. In that part of the *Treatise*, Hume in effect discusses the first part of the cosmological argument (see section 1.1), although he does not mention it as such, and does not mention (the existence of or arguments for the existence of) God, presumably not to offend his audience, and/ or not to draw censure or even persecution on himself. The proposition which he expressly investigates in that part of the *Treatise* is the proposition ‘whatever begins to exist, must have a cause of existence’. As regards the claim under discussion, viz. the third part of the cosmological argument, Hume writes in that part of the *Treatise*:

Every thing, ‘tis said, must have a cause; for if any thing wanted a cause, *it* wou’d produce *itself*; that is, exist before it existed; which is impossible. But this reasoning is plainly unconvincing; because it supposes, that in our denial of a cause we still grant what we expressly deny, viz. that there must be a cause; which therefore is taken to be the object itself; and *that*, no doubt, is an evident contradiction.<sup>19</sup>

According to Hume, most (if not all) scholars of his day, and, presumably, common usage (both then and now), a cause exists prior to its effect. So if something is said to cause (resp. have caused) itself, it must (have) exist (-ed) [as a cause] before it comes (came) into existence [as an effect], which is, to use Hume’s phrase, an ‘evident contradiction’.<sup>20</sup>

Hume thus agrees with this part of the cosmological argument. However, as noted before, this part does comparatively little to establish the conclusion of the entire cosmological argument, for which it is all to do. In the following section, that conclusion will be the point of investigation.

---

<sup>18</sup> *Dialogues*, part 9.

<sup>19</sup> *Treatise*, 1.3.3.

<sup>20</sup> As the proposition (viz. something can be the cause of resp. cause itself) is found to entail a contradiction, it is, in keeping with Hume’s aforementioned epistemological distinction, demonstratively resp. *a priori* false (resp. inconceivable resp. unintelligible), and so not (just) morally resp. *a posteriori* (resp. empirically resp. factually resp. as a matter of fact (and existence)) improbable.

#### 1.4. A necessary resp. necessarily existing, external cause, viz. God

- 4) Therefore, the cause of the universe has been a necessary resp. necessarily existent, external cause (resp. Being), who carries the reason of his existence in himself, and who cannot be supposed not to exist without an express contradiction, viz. God.

As Hume has argued that two of the three premises leading up to this conclusion, which premises are of crucial importance for the establishment of it, are unsound, the ‘therefore’ at the start of this last part of the cosmological argument appears no longer justified. Hume has, however, also attempted to show that that which (this conclusion of) the entire cosmological argument has aimed to establish all along, namely a ‘necessarily existent Being’, is an altogether meaningless phrase.

Hume discusses this final part of the cosmological argument in part ix of the *Dialogues*. There he writes - drawing on his overall epistemology, the relevant parts of which have been set out above (sect. 1.1.1) - in the person of Cleanthes (who would not leave it to Philo to start objections against the cosmological argument then just advanced by Demea, see sect. 1.2 above):

I shall begin with observing, that there is an evident absurdity in pretending to demonstrate a matter of fact [and existence], or to prove it by any arguments *a priori*. Nothing is demonstrable, unless the contrary implies a contradiction. Nothing, that is distinctly conceivable, implies a contradiction. Whatever we conceive as existent, we can also conceive as non-existent. There is no Being, therefore, whose non-existence implies a contradiction. Consequently there is no Being, whose existence is demonstrable. I propose this argument as entirely decisive, and am willing to rest the whole controversy upon it.<sup>21</sup>

In short, as we can conceive any being (Being) to exist or not to exist, the existence of any being can never be demonstrated (*a priori*), since for something (resp. a proposition) to be demonstrated means, according to Hume’s epistemology (see sect. 1.1.1), that the opposite of that something implies a contradiction resp. is inconceivable resp. is unintelligible, and in this case the opposite of either the existence or non-existence of any being is conceivable, as we can conceive any being both to exist and not to exist. This leaves us, however, with the phrase ‘necessarily existent’, for that phrase clearly leads to a contradiction in the proposition ‘a (the) necessarily existent being (Being) does not exist’. In response to this problem, Hume writes that the phrase ‘necessary existence’ really has no meaning. In his words:

---

<sup>21</sup> *Dialogues*, part 9.

It will still be possible for us, at any time, to conceive the non-existence of what we formerly conceived to exist; nor can the mind ever lie under a necessity of supposing any object to remain always in being; in the same manner as we lie under a necessity of always conceiving twice two to be four. The words, therefore, *necessary existence*, have no meaning; or, which is the same thing, none that is consistent.<sup>22</sup>

According to Hume's philosophy, as briefly set out in sect. 1.1.1 above, something (e.g. a proposition) is only necessary if it cannot even be conceived resp. would be unintelligible resp. would entail a contradiction resp. would have no (consistent) meaning if it were different (false). And, according to the same philosophy, existence resp. for something to be (non-) existent is, by its very nature, a contingent quality, for we can always conceive something - anything - to be both existent and non-existent. Thus, according to this philosophy, putting the two terms together into one phrase, i.e. 'necessary existence', yields a contradiction in terms; a phrase that entails a contradiction resp. is unconceivable resp. is unintelligible resp. has no (consistent) meaning.<sup>23</sup>

Directly following the foregoing comment, Hume adds a final, critical remark to his discussion of the conclusion of the cosmological argument. Even assuming that the phrase 'necessary existence' would somehow have a (consistent) meaning, he writes:

But farther; why may not the material universe be the necessarily existent Being, according to this pretended explication of necessity? We dare not affirm that we know all the qualities of matter; and for aught we can determine, it may contain some qualities, which, were they known, would make its non-existence appear as great a contradiction as that twice two is five.<sup>24</sup>

So, while assuming that the phrase 'necessary existence' has a (consistent) meaning, the conclusion of the whole cosmological argument might just as well be that the material universe, i.e. the matter in the universe, is the necessarily existent being that has caused the entire universe. It appears, however, that Hume now runs into a contradiction, for he has earlier admitted the third part of the cosmological argument, namely that something cannot cause itself. I see two ways out of this contradiction: 1) the material universe is necessarily existent and has (at some point in time) caused the rest of the universe (though I am not sure what rest that would be -- perhaps Hume displays here, maybe just for the sake of argument, a non-materialist conception of the universe, according to

---

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., part 9.

<sup>23</sup> In the foregoing quote, Hume himself gives as an example of a necessary resp. necessarily true resp. *a priori* resp. demonstrative resp. cannot be conceived to be different (false) resp. [etc.] proposition, the proposition 'twice two is four', but personally I usually give as an example of such a proposition a proposition about a triangle, e.g. 'a triangle does not have four angles'. (See sect. 1.1.1 of the current paper.)

<sup>24</sup> *Dialogues*, part 9.

which there exists more than matter alone), and 2) in making the point that the (material) universe might be the necessarily existent being, Hume draws on his earlier critique of the first part of the cosmological argument, and thus assumes that the (necessarily existent, material) universe need not have been caused (and so need not have caused itself, which Hume has said to be contradictory).

#### 1.4.1. Consequences for the cosmological argument

After arguing that two of the three premises leading up to the conclusion of the cosmological argument are unsound, so that that conclusion is no longer supported, Hume argues that that conclusion, even assuming that the premises leading up to it would have been sound, either makes no sense, since according to his philosophy the phrase 'necessarily existent' has no (consistent) meaning, or, when assuming that that phrase somehow has a (consistent) meaning, could just as well have been a different conclusion, e.g. that the material universe is the necessarily existent being that is the cause of all that is.



## 1.5. Saving the cosmological argument from Hume

As has been seen, Hume has launched a profound attack on the cosmological argument as a whole, by thoroughly attacking three out of four of its parts. It might now be asked: How could one save the cosmological argument - in the form presented and attacked by Hume - from Hume?

In his attack of the first part of the argument, Hume argues that something need not be caused to come into existence, so that something *can* come from nothing. Someone attempting to save (this part of) the cosmological argument would therefore have to provide a reason as to why something can come into existence only by being caused (and not in any other way), so that indeed only nothing comes from nothing.

Hume attacks the second part mainly by arguing that an explanation of (the cause(s) of) the parts of a whole suffices to explain (the cause(s) of) the whole, i.e. after explaining (the cause(s) of) the parts, one need not provide a separate explanation of (the cause(s) of) the whole. Someone attempting to save (this part of) the cosmological argument would therefore have to provide a reason as to why an explanation of (the cause(s) of) the parts of a whole does not suffice as an explanation of (the cause(s) of) the whole, and indicate - preferably with one or more examples - what kind of an extra explanation is needed to sufficiently explain (the cause(s) of) the whole.

Hume agrees with the third part of the argument, so that part need not be altered or provided with more support.

Hume attacks the fourth and concluding part of the cosmological argument in two stages. First, he argues that the phrase 'necessarily existent', which is of crucial importance to (this part of) the cosmological argument, has no (consistent) meaning. Someone attempting to save (this part of) the cosmological argument would therefore have to show, first of all, that that phrase does have a (consistent) meaning. Second, Hume argues that even if that phrase does have a (consistent) meaning, the conclusion of (this part of) the cosmological argument might just as well have been that the material universe (i.e. the matter in the universe) is the necessarily existent being. So secondly, someone attempting to save (this part of) the cosmological argument from Hume's critique would have to provide a reason as to why the only possible conclusion of (this part of) the cosmological argument is the existence of a necessarily existent *being* (Being), viz. God.

## 2. The argument from design

*A very small part of this great system, during a very short time, is very imperfectly discovered to us: And do we thence pronounce decisively concerning the origin of the whole?*<sup>25</sup>

*You might cry out sceptic and railer, as much as you pleased: But having found, in so many other subjects, much more familiar, the imperfections and even contradictions of human reason, I never should expect any success from its feeble conjectures, in a subject, so sublime, and so remote from the sphere of our observation.*<sup>26</sup>

*A total suspense of judgement is here our only reasonable resource.*<sup>27</sup>

The argument from design, as opposed to *a priori* arguments such as the cosmological argument discussed in the previous chapter, draws on experience to prove its point. In this chapter, the arguments in favour of and against the argument from design that Hume presents, via the characters of Cleanthes, Demea and Philo, in the *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion* will be discussed. It deserves to be noted right away that the argument from design can be and is used by both deists and theists to prove the existence of a supreme intelligence from which the universe and the order that we experience in it originates. Deists will stop short at such a proof, whereas theists will also aim to supply proofs of the additional attributes that they ascribe to the supreme intelligence, viz. God. Up to the final section of this chapter, the argument from design will only be discussed in its potential to prove a supreme intelligence from which the universe and the order that we experience in it originates, so that the arguments in favour of and against it apply equally to deists and theists. In the final section of this paper, it will be discussed whether the argument from design is, or to put it more broadly, whether reasonings from our experience are, sufficient to prove the attributes that theists additionally ascribe to the supreme intelligence.

---

<sup>25</sup> Hume, *Dialogues*, ed. Coleman, 2.22 [part, paragraph].

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.24.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.12.

## 2.1. The argument from design

The argument from design that Hume, in the character of Cleanthes, presents in the *Dialogues* can be divided in the following parts.

- 1) We experience adjustment of means to ends resp. order in the universe.
- 2) That order “resembles exactly, though it much exceeds, the productions [resp. effects] of human contrivance; of human design, thought, wisdom and intelligence”.<sup>28</sup>
- 3) Similar causes prove similar effects, and vice versa.
- 4) Therefore, “since the effects resemble each other, we are led to infer, by all the rules of analogy, that the causes also resemble; and that the Author of nature [resp. the universe] is somewhat similar to the mind of man; though possessed of much larger faculties, proportioned to the grandeur of the work, which he has executed”.<sup>29</sup>

Unlike the cosmological argument discussed in the previous chapter, I will not discuss Hume’s arguments on the argument from design via a separate discussion of every part of the argument, for the reason that his remarks on the overall argument from design cannot be mapped as clearly onto the separate parts of the argument. However, I can here give a brief indication of what Hume’s remarks on the overall argument will be via a mentioning of some of his remarks on the parts of the argument. The foregoing first part of the argument from design is not challenged by Hume in the *Dialogues*. The second part is challenged, mainly on account of the important phrase ‘exactly resembles [...]’. The third part is not challenged in the *Dialogues*, presumably for the sake of argument, for Hume has extensively challenged that claim in other of his works, most notably the (first book of the) *Treatise* and the first *Enquiry*.<sup>30</sup> (In fact, Hume is presumably most known for his critical, or perhaps one should say sceptical, analysis of the relation between cause and effect.) The above fourth part of the argument from design is discussed most extensively in the *Dialogues*. As regards that part, Hume presents both formal and substantial arguments, which are discussed in the following sections. This chapter closes, as has been indicated above, with a discussion of the attributes that theists (but not deists) ascribe, on the basis of (reasonings from) experience, to the supreme intelligence, viz. God.

---

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 2.5.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 2.5. The whole argument is presented in paragraph 2.5, though part 3 is stated explicitly in 2.17.

<sup>30</sup> As regards the third part of the argument, Hume writes in the *Dialogues*: “That all inferences, *Cleanthes*, concerning fact are founded on experience, and that all experimental reasonings are founded on the supposition, that similar causes prove similar effects, and similar effects similar causes; I shall not, at present, much dispute with you.” Ibid., 2.17. The ‘at present’ presumably refers to his discussion of this supposition in other of his works, such as mentioned in the main text.

## 2.2. Formal argument: Improper reasoning from part to whole

Perhaps the most fundamental, critical argument that Hume, via Philo, presents in the *Dialogues* against the argument from design, and, in fact, against all arguments from experience (such as arguments from analogy) on the cause(s) of the universe and the order that we experience in it, is the argument that it is not proper to transfer a conclusion from an operation of a part upon another part to the origin of the whole.<sup>31</sup> This argument can be called a formal argument against all reasonings from experience regarding the cause(s) of the universe and the order that we experience in it, because it leaves the content resp. substance of any such specific reasoning out of discussion. Hume, via Philo, rhetorically puts the point:

Can a conclusion, with any propriety, be transferred from parts to the whole? Does not the great disproportion bar all comparison and inference? From observing the growth of a hair, can we learn any thing concerning the generation of a man? Would the manner of a leaf's blowing [resp. blossoming], even though perfectly known, afford us any instruction concerning the vegetation of a tree?<sup>32</sup>

In the sentence directly following this quote, Hume, via Philo, explicitly states that reasoning from an operation of a part upon another part to the origin of the whole “never can be admitted”.<sup>33</sup> In the following quote, Hume illustrates the point somewhat further:

By observation, we know somewhat of the economy, action, and nourishment of a finished animal; but we must transfer with great caution that observation to the growth of a foetus in the womb, and still more, to the formation of an animalcule<sup>34</sup> in the loins of its male parent. Nature, we find, even from our limited experience, possesses an infinite number of springs and principles, which incessantly discover themselves on every change of her position and situation. And what new and unknown principles would actuate her in so new and unknown a situation, as that of the formation of a universe, we cannot, without the utmost temerity, pretend to determine.

A very small part of this great system, during a very short time, is very imperfectly discovered to us: And do we thence pronounce decisively concerning the origin of the whole?<sup>35</sup>

---

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.18-9.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.18. Gaskin notes that ‘blowing’ is a synonym for ‘blossoming’. Hume, *Dialogues*, ed. Gaskin, explanatory note to p.49, to be found on p.204.

<sup>33</sup> Hume, *Dialogues*, ed. Coleman, 2.19.

<sup>34</sup> A note by the editor (Coleman) explains: “*Animalcule*: According to early biological theory, a miniature, fully formed individual present in the sperm cell.” *Ibid.*, p.25.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.21 and 2.22.

On the basis of this formal argument, the argument from design, as well as any other experiential argument regarding the origin of the universe and the order that we experience in it, is improperly supported from the start. In the (rest of the) *Dialogues*, no reply is offered to this argument. Instead, directly following this argument, Hume, via Philo, writes that even when “allowing that we were to take the *operations* of one part of nature upon another for the foundation of our judgement concerning the *origin* of the whole (which never can be admitted)”, there still are many substantial (i.e. aimed at the substance of a specific argument) arguments against the argument from design, with which he continues. These substantial arguments against the argument from design are explicitly and extensively discussed in the rest of the *Dialogues*, and it is to a discussion of these arguments that we turn now.

### 2.3. Substantial arguments against the argument from design

As regards the argument from design, Hume remarks, via Philo, that the analogy between productions of human design and the entire universe, on which analogy the whole argument turns, is too weak to support the conclusion that the latter, like the former, originates in (something like human) intelligence. The analogy drawn on in the argument from design is argued to be too weak (to support the conclusion of the argument) when examined on itself, and when examined in comparison to alternative hypotheses, based on alternative analogies, concerning the cause(s) of the universe and the order we experience in it.

#### 2.3.1. The design-analogy on itself

Hume, via Philo, argues that the analogy drawn on in the argument from design is too weak on itself because the order that we experience in the universe does not ‘exactly resemble’ productions of human design (such as e.g. houses or watches), and Hume, in the person of Philo, suggests that “wherever you depart, in the least, from the similarity of the cases, you diminish proportionably the evidence; and may at last bring it to a very weak *analogy*, which is confessedly liable to error and uncertainty”.<sup>36</sup> Secondly, Hume, via Philo, argues that the analogy is too weak on itself, even if we would grant that productions of human design sufficiently resemble the order that we experience in the universe, because it clearly reveals a strong partiality on our behalf, to want to explain the whole universe on the basis of a property, namely (something like human) intelligence, that only has such

---

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.7.

a limited role in the world as we know it, which world represents only a tiny fraction of the supposedly immense universe.<sup>37</sup>

### 2.3.2. The design-analogy compared to alternative analogies

Hume, via Philo, argues that the analogy drawn on in the argument from design is too weak when compared to alternatives because

in such questions, as the present, a hundred contradictory views may preserve a kind of imperfect analogy; and invention has here full scope to exert itself. Without any great effort of thought, I believe that I could, in an instant, propose other systems of cosmogony, which would have some faint appearance of truth; though it is a thousand, a million to one, if either yours or any one of mine be the true system.<sup>38</sup>

Amongst the alternative explanations of the origin and ordering principle of the universe that Hume, via Philo, suggests, based on analogies, are the Epicurean hypothesis (that eternal matter in motion acquires an orderly arrangement at some point in time),<sup>39</sup> the ancient Greek hypothesis that the world is an animal inspirited by an ordering (godly) soul,<sup>40</sup> the hypothesis that the world and the order we experience in it originates in generation (similar to animals) or vegetation (similar to vegetables),<sup>41</sup> the hypothesis that the world and the order we experience in it is the work of an unintelligent cause resp. deity,<sup>42</sup> the hypothesis that the world and the order we experience in it is the work of multiple intelligent or unintelligent, limited, possibly procreating, possibly corporeal, possibly aged, possibly blundering, deities,<sup>43</sup> and the hypothesis that the world and the order we experience in it is the work of an infinite spider, “who spun this whole complicated mass from his bowels”.<sup>44</sup>

Hume, via Philo, acknowledges that one or more of these hypotheses may seem utterly absurd, either when taken on itself, or when compared to the argument from (something like human) design.<sup>45</sup> His point, however, is that when we reason from experience and analogy, any one of these

---

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 2.19. See also 3.12 and 7.11. This argument may remind one of one of the familiar sayings attributed to Xenophanes: “If cows and horses or lions had hands, Or could draw with their hands and make things as men can, Horses would have drawn horse-like gods, cows cow-like gods, And each species would have made the gods’ bodies just like their own.” Various writers and R. Waterfield (2000), *The First Philosophers: The Presocratics and Sophists*, trans. with com. by R. Waterfield, New York: Oxford UP, F8 (DK 21B15; KRS 169), p.27.

<sup>38</sup> Hume, *Dialogues*, ed. Coleman, 8.1.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 8.2 and beyond.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 6.3 and beyond.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 7.1 and beyond.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 5.7.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 5.8 and beyond.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 7.17.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., e.g. 5.12.

hypotheses is as likely, and in some cases even more likely, to be true as is the hypothesis from (something like human) design. For example, regarding the generation or vegetation hypothesis mentioned above, Hume, via Philo, explains why that hypothesis can be taken to be on an equal or even better footing than the design hypothesis in the following words:

The world, says he [Cleanthes], resembles the works of human contrivance: Therefore its cause must also resemble that of the other. Here we may remark, that the operation of one very small part of nature, to wit man, upon another very small part, to wit that inanimate matter lying within his reach, is the rule, by which *Cleanthes* judges of the origin of the whole; and he measures objects, so widely disproportioned, by the same individual standard. But to waive all objections, drawn from this topic [objections such as those discussed above, e.g. the part to whole objection]; I affirm, that there are other parts of the universe (besides the machines of human invention) which bear still a greater resemblance to the fabric of the world, and which therefore afford a better conjecture concerning the universal origin of this system. These parts are animals and vegetables. The world plainly resembles more an animal or a vegetable than it does a watch or a knitting-loom. Its cause, therefore, it is more probable, resembles the cause of the former. The cause of the former is generation or vegetation. The cause, therefore, of the world, we may infer to be something similar or analogous to generation or vegetation.<sup>46</sup>

A little further on, the following insightful remarks are added to the discussion of the generation or vegetation hypothesis:

I understand you, says *Demea*: But what wild, arbitrary suppositions are these? What *data* have you for such extraordinary conclusions? And is the slight, imaginary resemblance of the world to a vegetable or an animal sufficient to establish the same inference with regard to both? Objects, which are in general so widely different; ought they to be a standard for each other?

Right, cries *Philo*: This is the topic on which I have all along insisted. I have still asserted, that we have no *data* to establish any system of cosmogony. Our experience, so imperfect in itself, and so limited both in extent and duration, can afford us no probable conjecture concerning the whole of things. But if we must needs fix on some hypothesis; by what rule, pray, ought we to determine our choice? Is there any other rule than the greater similarity of the objects compared? And does not a plant or an animal, which springs from vegetation or

---

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.3.

generation, bear a stronger resemblance to the world, than does any artificial machine, which arises from reason and design?<sup>47</sup>

Thus, as could already be gathered from the quotations at the start of this chapter, Hume, via Philo, argues that our experience is insufficient to allow us to draw a reasonable and decisive conclusion regarding the cause(s) of the universe and the order we experience in it, even allowing experiential reasonings from part to whole (which never should be admitted), so that “a total suspense of judgment is here our only reasonable resource.”<sup>48</sup> If, however, we *insist* on formulating a conjecture regarding the matter, based on a reasoning from analogy, then we have a great many analogies to choose from, and it seems most reasonable, when engaged in such an endeavour - which really is beyond the bounds of our reason and experience - to choose the analogy with the closest fit between the objects that are being compared, and that analogy, according to Hume, via Philo, is not the analogy drawn on in the argument from design. In any event, the analogy drawn on in the argument from design is not evidently superior to alternative analogies. Thus, even if we would allow such analogies to try and reach something more than the purest of conjectures regarding the cause(s) of the universe and the order we experience in it - which in reality never should be allowed (for the reasons discussed above) - then still the argument from design would not turn out to be the most credible argument regarding “a subject, so sublime, and so remote from the sphere of our observation”.<sup>49</sup>

#### 2.4. Cleanthes’ response to the substantial arguments

After the critical arguments, discussed in the previous chapter, against the cosmological argument had been set out, no further arguments in favour of that argument, e.g. in the form of a response to one or more of those critical arguments, are presented in the *Dialogues*. The case is different with the argument from design, in favour of which several responses are offered to the critical arguments, discussed just now, against that argument. These responses are offered by the character of Cleanthes, who had proposed the argument from design as *the* argument to “prove at once the existence of a Deity, and his similarity to human mind and intelligence.”<sup>50</sup> As remarked, Cleanthes does not respond to Hume’s critical, formal argument, which is a shame, for if that argument is found to hold, then all reasoning from analogy concerning so remote a topic as the cause of the universe are unjustified from the start, no matter their content. Instead, Cleanthes implicitly assumes

---

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.7 and 7.8.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.12.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.24.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.5.



that reasoning from analogy concerning such a topic is justified, and proceeds to argue that his favoured reasoning from analogy concerning the topic, namely the design-analogy, is justified.

Hume, via Cleanthes, offers two responses to the critical, substantial arguments, discussed above, against the argument from design. Both of them start with the claim that “it is by no means necessary, that theists should prove the similarity of the works of nature to those of art; because this similarity is self-evident and undeniable”.<sup>51</sup> The first response adds to this claim the argument that “your [Philo’s] objections, I must freely tell you, are no better than the abstruse cavils of those philosophers who denied motion; and ought to be refuted in the same manner, by illustrations, examples, and instances, rather than by serious argument and philosophy.”<sup>52</sup> The second response adds to the foregoing claim the following argument:

Some beauties in writing we may meet with, which seem contrary to rules, and which gain the affections, and animate the imagination, in opposition to all the precepts of criticism, and to the authority of the established masters of art. And if the argument for theism be, as you pretend, contradictory to the principles of logic; its universal, its irresistible influence proves clearly, that there may be arguments of a like irregular nature. Whatever cavils may be urged, an orderly world [...] will still be received as an incontestable proof of design and intention.<sup>53</sup>

In other words: since the (analogy drawn on in) the argument from design is self-evident and undeniable, either the counter-arguments set out by Philo are false or in any event abstruse (and should therefore not be taken seriously), or the counter-arguments set out by Philo are correct, but as the (analogy drawn on in) the argument from design is self-evident and undeniable, this shows that there are arguments ‘contradictory to the principles of logic’ or ‘of an irregular nature’ in support of the argument from design.

Hume, via Philo or another character, does not respond to these arguments in the *Dialogues*. After Cleanthes’ long speech, in which he presents the foregoing responses, the work continues with: “here I could observe, *Hermippus*, that *Philo* was a little embarrassed and confounded: But while he hesitated in delivering an answer, luckily for him, *Demea* broke in upon the discourse, and saved his countenance”, and then another topic is brought up. In what follows, I will discuss Cleanthes’ responses to Philo’s charges. I will start with the claim on which both responses are founded,

---

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.1. See also 3.7, 3.8 and 4.13.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.1.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.8. I have skipped the following words from the original paragraph (and replaced them with ‘[...]’): “, as well as a coherent, articulate speech,”. I have skipped that phrase because it is not essential to the argument from design as presented by Hume, via Cleanthes, throughout the *Dialogues*. It presumably appears here because in the paragraphs prior to the one from which the quotation is taken, an example on language is used to defend the argument from design from the critical arguments previously set out by Philo.

followed by a discussion of the ‘irregular argument’ argument. Finally, I will discuss Cleanthes’ ‘abstruse cavil’ argument, which he sets out most elaborately.

#### 2.4.1. The design argument resp. analogy is self-evident and undeniable

As stated, both of Cleanthes’ responses to Philo’s arguments build on the aforementioned claim that the similarity between the works of nature (resp. the order we experience in the universe) and the works of (human) art (resp. intelligence) is self-evident and undeniable resp. universal and incontestable. That claim, I would say - and so does Hume in other works, e.g. in the *Natural History of Religion* - is empirically false, for there are, and presumably have always been, people for whom it is not self-evident and people who contest and deny it, so that it is not, and presumably has never been, universally influential resp. avowed.<sup>54</sup> Cleanthes, in his speech, acknowledges that the claim is not always universally avowed, but he attributes this to stupidity:

It sometimes happens, I own, that the religious arguments have not their due influence on an ignorant savage and barbarian; not because they are obscure and difficult, but because he never asks himself any question with regard to them. Whence arises the curious structure of an animal? From the copulation of its parents. And these whence? From *their* parents? A few removes set the objects at such a distance, that to him they are lost in darkness and confusion; nor is he actuated by any curiosity to trace them farther. But this is neither dogmatism nor scepticism, but stupidity.

Thus, even according to the character of Cleanthes, the claim is not universally avowed, and *a fortiori* not self-evident or undeniable resp. incontestable (for otherwise it *would* be universally avowed), but it might still have an influence on all non-stupid, non-ignorant, non-savage, non-barbarian people, and so be ‘universal’ - and self-evident and undeniable resp. incontestable - for that sub-set of all people. Before discussing that attenuated claim, I would like to stress that I consider this attenuation to be a highly significant attenuation, for I consider moving from *all* people to only a certain sub-set of people, for the determining of which sub-set one has considerable latitude, to be highly significant. In fact, the argument now draws an appearance of a rather narrow circularity on itself: ‘all reasonable people share my beliefs, and all people who share my beliefs are reasonable’. Coming now to a discussion of the claim, I would say that there are and have been

---

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, *From The Natural History of Religion*, e.g. Introduction, pp.124-5. Note that we are now discussing an *a posteriori* argument, so that arguments are supposed to draw, directly or indirectly (e.g. from analogy), on experience. Taken literally, the predicates ‘self-evident’, ‘undeniable’ and ‘incontestable’ only apply to *a priori* reasonings, as discussed in the previous chapter. (The predicate ‘universal’ might apply to *a posteriori* propositions.) These predicates are here taken figuratively, i.e. not as meaning that nobody can deny or contest that to which the predicates are added, or that that matter is necessarily self-evident, but as meaning that (‘real’/ ‘empirical’) people do not deny or contest it, resp. that the matter is self-evident to them.

many non-stupid (resp. non-ignorant, non-savage, non-barbarian) persons for whom the claim is not self-evident and undeniable resp. incontestable, so that the claim is not, and never was, universally influential, even for that sub-set of all people. In what follows I will, for the sake of argument, assume that the claim does hold (for all or a sub-set of people), and continue with a discussion of the arguments that are added to the claim.

#### 2.4.2. The ‘irregular argument’ argument

As stated, the ‘irregular argument’ argument builds on the claim that the argument from design is self-evident and undeniable. It adds to that claim the thesis, pressed by Philo in many different ways (see above), that the argument from design does not follow from, or is perhaps even contradictory to, logic and reason. From the combination of these two propositions, it concludes that the arguments for the argument from design are ‘of an irregular nature’. My response to this argument is fairly short: if the arguments for the argument from design are of an irregular resp. non-logical resp. non-reasonable nature, then (a discussion of) those arguments falls outside of the scope of natural religion. If reason tells us that the argument from design does not hold, whereas this argument is somehow self-evident and undeniable, then this being self-evident and undeniable is of a non-reasonable kind, and so cannot be dealt with at the hands of reason, the fundamental tool in the practice of natural religion. Natural religion aims to prove religious hypotheses at the hands of reason, and if reason tells against the argument from design, then the argument from design cannot be used in the practice of natural religion, however true it might be on other, e.g. ‘irregular’, grounds.

#### 2.4.3. The ‘abstruse cavil’ argument

As stated, the ‘abstruse cavil’ argument also builds on the claim that the argument from design is self-evident and undeniable, but it does not add the thesis, pressed by Philo, that the argument from design does not follow from reason. Rather, it suggests that the objections urged by Philo “are no better than the abstruse cavils of those philosophers who denied motion; and ought to be refuted in the same manner, by illustrations, examples, and instances, rather than by serious argument and philosophy.”<sup>55</sup> Hume presents, in the person of Cleanthes, two such illustrations, which I will discuss in turn.

---

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.1.

### 2.4.3.1. The *voice in the clouds* case

The first illustration that Hume, via Cleanthes, offers to defend the argument from design against the supposedly abstruse arguments set out by Philo, is the following:

Suppose, therefore, that an articulate voice were heard in the clouds, much louder and more melodious than any which human art could ever reach: Suppose, that this voice were extended in the same instant over all nations, and spoke to each nation in its own language and dialect: Suppose, that the words delivered not only contain a just sense and meaning, but convey some instruction altogether worthy of a benevolent being superior to mankind: Could you possibly hesitate a moment concerning the cause of this voice? And must you not instantly ascribe it to some design or purpose [resp. (something like human) intelligence]? Yet I cannot see but all the same objections (if they merit that appellation) which lie against the system of theism, may also be produced against this inference.

Might you not say, that all conclusions concerning fact were founded on experience: That when we hear an articulate voice in the dark, and thence infer a man, it is only the resemblance of the effects, which leads us to conclude that there is a like resemblance in the cause: But that this extraordinary voice, by its loudness, extent, and flexibility to all languages, bears so little analogy to any human voice, that we have no reason to suppose any analogy in their causes: And consequently, that a rational, wise, coherent speech proceeded, you know not whence, from some accidental whistling of the winds, not from any divine reason or intelligence? You see clearly your own objections in these cavils; and I hope too, you see clearly, that they cannot possibly have more force in the one case than in the other.

What is argued here is that Philo's principles, displayed in his objections to the argument from design, would lead one to conclude in this example that the voice in the clouds proceeded from 'you know not whence, [perhaps] from some accidental whistling of the winds, [but] not from any divine reason or intelligence', whereas it is deemed self-evident and undeniable that the voice originated in (something like human) intelligence, so that the conclusion that the voice did not originate in intelligence is considered an abstruse cavil; and since Philo's principles resp. objections thus lead to absurd conclusions in this example, one should not put too much - or perhaps not any - weight on them in other cases, such as when discussing the argument from design.

I consider the structure of this argument to be legitimate. That is, if one's principles lead to absurd conclusions in one case, then they should not, or in any event not without further examination, be trusted in the application to another case, and certainly not if that other case somewhat resembles

the first case. My response would therefore be to bite the proverbial bullet, and to argue that the principles that Philo displays in his objections to the argument from design do not lead to an absurd conclusion in this example. I would do so by arguing that the voice in the clouds bears enough analogy to a human voice, on account of it using language and even dialects and carrying meaning, to at the very least seriously consider the hypothesis that it originated in (something like human) intelligence, although I would challenge the claim that that hypothesis is self-evident and undeniable, on account of the differences between the voice in the clouds and the voices (which we assume to be) proceeding from human intelligence of which we have experience, and on account of the possibility that there are other hypotheses that may be as or even more probable than the intelligence-hypothesis.

I consider the alternative hypothesis that Cleanthes compares to the intelligence-hypothesis, i.e. the hypothesis that the voice in the clouds originated in the ‘whistling of the winds’, to be rather improbable, indeed less probable than the intelligence-hypothesis, for we have never experienced the whistling of the winds to be capable of producing sounds very similar to (a string of) language, let alone do so on a worldwide scale, producing sounds similar to the language and even dialects of all the people on the world, and even adjusted to them (i.e. everybody hears his/ her language and dialect, and only that language and dialect, for otherwise he/ she would be hearing thousands of languages and dialects intermingled with one another, and that would surely not convey a clear meaning). However, if one or more other hypotheses would prove to be as likely, or even more likely, to be true than the intelligence-hypothesis, than that would significantly diminish the degree of confidence that we ought to put on that hypothesis. We might, for instance, in this technologically advanced day and age, hypothesize that one or more persons had somehow contrived a large system that could produce this effect (e.g. by having satellites or airplanes or multiple speakers producing the desired sounds). Personally, I would, at face value, consider that hypothesis to be more probable than the hypothesis that a divine intelligence was responsible for the voice in the clouds.

Thus, since Philo’s principles, displayed in his objections to the argument from design, do not lead to an absurd conclusion in this case, they can justly be applied to other cases, and certainly to cases which resemble the present case.

### 2.4.3.2. The *natural volumes* case

The second illustration that Hume, via Cleanthes, offers to defend the argument from design against the supposedly abstruse arguments set out by Philo, is the following:

But to bring the case still nearer the present one of the universe, I shall make two suppositions, which imply not any absurdity or impossibility. Suppose, that there is a natural, universal, invariable language, common to every individual of human race; and that books are natural productions, which perpetuate themselves in the same manner with animals and vegetables, by descent and propagation. Several expressions of our passions contain a universal language: All brute animals have a natural speech, which, however limited, is very intelligible to their own species. And as there are infinitely fewer parts and less contrivance in the finest composition of eloquence than in the coarsest organised body, the propagation of an *Iliad* or *Aeneid* is an easier supposition than that of any plant or animal.

Suppose, therefore, that you enter into your library, thus peopled by natural volumes, containing the most refined reason and most exquisite beauty: Could you possibly open one of them, and doubt, that its original cause bore the strongest analogy to mind and intelligence? When it reasons and discourses; when it expostulates, argues, and enforces its views and topics; when it applies sometimes to the pure intellect, sometimes to the affections; when it collects, disposes, and adorns every consideration suited to the subject: Could you persist in asserting, that all this, at the bottom, had really no meaning, and that the first formation of this volume in the loins of its original parent proceeded not from thought and design [resp. (something like human) intelligence]? Your obstinacy, I know, reaches not that degree of firmness: Even your sceptical play and wantonness would be abashed at so glaring an absurdity.

But if there be any difference, *Philo*, between this supposed case and the real one of the universe, it is all to the advantage of the latter. The anatomy of an animal affords many stronger instances of design than the perusal of *Livy* or *Tacitus*: And any objection which you start in the former case, by carrying me back to so unusual and extraordinary a scene as the first formation of worlds, the same objection has place on the supposition of our vegetating library. Choose, then, your party, *Philo*, without ambiguity or evasion: Assert either that a rational volume is no proof of a rational [resp. intelligent] cause, or admit of a similar [rational resp. intelligent] cause to all the works of nature.

Before discussing what is actually argued here, it might be noted that this example could have taken a different route, namely the same route as the previous example. In that case, copying the format of my summary of the argument of that example, I would have written the following:

What is argued here is that Philo's principles, displayed in his objections to the argument from design, would lead one to conclude in this example that the 'natural volumes' of which it speaks did not originate in (something like human) intelligence, whereas it is deemed self-evident and undeniable that these volumes did originate in intelligence, so that the conclusion that the natural volumes did not originate in intelligence is considered an abstruse cavil; and since Philo's principles resp. objections thus lead to absurd conclusions in this example, one should not put too much - or perhaps not any - weight on them in other cases, such as when discussing the argument from design.

In a discussion of that argument, I would have responded very similar to my response to the previous example, namely by stating that the intelligence-hypothesis (in this case, that the volumes originated in intelligence) should be taken seriously, but that we should also look for other, possibly as or more probable, hypotheses (resp. explanations of this phenomenon). However, as stated, the present case builds up another argument than did the previous case. Let us examine that argument now.

What is actually argued in this case is that it is self-evident and undeniable that the 'natural volumes' of which the example speaks originate in (something like human) intelligence, and that the universe affords a stronger instance of having originated in intelligence than do these natural volumes, so that we should conclude that the universe originates in intelligence. At the end of Cleanthes' presentation of the case, Cleanthes asks Philo either to endorse the conclusion, or to reject the first premise. I reckon he should also have mentioned the option of rejecting the second premise. As regards the first premise, I would indeed reject that - on the basis of Philo's principles - on the grounds which I have just mentioned, which are exactly similar to those elaborated on in my discussion of the previous case. The volumes might have their origin in an intelligent cause, but we might come up with other hypotheses, e.g. the hypothesis of natural selection. However, as regards the argument presented in this case, I would direct most of my criticism at the second premise, the one that Cleanthes leaves unmentioned in his final question to Philo.

As regards the second premise, I would argue that the universe affords a weaker instance of having originated in intelligence than do the natural volumes. I would argue like that because we have a lot of experience of books originating in (what we consider to be) intelligence, and these natural volumes, as described in the case, bear a strong analogy to such books, which analogy I consider to be stronger than the analogy between the (other) works of nature (of which we have actual

experience) and productions of human intelligence. However, which point is actually of more significance: whether the universe bespeaks - and if so, how strong it does so - an intelligent cause, is the central question that underlies the whole discussion regarding the argument from design, so to draw a conclusion regarding that question into an argument on that topic as a premise and a conclusion, is clearly not a just way of proving a point.

All in all, in whichever way we read this case, it does not prove that Philo's principles, as displayed in his objections to the argument from design, are false or abstruse, or that the universe originates in (something like human) intelligence.

## 2.5. Reasoning from experience and divine attributes ascribed by theism

As remarked at the start of this chapter, we have up to now only discussed the potential, and have found that wanting, of the argument from design to prove that the universe and the order that we experience in it originates in something like human intelligence, which belief is shared by both deists, who stop short at this belief, and theists, who uphold further beliefs on the attributes of that intelligence resp. that intelligent being resp. God. As regards those attributes, Hume, via Philo, argues in the *Dialogues* that reasonings from experience, the foundation of the argument from design, are unable to prove any of the attributes that are commonly ascribed to the theistic deity, since our experience is either too limited to ascribe certain attributes to God, is indecisive with regard to the ascription of one or more attributes, or actually points to the ascription of an attribute different from or even opposed to one or more of the attributes commonly ascribed to God. In what follows, the attributes commonly ascribed to a theistic deity are discussed in turn.

When reasoning from our experience, God cannot be proven to be *infinite* (in any of his attributes), for "as the cause ought only to be proportioned to the effect, and the effect, so far as it falls under our cognizance, is not infinite; what pretensions have we, upon your suppositions, to ascribe that attribute to the divine being?"<sup>56</sup> God can thus not be proven to be *infinitely powerful*, *infinitely wise* or *infinitely good* (as we only have experience of beings with limited amounts of these attributes), regarding which attributes I will say something more at the end of this sub-section.

In similar vein, God cannot be proven to be *perfect*, for as we have no experience of perfection, and thus only experience of imperfection, it is not reasonable to attribute perfection to the cause of all these imperfections.<sup>57</sup> Add to that that even if we would assume this world to be perfect, this still does not prove perfection in its author, for we have often experienced certain effects, such as a

---

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.5. See also 10.35.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.6.



magnificent ship, to result from a seemingly inadequate or in any event unlike cause, such as a "stupid mechanic, who imitated others, and copied an art, which, through a long succession of ages, after multiplied trials, mistakes, corrections, deliberations, and controversies, had been gradually improving".<sup>58</sup>

In similar vein, God cannot be proven to be *one*, for we have the experience that "a great number of men join in building a house or ship, in rearing a city, in framing a commonwealth: [so] Why may not several deities combine in contriving and framing a world?"<sup>59</sup> That would be much more in line with our experience, especially when taking into account the vastly greater complexity of the universe, e.g. when compared to a ship. Furthermore, Hume, via Philo, adds: "An intelligent being of such vast power and capacity, as is necessary to produce the universe, or to speak in the language of ancient philosophy, so prodigious an animal, exceeds all analogy and even comprehension."<sup>60</sup>

In similar vein, God cannot be proven to be *immortal*, for we only have experience of mortal living and intelligent creatures, so to suppose him immortal is entirely arbitrary, and even contrary to common experience.<sup>61</sup>

In similar vein, God cannot be proven to be *immaterial*, and should perhaps be considered to have a human body, for we have only experience of (something like human) intelligence in human bodies, and absolutely no experience of intelligence without any material form.<sup>62</sup>

Finally, in similar vein, and discussed much more extensively than all of the former attributes (even when taken together), God cannot, at the hands of our experience, be proven to be *benevolent* (as we understand that term, see following footnote) without dropping the ascription of the attribute of omniscience, omnipotence, or both, since to our experience there appears to be unnecessary evil and suffering in the world.<sup>63</sup> Hume, via Cleanthes and Philo, discusses whether the proposition that happiness and goodness exceed suffering and evil in the world can save the inference to (or even consistency with) an omnipotent, omniscient and benevolent God, but concludes that it cannot, for any amount of suffering and evil in the world is incompatible with such a God (on the common meanings of the terms involved).<sup>64</sup>

---

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.7.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.8.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.9.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.10.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.11.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, parts 10 and 11, for a short sample see e.g. 10.24 and 11.5 and 11.12.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.31, 10.34, 11.1. I write 'on the common meanings of the terms involved' for one might, as many theists do (and as the character of Demea does in the *Dialogues*), argue that what we consider to be resp. call evil and suffering is not really evil and suffering, and/ or that God is, notwithstanding the possible evil and suffering in the world,

Lastly, as regards these attributes of a theistic God, Hume, via Philo, after a suggestion by the character of Cleanthes, argues that ascribing (not an unlimited but) a limited (though supreme) degree of power, wisdom and goodness to God - since ascribing these attributes to an infinite degree was found to be unjustified - still does not follow from, and is perhaps even contrary to, our expectations and experience of the actual world.<sup>65</sup> Regarding this attenuated hypothesis of the nature of the theistic God, Hume, via Philo, concludes that “however consistent [our experience of] the world may be, allowing certain suppositions and conjectures, with the idea of such a deity, it can never afford us an inference [based on our experience of the world] concerning his existence. The consistency is not absolutely denied, only the inference.”<sup>66</sup> In other words, if one is antecedently convinced, on the basis of reason or another source (e.g. faith), that the universe has been created by such a finite deity, then one might continue to uphold that belief (consistently) whilst experiencing evil and suffering in the world, for that might e.g. be assumed to lie outside the reach of the finite deity.<sup>67</sup> If one, on the other hand, does not antecedently hold the belief that such a limited deity exists, then, on the basis of our experience of the world (including the evil and suffering in it), it would not be reasonable to infer resp. conclude that such a deity exists.<sup>68</sup> To quote Hume, via Philo, a final time on this point: “I am sceptic enough to allow, that the bad appearances, notwithstanding all my reasonings, may be compatible with such [finite] attributes as you suppose [God to have]: But surely they can never prove these attributes.”<sup>69</sup>

All in all, Hume’s *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion* contain a great many arguments to the point that reasonings from our experience, e.g. from our experience of order in the universe, are insufficient to ground either a deistic or a theistic conception of a supreme intelligence, viz. God.

---

omnipotent, omniscient and benevolent, but that these terms should not be taken to have their common (‘human’) meanings, but take on completely incomprehensible (‘divine’) meanings when ascribed to God. (A defence such as this often employs the phrase ‘God’s ways are not our ways’.) In the *Dialogues*, Cleanthes - who is called an ‘anthropomorphite’, as opposed to Demea, who is called a ‘mystic’ (and Philo a ‘sceptic’) - insists on always using the common, ‘human’ meanings of terms when talking about God, for “if we abandon all human analogy, as seems your intention, *Demea*, I am afraid we abandon all religion, and retain no conception of the great object of our adoration.” *Ibid.*, 11.1. See also 4.1-3.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, part 11, for a sample see 11.1 and 11.2.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.4.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.1. See also 11.12. If one is antecedently convinced, on the basis of reason or another source (e.g. faith), that the universe has been created by an infinite (-ly powerful, wise and good) deity, then, whilst experiencing evil and suffering in the world, I see no other option, in order to uphold consistency in one’s beliefs and experiences, but to drop the common, ‘human’ meanings of one or more of the terms involved, as discussed in a foregoing footnote. (As remarked in that footnote, one might e.g., to achieve or retain consistency, uphold that what is perceived to be evil and suffering, in reality is not evil and suffering. In that case, one might retain the common, ‘human’ meanings of omnipotent, omniscient and benevolent. On the other hand, one could uphold the belief that evil and suffering does really exist, but that those three attributes (when assigned to God or overall) do not mean what one might take them to mean, or are even incomprehensible. Presumably, many more of such options - to achieve or retain consistency between an experience of or a belief in the reality of evil and suffering in the world, and the infinite qualities of God - exist.)

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.1. See also 11.12.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.12.

## Conclusion

What is now by many considered to be David Hume's magnum opus, *A Treatise of Human Nature: Being an Attempt to Introduce the Experimental Method of Reasoning into Moral Subjects* (1739/40), published when Hume was only in his late twenties, was in Hume's time charged to be a work of scepticism and atheism - which charge may have cost him two precious university appointments, almost got him censured by and excommunicated from the Church of Scotland, and, after him having passed away in August of 1776, supposedly led multitudes of people to gaze at the funeral procession, "as if they had expected the hearse to have been consumed in livid flames, or encircled with a ray of glory"<sup>70</sup> - even though in that work, Hume had taken great care, pushed thereto by many of his friends, not to explicitly or evidently implicate any part of religion. Nevertheless, careful readers of the work - in which Hume's epistemological resp. philosophical principles, to which he would adhere for the rest of his life, were for the first time laid out - understood that it contained powerful arguments against most or perhaps even all parts of religion, and most certainly against the practice of natural religion. During his lifetime, presumably on account of the risks involved and the stringent admonitions of his friends, Hume did not publish the work in which he explicitly, extensively and highly critically discusses two of the major arguments of natural religion, namely the cosmological argument and the argument from design, but he saw to it, via a request of both his good friend Adam Smith and his nephew David Hume the Younger, who ultimately published the work, that his *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion* (1779) would, at some point, see the limelight. When it (finally) did, it turned into one of the cornerstones of the field of the philosophy of religion.

In the *Dialogues*, as the name suggests, Hume presents his reflections in dialogue form. Although the work is highly readable and entertaining in its current form, the systematic exposition that this paper has aimed to supply of the arguments regarding the cosmological argument and the argument from design that are presented in the *Dialogues*, supplemented where considered appropriate with arguments from other of Hume's works or with my analysis of what certain missing arguments could be, may, it is hoped, provide an illuminating view of what Hume has written regarding these matters, a useful addition to the field of the philosophy of religion, and perhaps even an enlightening introduction to Hume's overall epistemology resp. philosophy.

---

<sup>70</sup> The quote is quoted in A. Bailey & D. O'Brien (2014), *Hume's Critique of Religion: 'Sick Men's Dreams'*, Dordrecht: Springer, p.1, and is noted to derive from S.J. Pratt (1777), *Supplement to the life of David Hume, Esq.*, London: J. Bew., reprinted on pp.306–315 in J. Feiser (2005, ed.), *Early responses to Hume's life and reputation*, vol.1, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Bristol: Thoemmes Continuum, p.312.

As regards Hume's reflections, as presented in the *Dialogues*, on the cosmological argument and the argument from design, it is evident that, on the basis of Hume's philosophical (resp. empirical resp. sceptical) principles, both of the arguments are heavily flawed, so that they are in no condition to justify their conclusions, which might, to make matters (even) worse, even be wholly unintelligible resp. meaningless when taken on their own. Our most reasonable resource, cautions Hume, when dealing with a subject so sublime, and so remote from the sphere of our observation, as the subject of the existence and/ or the attributes of God, and/ or - which regularly comes down to the same subject - the subject of the origin of the universe and/ or of the order we experience in it, is a total suspense of judgment.<sup>71</sup>

---

<sup>71</sup> Hume, *Dialogues*, ed. Coleman, 2.24 and 8.12. See the quotes at the start of chapter 2.

## References

- Bailey, A. & O'Brien, D. (2014). *Hume's Critique of Religion: 'Sick Men's Dreams'*. Dordrecht: Springer.
- Gaskin, J.C.A. (1988, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). *Hume's Philosophy of Religion*. London: MacMillan Press.
- Hume, D. (2003, orig. 1739/40). *A Treatise of Human Nature: Being an Attempt to Introduce the Experimental Method of Reasoning into Moral Subjects*. New York: Dover.
- (2007, orig. 1748). *An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*, ed. with intro. and notes by P. Millican. New York: Oxford UP.
- (2007, orig. 1779), *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion: And Other Writings*, ed. D. Coleman. New York: Cambridge UP.
- (2008, orig. 1779). *Dialogues and Natural History of Religion*, ed. with intro. and notes by J.C.A. Gaskin. New York: Oxford UP.
- Markie, P. (2008). 'Rationalism vs. Empiricism'. In E.N. Zalta (ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2013 Edition), <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2013/entries/rationalism-empiricism/> (last consulted 2014.06.06).
- Pratt, S.J. (1777). *Supplement to the life of David Hume, Esq.*. London: J. Bew. Reprinted on pp.306–315 in J. Feiser (2005, ed.), *Early responses to Hume's life and reputation*, vol.1, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Bristol: Thoemmes Continuum. Quoted in and reference taken from Bailey & O'Brien (2014), *Hume's Critique*.
- Russell, P. 'Hume on Religion'. In E.N. Zalta (ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2013 Edition), <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2013/entries/hume-religion/> (last consulted 2014.05.20).
- Various writers and R. Waterfield (2000). *The First Philosophers: The Presocratics and Sophists*, trans. with com. by R. Waterfield. New York: Oxford UP.