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HUME
Dialogues concerning Natural Religion

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DAVID HUME

Dialogues concerning Natural Religion and Other Writings

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For my daughter, Alexandra

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Introduction

David Hume's *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion* (1779) is one of the most influential works in the philosophy of religion and the most artful instance of philosophical dialogue since the dialogues of Plato. Some consider it a successful criticism of rational theology, some find it a failure, others regard it as a defense of some form of natural religion, and yet others emphasize its influence on the development of fideism, religious belief that disclaims rational justification. The great eighteenth-century historian, Edward Gibbon, said that of all Hume's philosophical works it is "the most profound, the most ingenious, and the best written."[1] All readers, regardless of their final assessments, can appreciate its penetrating analyses as well as its entertaining wit and ironic humor.

The topic of the *Dialogues* is natural religion, that is, religious belief, sentiment, and practice founded on evidence that is independent of super-natural revelation. The work presents a fictional conversation among three friends – Cleanthes, Philo, and Demea – that is overheard and later narrated by Pamphilus, Cleanthes' pupil, to his friend Hermippus. Although the names of the characters come from antiquity,[2] the temporal setting

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[1] Translated from M. Baridon, "Une lettre inédite d'Edward Gibbon à Jean-Baptiste Antoine Suard," *Etudes anglaises* 24 (1971), 80: "[J]e ne crains pas de prononcer que de tous les ouvrages Philosophiques de M. H. celui-ci [the *Dialogues*] est le plus profond, le plus ingenieux et le mieux écrit."

[2] Hume probably named Philo after Philo of Larissa, Cicero's teacher. He probably named Cleanthes after the second head of the school of Stoicism, Cleanthes of Assos (c. 331–c. 232 BC), a religious enthusiast. The names of the other characters may also have eponymous sources, but their etymological significance is more obvious. "Demea," from the Greek *demos*, meaning "people," is an appropriate name for one who defends popular or traditional religion. "Pamphilus," from the Greek *pan* (all) and *philos* (friend), meaning "friend of all," is appropriate for a Shaftesburean narrator who states that "opposite sentiments, even without any decision, afford an agreeable amusement."

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is an eighteenth-century one, and the main characters represent philo-
sophical or religious types. They all profess, for different reasons, that the
existence of God is evident; but Philo, a skeptic, and Demea, an orthodox
theist, urge that the nature of God is incomprehensible, while Cleanthes,
an empirical theist, dismisses their skepticism as excessive. He proposes
an argument based on the systematic order in nature – commonly known
as the argument from design – to establish both the existence of God and
his possession of human-like intelligence. Cleanthes later adds that the
beneficial aspects of nature's order provide compelling evidence of God's
moral perfection, which, if left doubtful or uncertain, would spell "an end
at once of all religion" (10.28).

Hume has Philo present a series of powerful criticisms of Cleanthes'
argument up to the final section of the dialogue, where he endorses a qual-
ified inference to an intelligent cause of nature that stops short of attribut-
ing moral qualities to it. Although Philo dominates the conversation and
is standardly taken to represent Hume's views, Hume makes Cleanthes
the putative apparent hero of the piece (LE2, 120), and has Pamphilus
pronounce at the end that "upon a serious review of the whole, I cannot
but think, that *Philo*'s principles are more probable than *Demea*'s; but
that those of *Cleanthes* approach still nearer to the truth" (12.34). This
conclusion is dramatically foreshadowed in characterizations attributed
to Hermippus in the *Dialogues*' prologue that contrast the "rigid, inflex-
ible orthodoxy of Demea," the "careless scepticism of Philo" and the
"accurate philosophical turn of Cleanthes" (Prologue, 6).

The most controversial problem in interpreting Hume's *Dialogues* is
what to make of Philo's acceptance of the design argument in Part 12,
the concluding section of the work. Many readers find it difficult to rec-
oncile his previous criticisms of the argument with his final confession
that "no one has a deeper sense of religion impressed on his mind, or
pays more profound adoration to the divine being, as he discovers himself
to reason, in the inexplicable contrivance and artifice of nature" (12.2).
In one sense the puzzle is about whether Philo is consistent. In another
sense the puzzle is about whether Hume is consistent or whether Philo
consistently represents Hume's own beliefs. This introduction will sug-
gest a solution to this and other puzzles in the course of elucidating the

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"Hermippus," from the Greek *herma* (stone boundary markers topped with a bust of Hermes) is
an appropriate name for one who contrasts the characters of the three conversationalists.

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Dialogues' argumentative structure, its relation to Hume's other writings, and its broader historical context.

Natural religion, philosophical dialogue, and skepticism

A variety of religious and moral interests motivated the preoccupation with natural religion during Hume's time. The perceived enemies of religion were the ancient Greek atomist, Epicurus, and two seventeenth-century philosophers, Baruch Spinoza and Thomas Hobbes.[3] Epicurus maintained that the order of the universe arose from chance and that the gods have no interest in human affairs. Hobbes argued that all occurrences in nature, including human thoughts and volitions, are reducible to the motions of matter governed by general laws. He also denied that the attributes of God could be known. Spinoza argued that God and nature are the same and that God's actions are logically necessary consequences of his nature, not free actions involving deliberation and choice. Although some theists accepted certain aspects of these theories, most considered them practically equivalent to atheism because a God who takes no interest in the world or human affairs, whose nature is unknowable, or whose actions are mediated through or identical with physical processes that occur by chance or necessity but not by choice, does not appear to be a God who can evoke religious sentiments of reverence and worship.

With the exception of extreme fideists, most theists considered natural religion a useful tool for answering doubts regarding theism posed by these philosophical systems. Moderate theists, such as Latitudinarians, also invoked natural religion to defend tolerance of opposing sects whose main doctrines could be justified by natural religion. On the other hand, deists attacked all forms of revealed religion, believing that true religion begins and ends with natural religion. Many theists also appealed to natural religion either to justify moral obligation or strengthen moral

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[3] For example, the subtitle of Samuel Clarke's *Demonstration of the Being and Attributes of God* is *More particularly in answer to Mr. Hobbes, Spinoza, and their followers*, and Clarke targets the Epicurean doctrine of chance in the same work. See Clarke, *A Demonstration of the Being and Attributes of God and Other Writings*, ed. Ezio Vailati (Cambridge and Yew York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 3; 11, 19. Berkeley specifies that his philosophy opposes those who take refuge in "the doctrines of an eternal succession of unthinking causes and effects, or in a fortuitous concourse of atoms; those wild imaginations of Vanini, Hobbes, and Spinoza; in a word the whole system of atheism," *Three Dialogues between Hylas and Philonous*, in *Works*, ed. T. E. Jessop and A. A. Luce (London and New York: T. Nelson, 1948–57), II:213. He also targets Epicurus, Hobbes, and Spinoza in his *Alciphron*, Fourth Dialogue, Sec. 16, in *Works*, III:163.

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motivation. Even free-thinking philosophers, such as Shaftesbury and Francis Hutcheson, who claimed that atheists are as capable of virtue as theists, contended that belief in divine rewards and punishments in an afterlife is morally preferable to atheism because it reinforces virtuous motives when they are opposed by a sense of the apparent futility of virtue and evident advantages of vice.[4] Most of Hume's contemporaries, then, would have considered his criticism of natural religion offensive to both religion and morality.

This offensiveness explains why the *Dialogues*, although first drafted in 1751, was not published until 1779, three years after Hume's death. Hume wanted to publish the work during his lifetime, but his friends discouraged him from doing so because they feared it would raise new charges of atheism, skepticism, and immoralism against him. Although Hume had never denied the existence of God or an ultimate cause of nature and had never explicitly questioned the validity of the design argument prior to the *Dialogues*, many of his critics believed that the basic principles of his philosophy as laid out in his *Treatise of Human Nature* (1739–40), *Enquiry concerning Human Understanding* (1748), and *Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals* (1751) undermined morality and religion. As a result, he was twice passed over for academic appointments and an effort was made to excommunicate him from the Church of Scotland. Although mindful of his friends' concerns, Hume believed that "nothing can be more cautiously or artfully written" than his *Dialogues* (*LDH* II:334). Encouraged by those who considered it his best work, Hume made provisions in his will for his nephew to publish it within three years of his death, reasoning that no one could fault a nephew for dutifully carrying out his uncle's last wishes.

Caution probably led Hume to cast his criticism of natural religion in the form of a dialogue so that he could avoid speaking in his own voice, but this was only one of several motives. Among them was his intention to correct, by example, the prejudicial manner in which modern dialogues on religion tended to represent the character of skeptics.

[4] Anthony Ashley Cooper, Third Earl of Shaftesbury, "An Inquiry Concerning Virtue or Merit," in *Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times*, ed. Lawrence E. Klein (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 190–192; Francis Hutcheson, *An Essay on the Nature and Conduct of the Passions and Affections, with Illustrations on the Moral Sense*, 3rd edn. (facs. rpt., Gainesville: Scholars' Facsimiles & Reprints, 1969), VI.iv.

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The opening sentence of the *Dialogues*' prologue alludes to Shaftes-bury's call in the early part of the century for a revival of Socratic dialogue-writing that pursues pedagogical ends through unrestrained, reasoned debate.[5] Shaftesbury lamented that modern philosophical dialogue-writing had devolved into the hands of dogmatic clerics who criticized heterodox opinions through misrepresentation, false ridicule, and alle-gations of immoralism. These writers apparently feared that represent-ing arguments against orthodoxy in a favorable light would give them an undeserved public influence dangerous to the interests of true reli-gion.[6] Shaftesbury defended tolerant inquiry on methodological grounds. He urged that dialogue-writers must address opposing opinions through accurate representations and logical rebuttal to assure that inquiry does not perpetuate errors. Still, Shaftesbury did not rule out the use of raillery and ridicule altogether. Believing that wit and humor are natural and plea-surable components of free-spirited conversation, he defended a polite form of raillery in dialogue-writing such as that used in private conver-sation among sensible friends whose moral virtues are never in question despite their minor flaws.[7] He also defended what he called "defensive raillery," the use of irony when "the spirit of curiosity would force a discovery of more truth than can conveniently be told."[8]

Similarly, Hume emphasized the importance of avoiding the "vulgar error" in dialogue-writing that puts "nothing but nonsense into the mouth of the adversary" (LE2, 120). He has his conversationalists engage in

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[5] See Shaftesbury, "*Soliloquy, or Advice to An Author*," "*The Moralists*," and "*Miscellany V*" in *Characteristics*, 87–93, 233–235, and 458–463. Hume owned a copy of the 1723 edition of the *Characteristics*, which he signed and dated in 1726 when he was fifteen. Shaftesbury's philosophical views about dialogue and soliloquy may have inspired the young Hume's decision to compose a manuscript, completed before he was twenty, that recorded the progress of his thoughts on religion. Hume recounted that the manuscript began with an "anxious search after arguments to confirm the common opinion" of God's existence. Then "doubts stole in, dissipated, returned, were again dissipated, returned again; and it was a perpetual struggle of a restless imagination against inclination, perhaps against reason." He burned the manuscript not long before sending the sample of his *Dialogues* to Gilbert Elliot in 1751. See LE2, 120.

[6] Critics of orthodoxy were also commonly guilty of abusive ridicule and misrepresentation. In their defense, they maintained that treating orthodoxy with a gravity their opponents were not willing to reciprocate would only reinforce false perceptions of their opponents' religious authority. For more on the topic of religion and ridicule, see John Redwood, *Reason, Ridicule and Religion: The Age of Enlightenment in England*, 1660–1750 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1976).

[7] Shaftesbury, "Sensus Communis, an Essay on the Freedom of Wit and Humour," in *Characteristics*, 36.

[8] Ibid., 30–31.

ridicule and raillery while having their friendship testify to their mutual respect despite their philosophical differences. Cleanthes accuses Philo of unreasonable skepticism, and Philo engages in defensive irony, both in his tenuous alliance with Demea until the end of Part 11 and in his palliative concession to Cleanthes in Part 12. However, despite adopting such Shaftesburean conventions, Hume rejected Shaftesbury's depiction of skepticism in his own dialogue, *The Moralists*, believing that it still portrayed skepticism in a prejudicial light.

To depict skepticism regarding natural religion in a realistic but religiously acceptable manner, Shaftesbury patterned the skeptic of his dialogue, Philocles, after his friend and philosophical nemesis, Pierre Bayle. Bayle, the most influential skeptic of the age, was thought by many to practice Pyrrhonism, an extreme form of skepticism named after the most radical ancient Greek skeptic, Pyrrho of Elis. Finding no opinions to be certain, Pyrrhonians recommended suspension of judgment to achieve peace of mind. Although caricatured as fools who would walk off cliffs because they distrusted the evidence of their senses, they implemented suspense of judgment in their daily life by simply deferring to customary behavior. Bayle repudiated the modern tendency to assimilate skepticism with atheism by proposing Pyrrhonism as a justification for fideistic acceptance of revealed religion as interpreted through traditional religious authorities. Shaftesbury regarded Bayle as "one of the best of Christians" and an exemplar of moral virtue,[9] but he was convinced that Pyrrhonian skepticism is flawed by a misplaced prioritization of values which undermines the skeptic's ability to form a fully consistent and settled character, a conviction he may have considered confirmed by Bayle's conversion to Catholicism, and then conversion back to Protestantism. Accordingly, in *The Moralists*, he has Philocles explain that he loved ease "above all else"[10] and regarded skepticism as more "at ease" and tolerant than dogmatical philosophy because it allowed him to indulge his relish for counterargument without binding him to the rigor of a systematic method that aims for final answers.

In many respects, Hume, like Shaftesbury, models the skeptic of his dialogues on Bayle, largely because Bayle influenced much of his

[9] Shaftesbury, Letter to Mr. Darby, February 2, 1708, in Benjamin Rand, ed., *The Life, Unpublished Letters, and Philosophical Regimen of Anthony, Earl of Shaftesbury* (London: Swan Sonnenschein, 1900), 385–386.

[10] Shaftesbury, "The Moralists," Pt. 1, Sec. 2, in *Characteristics*, 241.

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own thinking. Several of Philo's remarks – particularly those regarding the incomprehensibility of God, alternative cosmological hypotheses, Epicurus' formulation of the problem of evil, the doctrine of Manicheanism, the suggestion that belief in the existence of God by itself has no influence on our lives, and the idea that philosophical skepticism is the best foundation for belief in revealed religion – can be found in Bayle's writings. Philo also employs the skeptical technique of refutation revived by Bayle. Skeptics tentatively accept premises their dogmatic opponents think are certain and draw conclusions from them which contradict the claims of their opponents. Their aim is not to endorse these conclusions, but to show that the assumed premises fail to support their opponents' contentions.

Whether Bayle is actually a Pyrrhonian skeptic has always been controversial.[11] What is not controversial is that Hume repudiated the Pyrrhonian form of skepticism which many thought Bayle endorsed. Hume advocated Academic skepticism (*EHU* 12.3.24–25), a moderate form of ancient skepticism known mostly through the writings of Cicero, but which began during the third period of Plato's Academy, after which it is named. Academic skeptics held that while nothing is certain, opinions can vary in their degree of probability, and thus a reasonable skeptic accepts whatever beliefs appear most probable. To emphasize his affinity with Academic skepticism, Hume modeled his dialogue on Cicero's *The Nature of the Gods*, voicing his doubts about religion through a character who, like the skeptic in Cicero's dialogue, is an Academic skeptic and who, unlike Shaftesbury's skeptic, is neither flawed by misplaced priorities nor converted by theological arguments Hume considered weak.

Alluding to Hume's skeptical arguments in the *Treatise* and first *Enquiry*, Philo states in Part 1 that difficulties in justifying fundamental principles and contradictions existing in common concepts of causality and matter make judgments about objects of human experience probable rather than certain. Like Hume, he maintains that human beings are psychologically impelled to form beliefs on the basis of probability and that philosophical reasoning is no more than an "exacter and more scrupulous"

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[11] Although most of Bayle's contemporaries took him to be a Pyrrhonian skeptic, many believe that he is an Academic, not a Pyrrhonian, skeptic. See Maria Neto, "Bayle's Academic Skepticism," in Richard H. Popkin, James E. Force, and David S. Katz, eds., *Everything Connects: In Conference With Richard H. Popkin* (Leiden: Brill Academic Publishers, December, 1998); Thomas M. Lennon, *Reading Bayle* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999).

method for determining degrees of probability than what we employ in
everyday experience (1.9). Like Hume, he repudiates extreme skepticism,
recommending only cautious steps in all philosophical reasoning and the
limitation of inquiry to topics suited to the reach of our faculties. While
finding that there are many subjects for which there is "commonly but
one determination, which carries probability or conviction with it" (8.1),
Philo proposes that topics concerning objects beyond human experience,
such as the nature of God, are so uncertain that it is not reasonable to
trust any speculations about them. The *Dialogues* thus portrays skepti-
cism regarding religion, from Philo's point of view, as "entirely owing
to the nature of the subject" (8.1), not to excessive doubt or misplaced
priorities. However, since the very point of dispute between philosophi-
cal theists and skeptics is whether questions about the nature of God are
in fact beyond the scope of human reason and experience to determine,
Philo's skepticism is, from Cleanthes' point of view, excessive at least with
respect to religion, and so he teases Philo for acting like a Pyrrhonian.
The task Hume sets for Philo is to explain why the evidence for theism
does not warrant belief.

Arguments for the existence and nature of God

Philosophical arguments for the existence and nature of God can be
divided into two kinds, *a priori* and *a posteriori*. Following terminology
that became common at the beginning of Hume's century, *a priori* argu-
ments for theism purport to prove their conclusions by deducing them
as logically necessary consequences of premises taken to be intuitively
certain. The ontological argument, for example, infers the existence and
attributes of God as logically necessary consequences of the nature of per-
fect being. The cosmological argument demonstrates the existence and
nature of a necessarily existent being from an *a priori* assumption about
what kinds of things require a cause.[12] Empirical or *a posteriori* arguments
for theism, such as the design argument, only inductively infer that it is

[12] In the scholastic terminology in use from Aquinas down through the Renaissance and, less com-
monly, into the early eighteenth century, the cosmological argument was considered an *a posteriori*
argument because it reasons back from effects to causes rather than from causes to effects. Hume
was among those who describe the argument as *a priori*. For the variety of uses of the terms *a priori*
and *a posteriori* in eighteenth-century writers, see J. P. Ferguson, *The Philosophy of Dr. Samuel
Clarke and its Critics* (New York: Vantage Press, 1974), Ch. 2.

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probable that an intelligent designer of nature exists, given the evidence of experience.[13]

Many religious apologists in Hume's day considered *a priori* arguments essential to natural religion because only they can conclusively overrule objections against the existence and attributes of God.[14] However, by the time Hume composed the *Dialogues*, interest in *a priori* religious apologetics had started to wane. Even by the end of the seventeenth century, few gave any credit to the ontological argument, as most philosophers became convinced that, even if necessary existence is an essential attribute of a perfect being, it is questionable whether a being possessing that quality actually exists. At the beginning of the eighteenth century, Samuel Clarke breathed new life into the cosmological argument, but acknowledged that it could not settle the "main question between us and the atheists," namely, whether the ultimate, self-existent cause of nature is an intelligent being.[15] There is no obvious necessary connection, he explained, between intelligence and self-existence as there is between self-existence and such attributes as unity, immutability, and infinity. To settle the question between theist and atheist, Clarke thought that the cosmological argument had to be supplemented by a design argument.

Stunning discoveries in physics, astronomy, optics, biology, and other branches of science added new evidence of systematic order in nature that in turn fueled a growing interest in empirical methods of investigation in theology. Newtonianism popularized the view that while all empirical hypotheses fall short of logical certainty, in many instances, most notably Newton's three laws of motion, the evidence supporting them can be so

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[13] Other *a posteriori* arguments for God's existence include the argument from universal consent and the argument from miracles. The first claims that the existence of God is evident from the pervasiveness of religious belief throughout human culture; the second infers the existence of God from the evidence of apparent violations of laws of nature. In the *Dialogues*, variations on the argument from universal consent appear in Cleanthes' suggestion that belief in an intelligent deity is instinctually triggered by contemplating nature's order (3.7–9), and also Demea's suggestion that belief in a providential deity is triggered by hope and fear (10.1). The argument from miracles is not discussed in *Dialogues* because it does not fall within the province of natural religion, which considers only evidence that is independent of supernatural revelation. However, Hume criticizes this argument in detail in Section 10 of his *Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*.

[14] For example, Clarke, "The Answer to a Seventh Letter Concerning the Argument *a priori*," in *A Demonstration*, 119–121. Clarke considered the *a priori* component of his cosmological argument to be the inference of divine attributes from the nature of a necessarily existent being, once the existence of such a being is demonstrated *a posteriori* (in the scholastic sense – see note 12) from facts about the world.

[15] Clarke, *A Demonstration*, Sec. VIII, p. 38.

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strong as to leave no room for any practical doubt. While most apologists for rational theology followed Clarke in combining the design argument and cosmological argument, many began to consider the premises of the cosmological argument either empirical generalizations or psychologically determined beliefs rather than necessary truths. Others believed they could defend theism on the basis of an empirical design argument alone. The two most influential examples of the latter approach are found in Shaftesbury's dialogue, *The Moralists* (1709), and George Berkeley's dialogue, *Alciphron* (1732). To reflect Shaftesbury's and Berkeley's view that an empirical design argument is sufficient to support religion, as well as Clarke's view that *a priori* proofs are necessary for conclusively rebutting objections to theism, Hume's *Dialogues* evaluates the design argument as a stand–alone argument and also considers whether the cosmological argument can compensate for its limitations.

Cleanthes' design argument

The common feature in design arguments is to infer the existence of an intelligent designer from some aspect of the order in nature. More complete versions of the argument begin with arguments *to* design, that is, citations of various instances of order to support the claim that nature is a systematically ordered, harmonious whole.[16] The version in Hume's *Dialogues* assumes that nature's systematic order is a well–established empirical fact. Design arguments use various analogies to elucidate the concept of intelligently designed order. For example, Shaftesbury's version in *The Moralists* compares the order in nature to personal identity or the unity of the self, while Berkeley's version in the *Alciphron* compares the order in nature to human speech.[17] The version presented by

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[16] For example, William Derham, *Physico–Theology: or, A Demonstration of the Being and Attributes of God, from the Works of Creation* (London, 1713); Bernhard Nieuwent, *The Religious Philosophers: or the Right Use of Contemplating the Works of the Creator*, an influential Dutch work published in English five times between 1718 and 1745.

[17] See Shaftesbury, "The Moralists," Pt. 3, Sec. 1, in *Characteristics*, 300–304; Berkeley, *Alciphron*, Fourth Dialogue, Secs. 6–7, in *Works* III:148–149. Hume alludes to Shaftesbury's analogy in a footnote to his discussion of personal identity in the *Treatise* (1.4.6. n. 50). Hume may be alluding to Berkeley's analogy in *D* 3.7, when he has Cleanthes remark that "no language can convey a more intelligible irresistible meaning, than the curious adjustment of final causes" (3.7). Berkeley argued that nature is a language conveying meaning to us through visual or "optical" signs exactly as one person speaks to another in conversation through linguistic signs. We know God exists, he believed, because "God talks to us" using the visual language of nature.

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Cleanthes in Part 2 relies on the machine analogy rooted in the sys-
tems of Galileo and Newton and popularized by Hume's fellow coun-
tryman, George Cheyne. In *Philosophical Principles of Religion: Natural
and Revealed*, Cheyne wrote: "By nature, I understand this vast, if not
infinite, *Machine* of the Universe . . . consisting of an infinite Number of
lesser *Machines*, every one of which is adjusted by Weight and Measure."[18]
Although Cheyne, like Clarke, believed that the connection between intel-
ligence and order is a necessary one, Hume adapted Cheyne's analogy
to conform to an empirical cast of the design argument. Blending the
thoughts of various writers,[19] Hume has Cleanthes reason that since
order in nature resembles order in machines, and since experience teaches
that like effects have like causes, "we are led to infer, by all the rules of
analogy, that the causes also resemble; and that the author of nature is
somewhat similar to the mind of man; though possessed of much larger
faculties, proportioned to the grandeur of the work, which he has exe-
cuted" (2.5).

While Demea protests that Cleanthes' empirical argument gives advan-
tages to atheists by conceding the existence of God is not *a priori* certain,
Philo objects that it falls far short of empirical certainty. To show this
he introduces three objections to the argument which draw from Hume's
account of causal reasoning in the *Treatise* and *Enquiry*. First, in inferences
from analogy any deviation from an exact resemblance between objects
weakens the probability of inferences based on their resemblance. Since
the scale, mass, duration, and situation of the universe are vastly different
from those of any artifacts of human making, any inference from their
similarity falls significantly short of practical certainty. Second, while
not all forms of matter are capable of creating ordered effects – piles of
brick and mortar never arrange themselves into a house, for example –
nature affords numerous instances of forms of matter that are: plants
and animals and their seeds and eggs regularly produce other ordered
plants, animals, seeds and eggs. If experience shows that ordered effects

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[18] George Cheyne, *Philosophical Principles of Religion: Natural and Revealed*, 5th edn. (London,
1736), 2. Cf. *D* 2.5.

[19] Hume's decision to present the argument this way reflects his conviction that "a man cannot
escape ridicule, who repeats a discourse as a school-boy does his lesson, and takes no notice of any
thing that has been advanced in the course of the debate" (*Essays*, 109). On the other hand, his
lack of interest in *a priori* arguments may explain why, aside from Demea's characteristic tendency
to appeal to pious authorities, he has Demea provide no more than a "school-boy" summary of
Clarke's cosmological argument in Part 9.

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are produced by non–intelligent as well as intelligent causes, it is arbitrary to conclude that every ordered effect, including nature as a whole, must ultimately be produced by an intelligent cause (2.18–23).

These first two objections lead to the third: the most conclusive causal inferences are those based on observations of constant conjunctions between exactly similar types of objects. To be empirically certain that differences between nature and machines make no difference to the similarity of their causes, and to be empirically certain that causes of ordered effects other than intelligence cannot be the cause of nature, we would need to observe a constant conjunction between intelligent causes and the generation of universes. However, we do not have this kind of evidence regarding the universe since it is a unique, single entity. Philo concludes that the inference to an intelligent designer is at best weakly probable rather than empirically certain.

The instinctive feeling of intelligent design

Hume was aware that the design argument, despite its shortcomings, garnered a wide appeal which many of his contemporaries considered additional evidence in its favor. Consequently, he addresses this feature of the argument in Part 3, where Cleanthes characterizes the inference to an intelligent designer, not as a conclusion drawn by weighing evidence, but as an instinctive, immediate *feeling* that strikes with "a force like that of sensation" (3.7)[20] when contemplating nature's order. Cleanthes concludes that even if the inference is "irregular" or "contradictory to the principles of logic" by Philo's account, it is sufficiently supported by "common sense and the plain instincts of nature," evidence he claims Philo must accept if he professes to be a "reasonable" skeptic (3.8). Hume has Pamphilus describe Philo as "a little embarrassed and confounded" (3.10) by Cleanthes' ridicule and re-characterization of his argument in psychological terms. His reaction is dramatically appropriate given the shift in Cleanthes' argument and the unpopularity of skepticism regarding religion, but some readers have inferred that Pamphilus' observation,

[20] *A force like that of sensation*: Phrasing used by Colin MacLaurin, *An Account of Sir Isaac Newton's Philosophical Discoveries* (London, 1748; rpt., New York: Johnson, 1968), 381 and Henry Home, *Essays on the Principles of Morality and Natural Religion* (1751; facs. rpt., New York: Garland Publishing, 1976), 328. Since Home and Hume were close friends, they may have discussed this psychological account of the argument from design prior to or during the time Hume composed the *Dialogues*.

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together with Philo's conciliatory remarks in the concluding part of the *Dialogues*, signal that Hume himself was persuaded by this version of the argument.

This interpretation may seem to be supported by the fact that Cleanthes' new emphasis on common instinct curiously resembles Hume's defense of belief in causation in the *Treatise* and his first *Enquiry*. Causal beliefs, he argued, ultimately depend on natural instinct, not rational argument. While reasonable and unreasonable causal beliefs are distinguishable by the degree to which they are supported by observations of constant conjunctions between events, the inference to a causal relation based on this standard is not itself reasoned. It cannot result from immediate or demonstratively necessary inferences because, however constant the relation between two objects has been, it is logically possible that their conjunction will not continue. Nor is the inference based on probable reasoning, since probable reasoning already presupposes that regular conjunctions observed in the past will continue in the future. Causal inference, Hume concluded, must be founded on instinct rather than reason (*T* 1.3.2,14; *EHU* 5.22).

However, Hume also saw that not all instincts are alike. He distinguished between "principles which are permanent, irresistible, and universal; such as the customary transition from causes to effects, and from effects to causes: and the principles, which are changeable, weak, and irregular." Universal instincts are essential for survival, but irregular instincts are not:

> The former are the foundation of all our thoughts and actions, so that upon their removal, human nature must immediately perish and go to ruin. The latter are neither unavoidable to mankind, nor necessary, or so much as useful in the conduct of life; but, on the contrary, are observed only to take place in weak minds, and being opposite to the other principles of custom and reasoning, may easily be subverted by a due contrast and opposition. For this reason, the former are received by philosophy, and the latter rejected. (*T* 1.4.4.1)

Hume specifically comments on the relation between universal instincts and Cleanthes' argument in his March, 1751 letter to Gilbert Elliot. He delicately suggests to Elliot that the instinct to infer an intelligent designer from nature's order may be more like the anthropomorphic instinct to see human shapes in clouds than the instinct to believe in causes and external objects:

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> I could wish that Cleanthes' argument could be so analyzed, as to
> be rendered quite formal and regular. The propensity of the mind
> towards it, unless that propensity were as strong and universal as
> that to believe in our senses and experience, will still, I am afraid,
> be esteemed a suspicious foundation. It is here I wish for your assis-
> tance. We must endeavour to prove that this propensity is somewhat
> different from our inclination to find our own figures in the clouds,
> our face in the moon, our passions and sentiments even in inanimate
> matter. Such an inclination may, and ought to be controlled, and can
> never be a legitimate ground of assent. (LE2, 121; cf. *NHR*, 127–128)

Furthermore, in *The Natural History of Religion*, Hume unambiguously
argued that belief in intelligent, invisible power, while common, is not
universal (*NHR*, 124). He also proposed that religious belief originates
in and is perpetuated by hopes and fears concerning unknown causes
rather than by contemplation of nature's order (*NHR*, 126). Even if Hume
allowed that the feeling of intelligent design is in some sense instinctive,
he did not accept it as an irresistible psychological principle, much less as
one whose absence would lead to the extinction of human life.

Advocates of the design argument themselves acknowledged that the
feeling of intelligent design, while common, is not entirely universal, typi-
cally conceding that incurious "savages" and excessively curious skeptics
fail to experience it. Hume understood that he must still address the
suggestion that the argument for intelligent design is accepted at least
by all sensible people who seriously consider it (cf. *NHR*, 134). To do
this Hume has Philo and Demea draw Cleanthes' attention to alternative
explanations of observed order, all of which can be considered "sensible"
following Cleanthes' principles.

Alternative hypotheses

Demea's rebuttal of Cleanthes' argument revisits the lively controversy
between theists such as Peter Browne and Berkeley concerning what it
means to say that God is an intelligent being or mind.[21] Like Berkeley,

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[21] See Peter Browne, *The Procedure, Extent, and Limits of the Human Understanding* (London, 1728;
facs. rpt., New York and London: Garland Publishing, 1976), 81–85. His views were criticized
by (among others) Berkeley in *Alciphron* (originally published in 1732), Fourth Dialogue, Secs.
17–22, in *Works*, III:163–170. Browne responded to Berkeley and other critics in *Things Divine and
Supernatural Conceived by Analogy with Things Natural and Human* (London, 1733; facs. rpt., New
York and London: Garland Publishing, 1976).

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Cleanthes maintains that it means that God is intelligent in the same sense as the human – the difference is not a difference in kind, only one of degree. Like Browne, Demea argues that since perceptions, thoughts, sentiments, and volitions and their successive order of existence in human consciousness depend on physical circumstances of the human condition, human intelligence cannot literally resemble a being for whom physical circumstances do not apply. While Browne accepts that God and human thought are analogous powers, he denies their similarity consists in some proportion of knowable qualities. The difference between human intelligence and divine intelligence is not just one of degree, but an incomprehensible difference of kind. Like Browne, Demea nevertheless maintains that since intelligence is something we value in human nature, it is natural and appropriate to attribute intelligence to the ultimate cause of nature as a figurative expression of awe or respect for a power incomprehensibly greater than our own, provided it is acknowledged that when the terms "intelligent" and "mind" are used in this way, they do not denote anything literally resembling human thought (*D* 3.13). Philo also ascribes intelligence to God in a similarly limited, pious manner of speaking (*D* 1.3), but only ironically, presuming that he agreed with Berkeley's assessment that "nothing can be inferred from such an account of God, about conscience, or worship, or religion"[22] a consequence which suits Philo's skepticism regarding religion. However, Cleanthes, like Berkeley, rejects Browne's mysticism precisely because it would be no different from skepticism or atheism in its consequences.

Putting aside this controversy between theists, Philo shows that Cleanthes' facile manner in applying rules of analogy more strongly supports a variety of pagan hypotheses that have important explanatory advantages. In Part 5, he amusingly proposes polytheistic scenarios of universes created by intelligent but juvenile, senile, or underling deities. While fanciful, they have the advantage of explaining apparent imperfections in the universe. In Part 6, he proposes a pantheistic hypothesis according to which God is the soul of the universe and the universe is God's body. The suggestion has the advantage of conforming to the uniform evidence of experience that minds exist only in bodies. In Part 7, he proposes that the same features of the world which lead Cleanthes

[22] Berkeley, *Alciphron*, in *Works* III:165. His criticism of the view that God's mind is different in kind from human intelligence continues up through p. 170.

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to see nature as a machine can be found in the effects of biological gen-eration. If nature's order resembles an organism more than a machine, then, by Cleanthes' principles, it would follow that the universe more probably originated in a primordial plant, animal, egg, or seed. Fanciful as these suggestions appear, they have the advantage of being consistent with uniform experience that intelligent beings originate through biolog-ical generation, not the other way around.

Philo's arguments in Parts 5–7 have a playful mood, humorously reduc-ing Cleanthes' prideful empiricism to what Cleanthes would consider poetical superstitions, but in Part 8 he adopts a more serious tone. He proposes that, given infinite time and a finite quantity of matter, the observed natural order, including intelligent life, would inevitably arise from the motion and collision of unorganized material particles. Accord-ing to this hypothesis, nature's order is the result of necessity, not of chance or intelligent design. While it does not explain why matter possesses an inherent power of motion, it has an important explanatory advantage that Cleanthes' hypothesis lacks. The idea that intelligent life gradually devel-ops from unconscious matter in accordance with general causal laws is consistent with the evidence that while many forms of matter exist that are not intelligent, intelligent life has never been found to exist without matter. Cleanthes' hypothesis reverses this universally observed order of causal dependence, suggesting that material reality originates from an immaterial mind.[23]

Despite Philo's professed skepticism about understanding ultimate causes, the conspicuous change in tone in Part 8 leads some readers to speculate that Hume may have believed the ultimate cause or causes of nature are material. This interpretation may seem to be supported by the following remark from his *Natural History of Religion*:

> Could men anatomize nature, according to the most probable, at least the most intelligible philosophy, they would find, that these causes are nothing but the particular fabric and structure of the minute parts of their own bodies and of external objects; and that, by a regular and constant machinery, all the events are produced, about which they are so much concerned. (*NHR*, 127)

[23] However, Part 8 does not consider Berkeley's claim that matter, being passive, cannot originate motion, while mind, which we experience as an active principle, can. See Berkeley, *A Treatise concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge*, Pt. 1, Secs. 25–28 in *Works*, II:51–53. Hume addresses this type of view in *T* 1.3.14.8–13 and *EHU* 7.9–25.

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Nevertheless, the context of this statement is a general one about unknown
causes, not specifically about ultimate causes. The remark does not close
off the possibility that the "particular fabric and structure" of minute par-
ticles of matter and the "regular and constant machinery" of the universe
have a more ultimate, perhaps even intelligent cause, since it does not
explain why the fabric and structure of material particles and the laws of
physics are what they are. His remark further suggests that explanations
that pretend to identify ultimate causes would be less intelligible because
of the difficulty in explaining what makes such causes ultimate. The fol-
lowing quotation from the *Treatise* is further evidence that Hume, no less
than his fictional Philo, is skeptical of any pretense to identify ultimate
causes:

> And tho' we must endeavour to render all our principles as univer-
> sal as possible, by tracing up our experiments to the utmost, and
> explaining all effects from the simplest and fewest causes, 'tis still
> certain we cannot go beyond experience; and any hypothesis, that
> pretends to discover the ultimate or original qualities . . . ought at
> first to be rejected as presumptuous and chimerical. (*T*, Intro., 8)

The reason why Hume considers the fabric and structure of material
particles and general laws of physics the most "intelligible" account of
unknown causes is voiced by Philo: they do not reverse the universally
observed dependence of thought on matter. Nevertheless, since Hume
does not believe such explanations are complete, Philo accurately repre-
sents Hume's skepticism when he states that the material hypothesis of
Part 8, if taken as a pretended ultimate explanation of nature, is only one
of "a hundred contradictory views." It is natural, then, that Hume has
Philo conclude Part 8 by saying that all pretended ultimate explanations,
including Cleanthes' hypothesis, "prepare a complete triumph for the
sceptic," who claims that "a total suspense of judgement is here our only
reasonable resource" (8.12).

Demea's cosmological argument

Demea proposes that Philo's alternative hypotheses show that empirical
speculation concerning the ultimate cause of nature is too uncertain to
provide any guidance for religious worship. If Cleanthes' principles leave
in doubt whether the cause of nature is one or many, finite or infinite,

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transcendent or immanent, material or immaterial, "What devotion or worship address to them?" he asks, or "What veneration or obedience pay them?" With all these attributes in question, natural theology "becomes altogether useless" (6.1).

To remedy this deficiency, Demea offers to defend theism with an *a priori* cosmological argument for a necessarily existent being that resembles Samuel Clarke's argument.[24] Like Clarke, Demea maintains that the argument conclusively proves divine attributes such as unity and infinity that empirical arguments leave uncertain.

Cleanthes poses five objections to show that Demea's argument does not support theism. All are consistent with Hume's principles. His first objection, which he claims is entirely decisive, is a general statement denying that claims about what exists can be proven by *a priori* demonstration (9.5). His next two objections concern the concept of necessary being. He claims, first, that the concept has no consistent meaning, and then suggests that, by one account of its meaning, the material universe may be this necessary being (9.6–7). His final two criticisms challenge Demea's assumption that an eternal series of contingent events must have a cause (9.8–9).

Cleanthes' third criticism specifically addresses an argument Clarke had given to support his claim that the ultimate cause of nature cannot be material. The argument is sometimes referred to as the argument from contingency. Clarke noted that the material universe, with respect both to its parts and to the form in which its parts are arranged, is logically contingent rather than necessary because both the whole and each of its parts can be conceived not to exist or to exist in a different form. He concluded that the reason why a material universe exists rather than nothing, and the reason why the arrangement of matter in this universe exists rather than some other, must be an immaterial cause, not a material one. Cleanthes responds by saying that the existence of an immaterial deity also appears logically contingent:

> [T]he mind can at least imagine him to be non-existent, or his attributes to be altered. It must be some unknown, inconceivable

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[24] Demea describes the argument as *a priori*, but Clarke describes it as *a posteriori*. The difference is explained by the fact that Clarke used these terms in their older scholastic sense. See note 12. For Clarke's argument, see *A Demonstration*, Secs. I–III, pp. 8–28.

> qualities, which can make his non-existence appear impossible, or his attributes unalterable: And no reason can be assigned, why these qualities may not belong to matter. As they are altogether unknown and inconceivable, they can never be proved incompatible with it. (9.7)

Some readers question whether Cleanthes' criticisms of the cosmological argument are convincing, but Hume did not need them to be convincing if he believed that the cosmological argument, even if sound, has no religious significance. Even if it proves divine attributes such as infinity, unity, or necessary existence, it would not prove divine intelligence, and another issue – the focus of Parts 10 and 11 – would still divide theists from skeptics and atheists. Meanwhile, Hume concludes the discussion of the cosmological argument by having Philo say, without either endorsing or rejecting Cleanthes' criticisms, that he will set aside these abstract reflections to observe that

> the argument *a priori* has seldom been found convincing, except to people of a metaphysical head, who have accustomed themselves to abstract reasoning . . . Other people, even of good sense and the best inclined to religion, feel always some deficiency in such arguments, though they are not perhaps able to explain distinctly where it lies. A certain proof, that men ever did, and ever will, derive their religion from other sources than from this species of reasoning. (9.11)

The problem of evil

His cosmological argument dismissed, Demea's zeal to defend religious worship leads him to propose a psychological justification of religion in place of a rational one, a shift that parallels Cleanthes' shift to an instinctive justification in Part 3. He now asserts that consciousness of "imbecility and misery," not reasoning, leads people to believe "in a being, on whom all nature is dependent" who is capable of protecting humanity from misfortune. "Our hopes and fears," Demea asserts, make us "endeavour, by prayers, adoration, and sacrifice, to appease those unknown powers, whom we find, by experience, so able to afflict and oppress us" (10.1). Since Hume himself argues in his *Natural History of Religion* that religious worship originates in and is perpetuated by hope and fear spurred by ignorance, it is not surprising that he has Philo join Demea in cataloguing

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a long list of natural and moral evils[25] that pollute human life and concur that "the best and indeed the only method of bringing everyone to a due sense of religion is by just representations of the misery and wickedness of men" (10.2).

Demea's and Philo's gloomy assessment of the human condition introduces a new problem for natural religion – how to reconcile the existence of evil with the orthodox conception of God as an all-powerful, all-knowing, and morally perfect being. Several different strategies are available to theists to defuse this problem. One is to deny the reality of evil. Following this account, which Philo attributes to William King and Gottfried Leibniz (10.6), what we consider evil from our limited perspective is actually good in so far as it is part of a system that could not be improved by its elimination. Demea rejects this approach, finding that it contradicts "the united testimony of mankind, founded on sense and consciousness," that affirms the reality of evil. Instead, he proposes a solution he claims has been urged by "all pious divines and preachers," namely, that evil is real, but still compatible with God's perfect goodness because whatever evil exists will be rectified at some future time, if not in this life, then in life after death. Like Shaftesbury,[26] Cleanthes rejects this solution because expectations about what will exist in the future or an afterlife are arbitrary without evidence from present experience. Nevertheless, he also understands that if experience shows that humankind is "unhappy or corrupted" in this life, "there is an end at once of all religion. For to what purpose establish the natural attributes of the deity, when the moral are still doubtful and uncertain?" (10.28). To defuse the problem of evil, Cleanthes claims that Philo and Demea's depiction of the hopelessness of the human condition is exaggerated. The evidence of human experience shows that happiness predominates over misery, and this predominance in turn proves God's perfect benevolence.

Philo cautions Cleanthes that he is putting "this controversy on a most dangerous issue," and is "unawares introducing a total scepticism into the most essential articles of natural and revealed theology" (10.33). His warning initially draws from Hume's treatment of this topic in a manuscript fragment surviving from around the time he was finishing his *Treatise*. Despite his stated inclination to believe that misery predominates over

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[25] *Natural evil* is pain and suffering produced by unconscious forces of nature; *moral evil* is evil produced by human choice.
[26] Shaftesbury, "The Moralists," in *Characteristics*, 245.

happiness, Hume argued in the fragment that "the facts are here so com-
plicated and dispersed, that a certain conclusion can never be formed from
them" (Fragment, 111). It is understandable, then, that Hume would have
Philo say that "a talent of eloquence and strong imagery is more requisite
than that of reasoning and argument" (10.2) to represent the miserable
state of the human condition. It is also understandable why, even after
declaring his inclination to believe that misery predominates over happi-
ness, Philo says he will not "insist upon these topics" (10.33). Both Hume
and Hume's Philo deal with the question concerning divine benevolence
on other grounds.

Hume approached the question in two ways. One approach draws from
his account of moral passions and judgment. In this regard, the question
is how best to explain the existence of moral judgments and motives:
are they common to all conscious creatures or do they depend on more
particular characteristics and circumstances? Hume sided with the second
alternative. In his *Treatise* and *Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals*,
he argued that moral judgments depend on feelings and sentiments rooted
in human nature. Although he did not spell out the religious consequences
of this position in his published writings, he did so in a letter to Francis
Hutcheson. "Since morality, according to your opinion as well as mine,
is determined merely by sentiment," he wrote,

> it regards only human nature and human life. This has been often
> urged against you, and the consequences are very momentous . . . If
> morality were determined by reason, that is the same to all rational
> beings: But nothing but experience can assure us, that the senti-
> ments are the same. What experience have we with regard to supe-
> rior beings? How can we ascribe to them any sentiments at all? They
> have implanted those sentiments in us for the conduct of life like our
> bodily sensations, which they possess not themselves. (LH, 114)

Hume's second approach considers the issue solely within the context
of the problem of evil. From this standpoint, the question is: what hypoth-
esis best explains the distribution of happiness and misery actually found
in the world? Is the mixture of good and evil best explained in terms of
moral intentions of a deity, or by morally indifferent forces of nature?

In his early fragment, Hume argued that even if it is granted that plea-
sure predominates over pain, the ambiguity of the evidence suggests this
predominance is at best marginal. Since a marginal predominance could

result from a mixture of causes that are indifferent to human happiness, parsimony makes it probable that the ultimate cause or causes of nature have no moral intentions. However, by the time he wrote his *Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*, Hume came to believe that the problem of evil is not a problem about the quantity of evil at all. Framing the *Enquiry*'s discussion of this issue as a dialogue between a first-person narrator and his Epicurean friend, Hume has the friend argue that if the question of God's moral perfection is not assumed but subjected to the test of empirical evidence, even the least mixture of evil with good counts as evidence against it.

It may seem that Hume is endorsing a non-skeptical conclusion in the fragment and the *Enquiry* that is inconsistent with his view, voiced through Philo, that no judgments about the nature of ultimate causes warrant belief. However, the difficulty disappears if Hume's remarks are seen in the context of the same argumentative strategy adopted by Philo in the *Dialogues*. The purpose of these arguments is not to endorse non-skeptical conclusions but to show that, accepting the assumption of his non-skeptical, theistic opponents that empirical evidence is strong enough to justify conclusions about the moral qualities of ultimate causes, the evidence supports a conclusion that contradicts their opinion that God is perfectly benevolent.

Whereas Hume's fragment emphasizes the *quantity* of evil, and the *Enquiry* emphasizes the *mere existence* of evil, the *Dialogues* emphasizes the fact that evil *appears avoidable*. The shift is necessary because in Part 11 Cleanthes introduces the heterodox idea that God's powers are finite rather than infinite, explaining that while God is supremely wise, powerful, and benevolent, he is limited by necessity. Intractable qualities of matter and the general physical laws that govern them would require God to permit some evil in order to achieve benevolent ends. He then proposes that God is perfectly benevolent because the predominance of happiness over misery proves that God avoids unnecessary evil.

To undermine Cleanthes' argument, Philo sets out to show that evil *appears* avoidable to us even on Cleanthes' assumption that everything depends on a finite God. For example, one of the causes of evil is the conformity of everything in nature to general laws. This cause does not appear to be necessary because we find no contradiction in supposing that a finite, but still vastly superior and supreme cause could govern nature through particular volitions rather than general laws. Since the