

# Hume's Belief in God

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## Abstract

Hume's *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*<sup>1</sup> closes with an endorsement of the very position which it has consistently attacked, namely belief in an orderer. Hume's willingness to oppose arguments supporting a position in which he believes means that, despite mounting severe criticisms, he can consistently support a designer as the optimum hypothesis for order in the world. He produced numerous statements of order in the world and then, in *Part 12* of the *DNR*, alleged that persons of understanding would find that belief in a designer follows.

## 1. Introduction

Hume's criticisms of the design argument in the bulk of the *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* can be reconciled with his endorsement of belief in an intelligent designer in *Part 12* of the *DNR*. Opinion has been heavily weighted against this position, with scholars making various attempts to try and find a means of reconciling the theistic flavour of *Part 12* of the *DNR* with the scepticism of the rest of the work. Black and Gressis note: 'If you get your news from reports written by some prominent scholars, you might think that the point of Hume's *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* is simply to discredit the design argument for the existence of an intelligent designer'.<sup>2</sup> Willis echoes this opinion: 'Many hold that Hume was an atheist, that he despised the church, and that he was a devastating critic of religion'.<sup>3</sup> In general: 'Hume has been interpreted as an exceptionally destructive sceptic with regard to religion'.<sup>4</sup> This bequeaths a problem for *Part 12* of the *DNR* where, as Nelson claims:

<sup>1</sup> D. Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* (ed.) N.K. Smith, (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1947/1779) abbreviated *DNR* in the text.

<sup>2</sup> T. Black and R. Gressis, 'True religion in Hume's *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*', *British Journal for The History Of Philosophy* **25** (2017), 244–264, 244.

<sup>3</sup> A.C. Willis, 'The Potential Use-Value of Hume's 'True Religion'', *The Journal of Scottish Philosophy* **13.1** (2015), 1–15. 1.

<sup>4</sup> L. Tai Ha, 'Was Hume an Atheist? A Reconsideration', *Filozofia* **66** (2011), 240–257, 240.

‘... in *Part 12* Hume seems to be completely reversing his refutations in *Parts 1–11* of the argument from design’s claims to establish the existence and nature of God’.<sup>5</sup>

The problem with *Part 12* of the *DNR* arises from what seems an inconsistency in Hume’s views where he spends the bulk of his writing attacking the design argument yet concludes the work by endorsing design and a designer. In fact there is no inconsistency, once it is understood that what Hume is doing is searching for the optimum explanation of the ordered universe and expounding this in *Part 12*.

Hume is in general difficult to explore because he combines two ultimately inconsistent views: a belief in phenomenalism and a belief in a common sense view of the world. Ironically, he sees the inconsistency, for example, in his discussions of ‘the academic or sceptical philosophy’<sup>6</sup> but he does not follow through on this.<sup>7</sup> Importantly, in the case of the design argument he is prepared to follow where the argument leads, even if it means criticising defences of things in which he really believes. It is important to recognise that Hume is prepared to live with that tension, which sometimes, as in his discussions of the knowledge of matters of fact and causation, he feels able to resolve, and sometimes not, as in the *DNR*, which concludes with belief in a designer despite having savaged the argument for the same. In searching for the best explanation of the universe in the *DNR*, Hume trifles with explanations as bizarre as this world arising from a seed from another world,<sup>8</sup> whilst producing highly sophisticated criticisms of varieties of the design argument. The position in *Part 12* is consistent with the rest of the work since it is saying that for all its faults the notion of design and a designer is the preferable hypothesis for the workings of the world. The conclusion will be that Hume has a belief in design and a designer even though he cannot find a satisfactory argument to support it.

<sup>5</sup> J.O. Nelson, ‘The Role of Part XII in Hume’s Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion’ *Hume Studies* **XIV**. 2, (November, 1988), 347–372, 348.

<sup>6</sup> D. Hume, *Enquiries Concerning Human Understanding and Concerning The Principles of Morals* (ed.) L.A. Selby-Bigge, rev. P.H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975/1777), 149, abbreviated *EHU* in the text.

<sup>7</sup> I am grateful to Mr T. Miles for his perceptive comments on an earlier version of this paper.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 178

## 2. Rehabilitating Design

One might consider that very little of the Design Argument is left following the attacks on various positions favouring a deity in the *DNR*, not all of them connected with design. These criticisms include: the difficulty of accounting for the deity from one unique case; the notion that causal arguments must be based on experienced regularities, not available in the case of world constructions; the contention that the solution of the Deity as the cause of the universe bequeaths the more difficult problem of discovering the cause of the Deity; the position that resemblance to human contrivance is no more probable than resemblance to animals or other worlds; the contention that thought, design or reason operative within nature do not permit extension to account for the very existence of nature; the proposition that the existence of order within nature does not necessarily require anything external to nature to explain it.

Despite savaging the design argument in both the *EHU* and the *DNR*, Hume, whilst firmly resisting misuse of the argument, preserved a very minimal notion of design on the basis of observation of order in the cosmos. His principal concern over misuse of the design argument concerned attempts to extend it beyond its legitimate use: 'In the *EHU*, *Section XI*, Hume nullified the project of specifying particular characteristics of the Designer with the rejection of attempts to argue from the *AFD*,<sup>9</sup> with its conclusion of a possible designer, to sundry characteristics of that designer. In general terms, Hume is claiming that the inference from effect to cause, the pattern of the *AFD*, then succeeded by a move from cause to effect, is unwarranted'.<sup>10</sup> Hume's deity in *Part 12* of the *DNR* is simply a designer and no more; neither personal nor moral.

Hume accumulated a mass of evidence of order in the world and in human physiology in the *DNR*. He then appears to subscribe to a belief in a deity, as in *Part 12* of the *DNR*, and in *The Natural History*.<sup>11</sup> He has all his protagonists agree in the *DNR Part 12* that the world order should convince us that there is an intelligent creator. To add to that achievement, he also claimed to establish

<sup>9</sup> Argument from design.

<sup>10</sup> J. Tarrant, 'Hume's Fundamental Problem of Evil', *Philosophy* **89** (2014), 603–620, 607.

<sup>11</sup> D. Hume, *Principal Writings on Religion including Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion and The Natural History of Religion* (ed.) J.C.A. Gaskin, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993/1757, 1779), abbreviated *NHR* in the text, 184.

commonality between the positions of the theist and the atheist as persons of understanding. However, the complete absence of understanding in the vulgar<sup>12</sup> meant no universal appreciation of order and an orderer is possible.

The seeming *volte-face* in *Part 12* of the *DNR* is not without precedent in other writings of Hume. It happens that there are parallels between Hume's approach to factual knowledge and his approach to theism in the *DNR*. The parallels arise through his willingness to attack arguments which purport to support a position in which he believes. In relation to factual knowledge it seems that Hume all along believed in cause and effect and in the possibility of factual knowledge, but he questioned how such knowledge was possible. In considering this question he found flaws in many arguments that might seem to support it. But in this case he found his sceptical resolution of these doubts<sup>13</sup> and so could continue to see us as having knowledge of matters of fact based on causal reasoning. In the *DNR* he does much the same: he finds flaws in many arguments purporting to defend belief in a creator but in this case he finds no sceptical resolution of his doubts,<sup>14</sup> and so he just goes back to believing what he had accepted all along: that the existence of an intelligent creator follows, somehow, from the order of nature.

The first parts of the *DNR* do not even purport to prove that God does not exist; finding faults in many of the arguments which purport to show that God does exist does not prove the contrary. Hume finds that: '...the argument from design is not scientifically capable of proving the existence and nature of God, either because it appeals to illicit applications of causal or strict analogical reasoning or because, insofar as it attempts to rest itself on weaker analogical reasonings, it proves too much...'<sup>15</sup> Hume believed that order implied intelligent design and hence an intelligent designer. However, Hume could not see what the argument for such a designer was and so he tended to revert to talk of analogy and thus in *Part 12* of the *DNR*, having amassed overwhelming evidence of order in the world, concluded by advocating a designer and professing belief in the same.

It should be said that Hume was not at any time presenting belief in the Christian God. He had demolished the notion of God as moral

<sup>12</sup> The term is used several times by Hume and refers to ordinary people whom he deems incapable of appreciating a holistic view of the world.

<sup>13</sup> Hume, *EHU*, op. cit. 40–55.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Nelson, op. cit. 352.

and personal in the earlier parts of the *DNR*.<sup>16</sup> Consequently, his espousal of a designer in *Part 12* is to a much diminished deity, which, he believes, should be an explanatory hypothesis of order in the universe acceptable to persons of taste, be they atheists or theists. His designer has much in common with the orderer of the deists<sup>17</sup> with whom he agrees in denying a particular providence, the notion that God intervenes in people's lives in response to prayer and petition, but whom he opposes as advocates of a deity manifested to reason alone by the natural world. He further opposed the deists, insisting in the *NHR* that religion arises from fear and manifests in polytheism in its early stages.

*Pace* critics of the disparity between *Part 12* and the rest of the *DNR*, in fact Hume's positive stance on the issues of order and analogy with Philo's warming to design, and Philo is generally, though not universally, taken for the most part to reflect Hume's own thinking, does not begin in *Part 12*, but before it. It is in the matter of sentiment that Philo changes his antipathy to design<sup>18</sup> when in the *DNR Part III* Cleanthes advances his second design argument, appealing to instinctual beliefs in favour of an orderer rather than argument:<sup>19</sup> 'Consider, anatomize the eye: Survey its structure and contrivance; and tell me, from your own feeling, if the idea of a contriver does not immediately flow in upon you with the force like that of a sensation'.<sup>20</sup> Philo replied to Cleanthes implicitly expressing support for the latter's second design argument: 'Formerly, when we argued concerning the natural attributes of intelligence and design, I needed all my sceptical and metaphysical subtilty [*sic*] to elude your grasp. In many views of the universe, and of its parts, particularly the latter, the beauty and fitness of final causes strike us with such

<sup>16</sup> Tarrant, *op. cit.*

<sup>17</sup> There was considerable variation in the views of the deists. Samuel Clarke in the Boyle lectures attempted a classification, though it was heavily weighted in terms of his own prejudices. What should be said is that there were considerable differences between Lord Herbert, Tindall, Toland and Shaftesbury, though to varying degrees they combined in rejecting revelation. Hume resented attempts to call him a deist, not so much for the notoriety of the term, but for its association with reason as the foundation of religion.

<sup>18</sup> It should be said that, in general, Philo retains his critical stance on matters that come before him.

<sup>19</sup> Here Cleanthes adumbrates a position so important in chapter 12 where sentiment and not acceptance of the design argument has a role to play in supporting the acceptance of an orderer

<sup>20</sup> Hume, *DNR*, *op. cit.*, 154.

irresistible force, that all objections appear (what I believe they really are) mere cavils and sophisms; nor can we then imagine how it was ever possible for us to repose any weight on them'.<sup>21</sup> Here is a new paradigm: endorsing that which seems the most satisfactory explanation of the workings of the universe. Hume feels there is a designer at work, from the intricacies of the eye to the way in which the parts of the universe enmesh to make a whole, but has no valid argument to show that it is true. Notwithstanding the lack of an argument, he finds that the sense of a designed universe is so evident to those who will seriously observe it that a designer must rank as a preferable explanation to chance.

### **3. Order and an Orderer**

Concurrently with his recognition of a conviction of a designed world which fits so neatly together, Hume produced a massive accumulation of evidence of order in the world for which he could see no alternative explanatory hypothesis other than that of a designer. Hume argued in the *NHR*: 'The whole frame of nature bespeaks an intelligent author, and no rational enquirer can, after serious reflection, suspend his belief in a moment with regard to the primary principles of genuine Theism and Religion'.<sup>22</sup> Hume felt that order, which was obvious in the world, compelled any rational person to admit that one could infer from order to the existence of a guiding intelligence. The caveat, rational, proved to be important when Hume referred to the vulgar.

Hume considered that belief in an orderer is not something that will be discerned by all persons, but only those of taste.<sup>23</sup> For those he termed the vulgar, the accumulation of evidence for order would be lost. Perceiving order in the world and the potential for an orderer is the product of those of good understanding, and a conjecture which Hume encapsulated in his, *A Letter from a Gentleman to his Friend in Edinburgh*,<sup>24</sup> written after the defeat of the chair he

<sup>21</sup> Hume, *DNR*, op. cit. 201–202. Interestingly, Philo makes this concession to Cleanthes in the context of a devastating attack on divine morality. For a discussion of the latter see Tarrant, op. cit.

<sup>22</sup> Hume, *NHR*, op. cit. 134.

<sup>23</sup> Persons of cultivation, understanding and good judgement.

<sup>24</sup> Hume, *A Letter from a Gentleman to his Friend in Edinburgh* (eds) E.C. Mossner and J.V. Price (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1967/1745), abbreviated *LFG* in the text.

sought, and which was conciliatory in tone: 'Wherever I see Order I infer from Experience that *there*, there hath been Design and Contrivance. And the same Principle which leads me into this Inference, when I contemplate a Building, regular and beautiful in its whole Frame and Structure; the same Principle obliges me to infer an infinitely perfect Architect, from the infinite Art and Contrivance which is displayed in the whole Fabrick [*sic*] of the Universe'.<sup>25</sup> In addition, he writes: 'All things in the universe are evidently of a piece. Everything is adjusted to everything. One design prevails throughout the whole. And this uniformity leads the mind to acknowledge one author'.<sup>26</sup> Clearly, Hume saw order as strong evidence for a creator and hence as warranting belief in the same. His objections were to arguments which tried to show why order was evidence. Since he could see any other reason why order should be evidence he reverted back to talk of analogy. This was a dilemma he did not resolve and tended to see in psychological terms, referring to a verbal dispute.<sup>27</sup>

The support for order mounted by Hume in the *DNR* is prodigious and all-embracing, including internal and external references to order, amounting to an overwhelming case for an orderer. Evidence for Hume's preference for order is apparent outside the *DNR* as is amply demonstrated in the author's *History of England*.<sup>28</sup>

The evidence for order builds in the *DNR* when Philo offers his thoughts on anatomy, in an attempt to refute the idea that the world is the result of pure chance<sup>29</sup> and strengthen the hypothesis that it is the result of design: 'It is with pleasure I hear GALEN reason concerning the structure of the human body. The anatomy of a man, says he, discovers above 600 different muscles; and whoever duly considers these, will find, that in each of them nature must have adjusted at least ten different circumstances, in order to attain the end which she proposed; proper figure, just magnitude, right disposition of the several ends, upper and lower position of the whole, the due insertion of the several nerves, veins, and arteries:

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 138.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> See page 11.

<sup>28</sup> Hume, *The History of England* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1993/1778). See for example Hume's distaste for the Independents as a recipe for chaos, vol. 6, 62, and his recognition of the Church of England as a bastion of order, vol. 5, 442, abbreviated *History* in the text.

<sup>29</sup> Hume, *DNR*, op. cit. 178. Hume had introduced the possibility that the world arose from a seed shed by another world.

So that, in the muscles alone, above 6000 several views and intentions must have been formed and executed... What a prodigious display of artifice, even in these simple and homogenous parts... The farther we advance in these researches, we discover new scenes of art and wisdom. But descry still, at a distance, farther scenes beyond our reach; in the fine internal structure of the parts, in the oeconomy [*sic*] of the brain, in the fabric of the seminal vessels. All these artifices are repeated in every different species of animal, with wonderful variety, and with exact propriety, suited to the different intentions of nature, in framing each species'.<sup>30</sup> Philo adds: 'Supposing there were a God, who did not discover himself to our senses; were it possible for him to give stronger proofs of his existence, than what appear on the whole face of nature?'<sup>31</sup>

Philo's use of Galen here reads very much like the work of William Paley. Galen has shown the complexity and inter-relationship of the organs, nerves, blood circulation and tissue in the human body requiring immense wisdom and knowledge for their origination. Paley held that no animal could have contrived its own limbs and senses or been the author to itself of the design with which it was constructed. This was expressly controverted by Darwinian doctrine, which showed how an animal, or more accurately a species, could be author to itself in terms of the unsupervised adaptation of organisms to the environment. Paley is best known for his analogical design argument, in which he likened the universe to a watch, arguing that if we were to discover a watch in a natural environment then, due to its order, complexity, and purpose, we would rightly infer that it was the work of an intelligent designer; these features are the marks of design. For Paley, order in nature is a wonder and a marvel needing special explanation; for Darwinian supporters it required no such explanation beyond itself. Paley and design supporters took it that nature could not be self-organising and there is the gulf between the design supporters and Darwin's theory of evolution by natural selection, which is a completely different paradigm. It is important to appreciate that Hume, despite his criticisms of the design argument, did not produce such an alternative paradigm. Hume in the *DNR* gave a brief consideration to self-organization in nature, some one hundred years before Darwin, but lacked the empirical data to produce anything on the scale of Darwin's theory of evolution and no real alternative to the designer paradigm hence he concentrated on critiquing the design argument. His response to the watch, for

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 215.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.



example, was to say that though one may infer that a watch was designed because we can observe humans constructing clocks, one cannot infer that a universe or a life-form was designed because humans lack direct observation of a creator making such entities.

To lend further support to the belief in an orderer and the explanatory notion of design, the machine analogy is introduced. Cleanthes argues: 'that one great advantage of the principle of theism, is, that it is the only system of cosmology which can be rendered intelligible and complete, and yet can throughout preserve a strong analogy to what we every day see and experience in the world. The comparison of the universe to a machine of human contrivance is so obvious and natural, and is justified by so many instances of order and design in nature, that it must immediately *strike* all unprejudiced apprehensions, and procure universal approbation'.<sup>32</sup> Here, according to Cleanthes, is the one, viable explanatory hypothesis concerning the universe which must strike any unprejudiced person considering such a matter. Indeed, Cleanthes further argues: 'Whoever attempts to weaken this theory, cannot pretend to succeed by establishing in its place any other that is precise and determinate: It is sufficient for him, if he starts doubts and difficulties; and by remote and abstract views of things, reach that suspence [*sic*] of judgement, which is here the utmost boundary of his wishes. But besides that this state of mind is in itself unsatisfactory, it can never be steadily maintained against such striking appearances as continually engage us into the religious hypothesis'.<sup>33</sup>

Cleanthes's words are very important for they make the point that what is needed here to make the doubt engendered by the purely negative arguments of the *DNR* a genuine, serious doubt, is another explanation, a serious rival to that of the orderer, and this, he maintains, is what is lacking. There is no viable, rival explanation to that of design and a designer. One then looks with interest to Philo's response and finds he does not demur from Cleanthes's position. In fact, Philo, similarly, places little store on the possibility of a suspense of judgement in this matter: 'So little, replied Philo, do I esteem this suspense of judgement in the present case to be possible, that I am apt to suspect there enters somewhat of a dispute of words into this controversy, more than is usually imagined'.<sup>34</sup> The controversy he is referring to is that between atheists and theists, which, in

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 216. My italics.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

the face of overwhelming evidence for a designer, he takes to be a mere verbal dispute.

#### **4. Order leading to Deity**

The purpose of the voluminous evidence of order should now be clear. Hume will finally present this, in *Part 12* of the *DNR*, with its accompanying notion of an orderer, as the most viable explanatory hypothesis for the way the world is, rather than the alternative of chance. Importantly, his presentation is of such a nature that it should appeal to persons of understanding, be they atheists or theists. In expounding his thesis, and it is worth quoting this at length, Philo falls back on the case of analogy which he had largely rejected earlier in the *DNR*. Philo states in the *DNR*: ‘That the works of nature bear a great analogy to the productions of art is evident; and according to all the rules of good reasoning, we ought to infer, if we argue at all concerning them that their causes have a proportional analogy. But as there are also considerable differences, we have reason to suppose a proportional difference in the causes; and in particular ought to attribute a much higher degree of power and energy to the supreme cause than any we have even observed in mankind. Here then the existence of a Deity is plainly ascertained by reason; and if we make it a question whether, on account of these analogies, we can properly call him a *mind* or *intelligence*, notwithstanding the vast difference, which may reasonably be supposed between him and human minds; what is this but a mere verbal controversy? No man can deny the analogies between the effects: To restrain ourselves from enquiring concerning the causes is scarcely possible: From this enquiry the legitimate conclusion is, that the causes have also an analogy: And if we are not contented with calling the first a supreme God or Deity but desire to vary the expression; what can we call him but MIND or THOUGHT, to which he is justly supposed to bear a considerable resemblance?’<sup>35</sup>

The issue then is how far this flexibility, which Philo noted, would in fact embrace the several positions on the orderer: atheism, deism<sup>36</sup>

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 216–217.

<sup>36</sup> There is no one quintessential statement of deism, there being considerable differences between the views of the deists such as Herbert, Toland and Woolston. Shaftesbury’s Letter, with its condemnation of enthusiasm, may be taken as the view of a moderate deist. Hume does not distinguish between shades of deism but in most cases there was commonality

and theism.<sup>37</sup> Despite the differences between these groups, the contention of Philo in *Part 12* of the *DNR* was that all of them could be moved by the prevalence of order and the potential for an orderer. Taking the nexus of atheists, deists and theists, Philo contended that the evidence and appeal of order was so powerful that no person of taste could reject it. Persons of taste, according to Cleanthes, are to be distinguished from the vulgar who have: '... a general prejudice against what they do not easily understand, and makes them reject every principle which requires elaborate reasoning to prove and establish it... They firmly believe in witches though they will not believe nor attend to the most simple proposition of Euclid'.<sup>38</sup> Philo and Cleanthes showed that the real gulf in *Part 12* was not between theism and atheism but between persons of understanding and the generality of people.

### 5. Convergence of positions: A mere verbal controversy<sup>39</sup>

Hume's affinity with persons of taste led him to offer, through Philo, his favoured explanation of an ordered universe to them, in the course of which he minimised their different affiliations, whether atheist or theist. If persons of taste recognise the overwhelming existence of order in the world and the absence of any explanatory hypothesis other than design or blind chance, it should be possible to establish a convergence of views amongst them. Philo introduced the notion of a verbal dispute which was supposed to apply between the theist and the atheist, both persons of taste who would appreciate the significance of order and were simply divided by definitions and degrees of acceptance. In claiming that the dispute between the atheist and the theist was merely verbal, Hume assumed they could be moved by the evidence of order to an entity with natural characteristics, whatever title or scope that orderer might be given. The

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with theism on design and Hume sometimes uses the term theist to embrace moderate deists although there were differences on the matter of a personal and moral God.

<sup>37</sup> Hume's use of the term theist is confusing. At times, as in this case, he uses an aspect of what is common between theism and deism which is support for an intelligent designer and ignores differences between them. Hume also uses the term theism when contrasting monotheists, who would include deists, with polytheists, see *NHR*, 160.

<sup>38</sup> Hume, *DNR*, op. cit. 136.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 217.

disarming phrase of a verbal dispute occurs elsewhere in Hume and disguises the fact that Hume is referring to the definition of terms.<sup>40</sup> Disputes in common life and experience, he thought, could sometimes be the result of ambiguous expressions and he considered that this applied in the issue of liberty and necessity.<sup>41</sup> He stated in the *EHU*: 'Nothing is more usual than for philosophers to encroach upon the province of grammarians; and to engage in disputes of words, while they imagine that they are handling controversies of the deepest importance and concern.'<sup>42</sup> The *appendix four* of the *EHU* is in fact entitled, *Of some verbal disputes*.<sup>43</sup> Hume is claiming that the path to resolving some disputes lies in a careful analysis of and use of terms, something available to the atheist and the theist as persons of taste.

## **6. Analogy**

Armed with his conviction of underlying verbal disputes and the instrument of analogy, Hume, in *Part 12* of the *DNR* embarked on a revision of his earlier scepticism concerning the notion of design and designer when presented as the argument from design. That argument having been faulted and other suggestions for the origin of the universe abandoned, Philo's presentation of design and designer in *Chapter 12* of the *DNR* is offered as the best explanation of order in the universe and acceptable to those persons of taste: theists and the atheists. He does this by presenting their differences as a matter of the degree to which they recognise an analogy between the operations of nature and the creator and sustainer of order in the universe. Philo claimed that: 'The theist allows, that the original intelligence is very different from human reason: The atheist allows, that the original principle of order bears some remote analogy to it'.<sup>44</sup>

Philo's case is that since the atheist and theist are both persons of understanding, perceiving order and aware of the settled laws by which the universe operates, there can be only a matter of a degree of difference between them. Philo states: '...the existence of the DEITY is plainly ascertained by reason; and if we make it a question,

<sup>40</sup> The term, verbal dispute, occurs in the *EHU* with discussion of the terms liberty and necessity, *EHU*, op. cit. 93.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 81.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 312.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>44</sup> Hume, *DNR*, op. cit. 218.

whether, on account of these analogies, we can properly call him a *mind* or *intelligence*, notwithstanding the vast difference, which may reasonably be supposed between him and human minds; what is this but a verbal controversy?'<sup>45</sup> Expounding further on analogy, Philo continues: 'No man can deny the analogies between the effects: To restrain ourselves from enquiring concerning the causes is scarcely possible: From this enquiry, the legitimate conclusion is, that the causes also have an analogy: And if we are not contented with calling the first and supreme cause a GOD or DEITY, but desire to vary the expression; what can we call him but MIND or THOUGHT, to which he is justly supposed to bear a considerable resemblance?'<sup>46</sup>

There is no evangelical aim here of uniting or reconciling those with different views on religion; Hume is simply appealing to persons of understanding like himself to consider acceptance of the explanation of design and a designer. The extent and detail of the appeal here is a testament of the degree to which Hume felt he had found, after a critical analysis, the optimum explanation for the ordered universe. Philo declares: 'I next turn to the atheist, who, I assert, is only nominally so, and can never possibly be in earnest; and I ask him, whether, from the coherence and apparent sympathy in all the parts of this world, there be not a certain degree of analogy among all the operations of nature, in every situation and in every age; whether the rotting of a turnip, the generation of an animal, and the structure of human thought be not energies that probably bear some remote analogy to each other: It is impossible he can deny it: He will readily acknowledge it'.<sup>47</sup>

Philo takes it that acceptance that there is order in the universe will be common to both and it is for this reason that the atheist can only be nominally so and never be in earnest. The position given by Philo at the conclusion of the *DNR* is appropriately cautious for venturing a common denominator: 'If the whole of natural theology, as some people seem to maintain, resolves itself into one simple, though somewhat ambiguous, at least undefined proposition, *that the cause or causes of order in the universe probably bear some remote analogy to human intelligence*: If this proposition be not capable of extension, variation, or more particular explication: If it afford no inference that affects human life, or can be the source of any action or forbearance: And if the analogy, imperfect as it is, can be carried no further

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 217.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 218.

than to the human intelligence; and cannot be transferred with any appearance of probability, to the other qualities of mind: If this really be the case, what can the most inquisitive, contemplative, and religious man do more than give a plain, philosophical assent to the proposition as often as it occurs; and believe that the arguments, on which it is established, exceed the objections which lie against it?'<sup>48</sup>

Philo assumes the acceptance of the analogical here; the instrument of reconciliation between these persons of understanding which still allows considerable breadth for their different positions. There was, for example, the issue of how much power to attribute to the deity, which is far greater power than we experience in ordinary life and would be potentially a matter of continuous debate. There was also the issue of the title, whether God, Deity, Mind or Thought. This was an issue of quality for which there was no exact answer. Theists would pronounce a huge difference between the divine and human mind, the atheist would allow a remote analogy between the operations of nature and the original principle of order in the universe

That the gap concerning the nature and quality of the deity could not be closed completely is acknowledged by Hume. In a paragraph made in the final revision of the *DNR* in 1776, Philo comments that there are controversies involving degrees of quality which can never be resolved: 'But there is a species of controversy, which from the very nature of language and human ideas, is involved in perpetual ambiguity, and can never, by any precaution or any definitions, be able to reach a reasonable certainty or precision. These are the controversies concerning the degree of any quality or circumstance'.<sup>49</sup>

Philo says of the disputants that they may: '...never be able to define their terms, so as to enter into each other's meaning: Because the degrees of these qualities are not, like quantity or number, susceptible of any exact mensuration, which may be the standard in the controversy. That the dispute concerning theism is of this nature, and consequently is merely verbal, or perhaps, if possible, still more incurably ambiguous, will appear upon the slightest enquiry'.<sup>50</sup> Nonetheless, Philo held that though the qualities of the designer may be contested, the essential minimum that there was design and a designer was within the ambit of consensus and a potential subject of belief.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 227.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 217.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 217–218.

## 7. Absence of Convergence: The Vulgar

In *Part 12* of the *DNR*, the gulf is between those of understanding and those in whom it is absent. Hume did not expect his beliefs in order and an orderer to be shared by the mass of the people. It was not the atheist or the theist who was at one remove from belief in an orderer, but the vulgar. The latter, of course, had no knowledge of Newton's laws. In the case of the atheist and the theist there is no gulf approaching that between the enlightened and the vulgar, of whom Hume writes : 'The feeble apprehensions of men cannot be satisfied with conceiving their deity as pure spirit and perfect intelligence...' <sup>51</sup> Hume made it abundantly clear that the vulgar could not appreciate order in the universe. The vulgar will have no notion of order but defer to arbitrary fiat. 'Even at this day and in Europe ask any of the vulgar, why he believes in an omnipotent creator of the world; he will never mention the beauty of final causes, of which he is wholly ignorant'. <sup>52</sup> The requirement of good understanding is reflected in the *NHR* with Hume contrasting sharply the uninstructed with the more perceptive of persons: 'Though the stupidity of men, barbarous and uninstructed, be so great that they may not see a sovereign author in the more obvious works of nature, to which they are so much familiarized yet it scarcely seems possible, that anyone of good understanding should reject that idea, when once it is suggested to him'. <sup>53</sup> Hume rejected popular religion, but true religion, he believed, arose from natural principles, a recognition of order in the universe.

It must be said that Hume appeared to accept the tendency, apparent in expositions and illustrations of the design argument, to endorse the division of people into different classes, including differences in intellect. Hume accepted the hierarchy of individuals and this shows him, again, sympathetic to design and a designer. He writes in the *EHU*: '...that Supreme Will, which bestowed on each being its peculiar nature, and arranged the several classes and orders of existence'. <sup>54</sup>

<sup>51</sup> Hume, *NHR*, op. cit. 160.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 153.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 183.

<sup>54</sup> Hume, *EHU*, op. cit. 294. The endorsement of divinely endorsed hierarchy of classes is found in Mrs Alexanders' hymn: *All Things Bright and Beautiful* and the most prominent exponent of this aspect of design was William Paley.

## 8. Conclusion

Belief in God is possible for Hume because of that same sentiment which leads him from the beauty of regularity to the notion of a designer. All persons of understanding, atheists, deists or theists, though they will differ on the qualities of the designer, can be moved, he believes, in this direction if they will consider the hypothesis of a designer without prejudice. Indeed, as persons of understanding they will be without the prejudicial inclinations of the vulgar. What other hypothesis other than design and designer could have a place in persons of taste; certainly not a hypothesis of chance? They may view the designer from different perspectives but the point on which they will surely concur is that this is the best explanation of the ordered universe. In this way Hume's belief in order or design as the best explanation of the universe is the termination of a search conducted within the *DNR* and a prospective measure of consensus between atheist, deist and theist.

That Hume was not completely satisfied with his position in the *DNR* is evident from his, *A Letter Concerning The Dialogues*<sup>55</sup> to Gilbert Elliot. In that letter Hume asks for help with Cleanthes's side of the argument, Cleanthes being the advocate of the argument from design in the *DNR*: 'Whatever you can think of to strengthen that Side of the Argument, will be most acceptable to me'.<sup>56</sup> This suggests Hume's desire to find an argument for the designer immune from the criticisms that Philo had cited in the *DNR*. This is further evident in the same letter when Hume writes: 'I cou'd [*sic*] wish that Cleanthes' Argument cou'd [*sic*] be so analys'd, [*sic*] as to be render'd [*sic*] quite formal & regular. The Propensity of the Mind towards it, unless that Propensity were as strong & universal as that to believe in our Senses & Experience, will still, I am afraid, be esteem'd [*sic*] a suspicious Foundation. Tis [*sic*] here I wish for your Assistance'.<sup>57</sup>

Not only was the design argument unsatisfactory and help was needed to revise it but Hume was also concerned that the inclination to move from order to designer was susceptible to challenge. Whatever the need to strengthen the design argument by Cleanthes, Hume's zest for moving from order to designer showed that whilst the argument in favour of design may be lacking, and

<sup>55</sup> Hume, *A Letter Concerning The Dialogues* 10<sup>th</sup> March 1751 in *NHR*, op. cit. 25, hereafter *the letter* in the text.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 26.



this was an unsatisfactory situation, one could not escape the inclination to associate order with a designer. *The letter* shows that Hume was genuinely seeking an argument proving the existence of God, or at least one that was very strong, and at the same time confirms that he did not think he had found it. However, the hypothesis of theism in relation to order in the world, with all its defects, was preferable over chance so far as Hume was concerned, it being the case that no further alternative hypothesis, in particular, evolution, was available to him at that time. Cleanthes stated in the *DNR*: '...one great advantage of the principle of theism, is, that it is the only system of cosmology which can be rendered intelligible and complete, and yet can throughout preserve a strong analogy to what we every day see and experience in the world'.<sup>58</sup>

It is, however, difficult to classify Hume, whether as some kind of theist, or deist. He is inclined to a mover or designer but not to a personal or moral God, all of which he would need to subscribe to and more if he were a complete theist. Yet neither was he a deist, disagreeing with them on a number of counts: the early prevalence of monotheism and on the role of reason in religious belief, maintaining that experience, not reason, was the proper source of causal beliefs. Moreover, Hume resented attempts to call him a deist, not so much for the notoriety of the term, but for its association with reason as the foundation of religion. It might be more faithful to his position to label him a very weak theist who was vexed at being rather better at attacking arguments for that which he felt inclined to support than he was at defending the same. Yet whilst he praised the role of the established church in terms of encouraging stability in society,<sup>59</sup> he reviled its pomp and ceremony. His spirit of enquiry would be inimical to those seeking faith and allegiance and his designer would be shorn of so much that was dear to theists.

To summarise: Hume believed in a creator, an orderer, and despite finding fault with the arguments in support of that idea, he considered that belief in a designer could and would be shared by persons of understanding. Because he could not think what the supporting argument would be for the explanatory hypothesis of a designer, he reverted, as his letters show, to talk of analogy. His celebrated refutations of the design argument for God's existence<sup>60</sup> occupy part of the *DNR*, yet, paradoxically, the volume closes with design and the designer as the most satisfactory explanatory hypothesis of

<sup>58</sup> Hume, *DNR*, op. cit. 216.

<sup>59</sup> Hume, *History*, op. cit. V 442.

<sup>60</sup> The *a priori* argument is summarily dismissed in *DNR Part 9*.

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the ordered universe. Hume considered that it was order in the universe which, despite the usual arguments falling short of proof, pointed to an orderer. This order was evident to those who were perceptive of beauty and knowledgeable about the workings of the universe, in this case, Newton's laws. It did not apply to the vulgar, whose faith rested in the fear of the disorder from which they hoped God would save them. But Hume did not think that the conclusion from order supported either the Christian idea of God, or a personal providence. However, Hume considered that the difference between theists and atheists was only verbal; it turned on an irresolvable difference over quality, namely, how closely the orderer would resemble human beings in intelligence, feelings and associated faculties. In the whole of this enterprise the *DNR* should be deemed entirely coherent, *Part 12* being the climax of Hume's search and the evidence for the extent of his belief.

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