Leaving the "Real Hume" in Peace and Reading the Dialogues from a Moral Perspective

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Abstract

This paper offers a new reading of Hume's much discussed Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion *(1779/2000) which shows that, in contrast to what commentators tend to ascribe to Hume, the crux of the text is not epistemological-ontological – that is, not the arguments in favour of and against God's existence – but moral. It is shown that, although most of the epistemological-ontological pro-and-contra arguments are quite weak, Hume's interlocutors nevertheless cling to their theses from beginning to end, with the reason for their dogmatism shown to be moral rather than epistemological-ontological. The paper is divided into four sections. The introduction to the argument is followed by a discussion of Hume's rejection of substance as epistemologically-ontologically superfluous and as morally bad. Thereafter, it is first shown how the concept of a transcendental God undergoes deflation and consequently disappears. It is then shown that, even though their arguments are wrong, Cleanthes and Philo cling dogmatically to their starting points instead of trying to improve their claims and to rebuff the criticisms made against them. In conclusion, it is shown that the only way to account for their dogmatic inflexibility is in terms of their moral position: Cleanthes thinks that society and morals will collapse without the belief in a transcendental God, while Philo thinks it will function better if we discard this belief.*

Introduction

As is the case with many such essays which have become popular common property, David Hume's *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* (1779/ 2000a) is surrounded with the usual clichés acclaiming the fine literary style, the forerunner of Darwin's theory of evolution, the philosopher who has killed once and for all the argument from design, and so on. There are three fictional interlocutors in the *Dialogues* – Cleanthes, Demea and Philo – who discuss *inter alia* scepticism, the arguments in favour of and against God's existence, the problem of evil, and the true religion. Another favourite activity in the research on Hume is to get Hume out of the closet, as it were, by finding out where the "real Hume" hides –

under the guise of Cleanthes, Demea or Philo?[1] In my opinion, all the interlocutors bear some similarity to Hume, and yet we cannot identify any of them with him. Philo is too sceptical to represent the real Hume.[2] His bizarre theory of finite material in infinite time runs counter to what Hume says in the *Treatise*

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[1] O'Connor (2001, pp. 214ff) proves that Hume is being represented by Philo. Kemp Smith (1948, pp. 57-75) does a great job to prove that Philo speaks for Hume. Tweyman (1986, pp. 124ff) is of the same opinion. He claims that Philo represents Hume's mitigated scepticism. Penelhum (2000, p. 200) is of a similar opinion although he does not explicitly identify Philo with Hume.

[2] See Cleanthes's critique and mockery of Philo's scepticism in Dialogue I, for example.

(1739-40/2003a, pp. 21ff).[3] Demea is too dogmatic and orthodox to represent Hume, but his conception of the human mind (1779/2000a, pp. 217-218) reminds us of Hume's views on the subject. Cleanthes seems to hold a good balance between sceptical caution and support of modern scientific progress. But he differs from Hume's views by going beyond the order he discerns in nature, namely the scope of what Hume calls "experience", and trying to infer the existence of God from it.[4]

The attitude of commentators such as Kemp Smith (1848), Penelhum (2000), O'Connor (2001) and Gaskin (1988) towards the text is an epistemological-ontological one. That is to say, they deal with the merits of the arguments in favour of and against the existence of God. Then they go on to compare the different epistemological-ontological approaches presented in the course of the *Dialogues* with Hume's own approaches in order to find which fictional figure represents Hume.

In my opinion, the arguments of the interlocutors are mostly very weak. The interlocutors fail time and again to articulate them logically and either to defend them or to refute the opposing arguments. Instead, they cling stubbornly to their fixed opinions from the beginning to the end. It therefore seems to me that the epistemological-ontological attitude is a bad strategy for approaching the text. First of all, it is not especially interesting to work with weak arguments that the interlocutors do not really make much effort to defend and to improve. Secondly, it would be much more interesting to ask why the interlocutors so doggedly reiterate their weak arguments. From the epistemological-ontological point of view, only the *static* facet of the text is seen while the *dynamic* facet is totally overlooked. It seems to me that it is only by asking why the interlocutors remain so dogmatically loyal to their positions that we can uncover the dynamic aspect of the text. Thirdly, by taking it one step further and asking who is the real Hume of the *Dialogues*, one makes the bad even worse. For once we know who is Hume in the *Dialogues*, the text loses its interest and becomes redundant, as is the case with Berkeley's *Three Dialogues between Hylas and Philonous* and Leibniz's *New Essay on Human*

Understanding where we know from the outset which interlocutor represents the author. Fourthly, and most importantly for my reading, in the course of the *Dialogues* the transcendental substance undergoes a deflation until it totally evaporates. So, once the issue of the metaphysics has disappeared, it becomes futile to put all the money on the metaphysical horse. As I will show, the real matter in the *Dialogues* is the moral issue.

In what follows, I offer a fresh and new reading of the *Dialogues*. Instead of the epistemological-ontological approach to the text I will offer a *moral* one. I will claim that the interlocutors stay dogmatically faithful to their epistemological-ontological viewpoint all through the *Dialogues* only because of their *moral* views. As I will show, both Cleanthes and Philo fail many times to defend their own philosophical claims and to refute the other's, staying faithful to their epistemological-ontological starting point only because of moral considerations. Cleanthes remains faithful to the assumption of *a transcendental God* – not because he succeeded in pursuing and proving this assumption, but because he thinks that it would be *morally* wrong to give up this idea, with the epistemological-ontological issue remaining for him secondary and not crucial. Philo, on the other hand, remains faithful to his idea of *an inherent principle* – not because he succeeded in establishing it epistemologically-ontologically, but rather because he thinks that a transcendental substance must have a very bad moral influence on our culture and conduct.

Livingston (1986) offers us a sober and clever way to approach Hume. Livingston shows that, according to Hume, religion is a branch of philosophy (or, more specifically, metaphysics) in that it has as its basis the same principles as those underlying philosophy. These are the principles of 'ultimacy' and 'autonomy' (ibid., pp. 34ff) – that is to say, the principle of the autonomy of pure mind and the principle of ultimate first and true cause to which everything is to be traced back. Anything else apart from this true first cause (i.e. the realm of ideas) is illusion. The craving to reach both principles, or ideals, Livingston goes on to say, leads us to ignore the socio-cultural context in which we are embedded and to want to overcome the limits of our finite impure mind. This religion-metaphysics, Livingston continues, is *false* in that it promises us ideals lying out of our reach, namely the autonomy of mind and realm of pure thought. Its inability to fulfil its promise leads to scepticism. Livingston takes the trouble to show that Hume sets in place of the false religion-philosophy the *true* religion-philosophy. This alternative religion is true, for it does not leave the realm of experience. It does not set ideals such as a pure and free mind and first

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[3] Note, in particular, p. 23: "The infinite divisibility of space implies that of time …"

[4] On the one hand, Cleanthes attacks Demea's mysticism in Dialogues III-IV and the ontological argument in Dialogue IX. He speaks for the *deistic* attitude towards God, which is supposed to fit well into the scientific worldview. He is also up-to-date with the scientific tendencies of his days: Galileo, Copernicus, and Newton. He wants, however, to extend the analogy beyond the range of our experience to the transcendental realm.

ultimate cause. In order to achieve these ideals, the human understanding would have to extrapolate beyond the realm of experience, and the outcome would be a radical scepticism. I find Livingston's reading very fruitful, for it fits in well with the Humean metaphysical and moral context.

I would like to take Livingston's thesis a few steps further and put it in my own words. On the one hand, we render correctly Hume's sceptical facet by leaving aside the transcendental substance, since it is something we can never access or achieve with our conceptual means (Hume, 1739-40/2003a, pp. 11ff). On the other hand, the call to adhere to our experience mitigates Hume's scepticism, reflecting his awareness that extreme scepticism cannot be adequately held due to the dominance of our unreflective bestial instincts and desire to survive. This is a fair interpretation of Hume's philosophy of mind no less than of his philosophy of religion and his moral philosophy.

In what follows, I am going to develop this line of thought. I will show that, although the arguments on both sides are far from being convincing, the outcome of the discussions in the *Dialogues* is the deflation and evaporation of the concept of *pure mind*, of God as the *first pure substance*. The climax of this process is Dialogue XII, in which Cleanthes and Philo discuss *true religion*[5]. It is the highest point, because it shows us why they both so doggedly adhered to their metaphysical-philosophical fixed ideas throughout the *Dialogues* even though they failed to defend their theses. Cleanthes continues to argue in favour of a transcendental substance because he thinks that without it our moral nature and society will collapse. Philo, on the other hand, believes that transcendental substance is the origin of all the moral and social (as well as metaphysical) problems we encounter. By this new reading of the *Dialogues*, I shift the attention from the static to the dynamic facet of the text: the issue at stake is not the knockout arguments about God's existence, but rather an open discussion about society with or without religion based on a transcendental substance.

In the next section, I will discuss Hume's thesis, according to which the transcendental substance is

both epistemologically-ontologically superfluous and morally bad. In the section thereafter, I will focus on some arguments by Cleanthes and Philo. I will show that none of them is logically good and compelling. I will show how easy it is to find alternative, and better, replies and critiques. I will show that, although the arguments are mostly clumsy and inept, the outcome of the discussion is deflation and removal of the transcendental substance from the arena. In the concluding section, I will explain why the interlocutors hold dogmatically to their starting points even though they fail time and again to defend their theses and to refute the opposing ones.

Hume's Thesis

Locke's nominalistic influence and Hume's own decision in the first book of the *Treatise* to depend only on what is given in the realm of sense data (which Hume calls "perceptions") led Hume to discard the metaphysical concept of substance as that which stands beyond the particular characteristics of the object.[6] On the *epistemological* level, the concept of substance thus makes no contribution towards explaining the surrounding world and can only cause unneeded perplexity and obscurity due to "evident contradictions" (Hume, 1739-40/2003a, p. 157).

> But these philosophers carry their fictions still farther in their sentiments concerning *occult qualities*, and both suppose a substance supporting, which they do not understand, and an accident supported, of which they have as imperfect an idea. The whole system, therefore, is entirely incomprehensible … . (ibid., p. 159)

Now, according to Hume, there is in principle nothing wrong with fantasies (even if we cannot account for them epistemologically) as long as they promote and ensure our survival and well-being. But, apart from the *positive fantasies*, there are some other fantasies which are simply futile, because they are not only epistemologically *occult,* as Hume puts it, but are also not necessary for our survival: the former regarding causes and effects, and the latter regarding substance.

> … I must distinguish in the imagination betwixt the principles which are permanent, irresistible, and universal; such as the

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[5] The shift from design with to design without designer can be carried out more smoothly than between a transcendental God and a universe without God. This is the reason why Demea – who both believes in a transcendental God and yet insists on our basic ignorance regarding the true nature of God – must leave the rest of the discussion to the two other interlocutors who respectively represent design with (Cleanthes) and design without (Philo) designer.

[6] It is a fact that Hume does not adhere to the sense data theory, as I have shown elsewhere (Segev, 2008). Locke's nominalism suffices, however, to discard the traditional concept of substance; we are used or conditioned to see different qualities occurring together. Hence we conclude that they are predicates of some unseen substance.

customary transition from causes to effects, and from effects to causes: And the principles, which are changeable, weak, and irregular … . The former are the foundation of all of 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 observ'd only to take place in weak minds, and being opposite to the other principles of custom and reasoning … . (ibid., p. 161)

Hume (ibid., pp. 162ff) goes on to criticize and to show the absurdity stemming from Descartes's inadequate undertaking to distinguish between primary (i.e. substantial) and secondary (i.e. non-substantial) qualities, as well as from Descartes's claim that only the primary are true. Hume (ibid., pp. 171ff) turns next to the additional obscurity created by Spinoza's monism. While Spinoza aspires to trace everything back to one substance, Descartes postulated *three*: expanding substance, thinking substance, and God.

What do we derive from this "substance" philosophy? Above all, an extreme scepticism that nobody is able to maintain (Hume, 1748/2004, p. 94). Whatever we receive through our senses must be an illusion, and truth can be revealed only through particular intellectual insight or light, as Descartes (see, for example: *Meditation II*, 1641/1986, §16) and Spinoza (*Ethics*, Part II, 1677/2007, §§40-47) believe.

What do we gain by rejecting substance? On the epistemological level, we get rid of something that does not help us to explain the world around us but rather leads us to severe scepticism. It does not mean that "substance" has disappeared from the scene; it is very convenient and practical to relate different accidents which happen normally to co-occur to the same substance, especially when we come to moral actions that we must ascribe to a particular person, to an "identical self". To use modern terminology, Hume implies time and again that our language has a *performative* and not only a *denotative* function. By these means, our language can fill the epistemological void: we use words that denote nothing but what they themselves create, namely *perform;*[7] for example, in

cases of the causality, independent reality, and continuity of the *same* identical object.

On the theological level, dispelling substance negates the monotheistic concept of God as the one sole substance that exists beyond and above what occurs on earth. This must, of course, have far reaching implications in the moral and political arena. In *The Natural History of Religion* (1757/2000b), Hume gives polytheism precedence over monotheism for not only epistemological and ontological, but also moral, reasons. The attempt to reduce everything to one single substance entangles us in unsolvable contra-dictions (ibid., p. 167). But superstitious religion, which consists of a plurality of deities being only slightly superior to the human being, is *tolerant* towards other religions and deities. Monotheism is intolerant and cruel (ibid., p. 145). The concept of one single absolutely sublime perfect God leads to submission, abasement, cowardice and passive dependence upon the one almighty God; it annihilates everything that constitutes the best of the human spirit. On the other hand, "where the gods are conceived to be only a little superior to mankind and so to have been, many of them, advanced from that inferior rank, we are more at our ease, in our addresses to them, and may even, without profaneness, aspire sometimes to rivalry or emulation. Hence activity, spirit, courage, magnanimity, love of liberty, and all the virtues which aggrandize a people" (ibid., p. 149).[8]

So Hume has shown us that he has at least two good reasons to reject substance. From an epistemological-ontological perspective, it yields nothing that can help us to account for the world around us; eventually, too, it leads to scepticism. From a moral perspective, although substance is a factor we cannot avoid in ascribing moral or immoral deeds to a particular person, it becomes detrimental the moment we elevate it to the rank of God or a monarch. As such, as we have seen, it is the ground for submission, intolerance and self-effacement.

Arguments from Design

In this section, I am going to trace the way in which Hume destroys the idea of substance. I will focus

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[7] For example: "So it naturally happens, that after frequent use of terms, which are wholly insignificant and unintelligible, we fancy them to be on the same footing with the prec'dent [i.e. terms which *do* denote something], and to have a secret meaning, which we must discover by reflection" (Hume, 1739-40/2003a, p. 160); "… all the

nice and subtle questions concerning personal identity can never possibly be decided, and are to be regarded rather as *grammatical* than as philosophical difficulties" (ibid., p. 187; my emphasis).
[8] There are, of course, more far reaching implications on the political level as well. While I am not familiar with that issue, Livingston gave an interesting talk on this topic at the last meeting of the Hume Society in 2006 in Koblenz.

mainly on two interlocutors – Cleanthes and Philo. Cleanthes represents and defends the design argument: he tries to infer the existence of a God-designer from the design he discerns throughout the world. Philo admits that design pervades everything, but argues that we cannot infer the existence of God from it.

The design-argument is based on an analogy drawn between designer and designed on the human level (for example: architect and house) and designer and designed on the natural level. The designer on the natural level is missing, but we are (according to the supporters of the design-argument) compelled to infer the designer from the overwhelming evidence we encounter everywhere of nature as designed. The closer the analogy between the cosmos and human artifacts is, the more convincing the analogy between a creating God and the human mind is supposed to be. The discussion is thus concentrated around the missing side of the analogy: is it necessary to fill it with God or are there better alternatives?

Cleanthes begins with the design and order (which he calls "machine"/s) we encounter all around, with the perfect adapting of means to ends: "the curious adapting of means to ends, throughout all nature, resembles exactly, though it much exceeds, the productions of human contrivance; of human designs, thought, wisdom, and intelligence. … Since therefore the effects resemble each other, we are led to infer, by all rules of analogy, that the causes also resemble; and that the author of Nature is somewhat similar to the mind of man ..." (Hume, 1779/2000a, p. 203).

Philo replies that the only reasonable and permissible scope for our analogies is our *experience* (ibid., p. 204ff). That is, only things that either have occurred together in the past *many times* or that resemble them are allowed to be one side of the analogy. Only the fact that two things always have occurred together, Philo goes on to say, allows us to infer that, when we see the first occurring, the second will occur, or, when we see similar occurrences, to infer or await similar results. But the occurrence of *one singular universe* we experience, Philo points out, can never stand as the side of an analogy. Philo concludes: "To ascertain this reasoning, it were requisite, that we had experience of the origin of *worlds*; and it is not sufficient, surely, that we have seen ships and cities arise from human art and contrivance … " (ibid., p. 210; emphasis added).

Recurrence, according to Philo, is the keystone in the analogy: singular occurrence is not sufficient to allow us to apply an analogy. The "same" event should return many times – and the more often it takes place,

the better and more compelling is the analogy. As Philo puts it: "*Like effects prove like causes*. This is the experimental argument; and this … is the sole theological argument. Now it is certain, that the liker the effects are, which are seen, and the liker the causes, which are inferred, the stronger is the argument" (ibid., p. 226).

Philo's reply suffers from two problems:

I. It is definitely not the case that we simply see two things occurring together and, seeing the one, infer the other, or from similar occurrences infer similar conclusions. Having no definite perspective at hand, it is nonsense to speak about analogy. For example, a "ship" and a "house" (which are the examples Cleanthes and Philo are discussing) *as such* have nothing in common. In respect, however, of their being planned and built by human beings, they have much in common. So what is Philo's criterion in claiming that there is no analogy between human products on the one hand and God's creations on the other? Well, actually it is Cleanthes, the supporter of the design argument, who had to provide the criterion. But he does not provide it. So Philo, not saying it explicitly but yet implying it, assumes that it is the *act of creation*: we have seen many times the *creation* of houses and ships, so we are allowed to infer an architect or planner. But Cleanthes did not mention creation as criterion; he has so far talked only about the design or plan that we discern in the case of both human products and the things of nature around us. What is implied is the intentional act and planning. So it can well be the case that God planned the world yet did not create it, or that He controls it from eternity to eternity without the act of creation; God is, in other words, an *inherent* principle. This alternative is far from perfect, but Cleanthes can still adhere to a plan without creation, thus shifting the target and causing Philo to misfire. (It is also true that *design*, namely the experience of order, implies a "biased" particular perspective or point of view. It is by no means the case that somebody coming from another planet or an absolutely different culture would share with us the same sense of design and order. Both Cleanthes and Philo, being similarly "biased", share the same perspective of design.)

II. Philo repeats his thesis that, in the case of human products such as houses, we have had recurring experiences of them as having been planned intentionally, while, in the case of the *worlds*, we have no *recurring* experience of their creation. Philo asks Cleanthes: "Have *worlds* ever been formed under your eye?" (ibid., p. 212) Let us take it slowly: the act of creation he is talking about is a *singular* one; it has occurred *only once* and it is not the case that God

creates and annihilates *worlds* at whim or on a regular basis. (God's *repeated* acts of creation in Descartes's *Meditation III* are designed to maintain the continuity of the same identical world).[9] And this holds true for every and any theory of creation – be it through God or some physical event such as the big bang. In addition, consciousness is subsequent rather than prior to creation: each of us was present in his own creation (conception and birth), but can never be conscious of it. So Philo's demand for a recurring experience of creation is simply absurd. But wherein exactly does this absurdity consist? In Cleanthes's demand to analogize human creation and planning with God's, or in Philo's assumption that a one-time event cannot be one side of an analogy?

Be it as it may, Philo has no appropriate vocabulary at hand to articulate this critique; he can articulate meaningfully neither recurring creations nor co-present consciousness during the act of creation. And Cleanthes would have encountered the same inability, were he entrapped into trying to answer Philo's arguments on this matter. Cleanthes, however, reiterates his thesis of a transcendental personal God. He must personify and keep God transcendental in order to maintain the analogy. Demea then accuses Cleanthes of anthropomorphism: the difference between God and ourselves is so great that any attempt to draw an analogy between God and us will necessarily entangle us in anthropomorphism. Cleanthes, on his part, accuses Demea of mysticism (see Dialogues III-IV): if you can say nothing about God, He disappears in a mystical cloud.

These difficulties are aporetic, and there is no clear victory on either side. But eventually it will help to dismiss and dispel the pure substance, that is, the transcendental God at the peak of the hierarchy. For it seems that all the problems revolve around the introduction of this notion into the discussion.

Philo's next argument against the transcendental God shows that, if we accept Him as first reason and cause, we will be entangled in infinite regress:

> How therefore shall we satisfy ourselves concerning the first cause of that Being, whom you suppose the Author of Nature, or, according to your system of Anthropo-morphism, the ideal world, into which you trace the material? But if we stop and go no farther, why go so far? Why not stop at the material world? How can we satisfy ourselves without going to *infinitum*? And after all, what satisfaction is there in that

infinite progression? (ibid., p. 222)

Now, Philo continues, if we say that the ideal world does not depend on another designer, and so on to infinity, but instead orders itself, then why does not the same apply to the material world? "An ideal system, arranged of itself, without a precedent design, is not a whit more explicable than a material one, which attains its order in a like manner" (ibid., p. 225). In other words, we can explain our surroundings quite well without the aid of the transcendental realm, so why do we need it at all, if it causes so much trouble on both the epistemological and ontological level (causality)?

There is no cut-clear solution here, for a self-ordering universe is also not without problems, giving rise to questions about the preconditions and optimal timing and the co-occurrence of these to enable the further self-development of the universe. Philo's resolution is thus pragmatic, explanation either with or without transcendence being problematic. But where do we find a better solution? Once we leave our mundane realm and go transcendental, we are in a predicament (ibid., p. 222). Philo goes on to attack the assumption of transcendence in two ways: (1) We have an experience of both ideas and matter which become organized without an agent – as in the case of generation and vegetation, where organization and order prevail without an organizer. The advantage here is that the principle is not transcendental or "located somewhere" (let us say, in the roots or leaves), but instead is dispersed, as Philo claims. (2) It is by no means clear why Cleanthes ascribes order to the transcendental realm of thought, because, in the case of madness and distortion, we see thoughts and ideas distorted without any order (ibid., p. 223).

Both Philo's prongs are directed against the transcendental God as well as against the pure mind. It is hence very curious that Cleanthes both accepts the pragmatic solution and yet maintains his claim that design depends on a transcendental God: "You ask me, what is the cause of this cause? I know not; I care not; that concerns not me. I have found a Deity, and here I stop my enquiry" (ibid., p. 224).

Both Cleanthes and Philo have better munitions in their arsenal that they do not use. Cleanthes could have retorted that the optimal conditions and timing that enable good development and growth are by no means clear without a transcendental God. How is it that exactly the essential and necessary conditions are laid ready there for the organism to start growing and developing? Philo's infinite regress is a sword that cuts both ways. So Cleanthes could throw the onus back on him by saying that only a transcendental God

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[9] See Descartes (1641/1986, §31).

could halt an infinite regress, as Craig (2002) does with his version of the *Kalam* cosmological argument. (Craig's point is that, without an act of creation, we would get an "actual infinite" – which is a contradiction in terms, as he shows with the aid of Hilbert's hotel-paradox.)[10] Philo, on the other hand, could say that it is by no means clear in which way God or pure mind can exert influence and work on nature. Philo does indeed claim this later at the end of Dialogue VIII (ibid., p. 248).

Either way, we encounter the problem of how to halt the infinite regress. But, once Philo has shown that adding a transcendental God would not do this, he has scored better than Cleanthes. He shows, in other words, the epistemological and ontological redundancy of a transcendental God. "To multiply causes, without necessity, is indeed contrary to true philosophy" (ibid., p. 229).

Philo's next critique of the analogy runs as follows: The universe, as revealed to us in modern times with the invention of the telescope and the microscope, is immense. Compared to it, human production and activity is minuscule. So how can one draw analogical lines between an enormous universe on the one hand and paltry human production on the other (ibid., Dialogue V)? Philo sums up his argument: "It is still more unreasonable to form our idea of so unlimited a cause from our experience of the narrow productions of human design and invention" (ibid., p. 227).

Once again, it is a question of a definite perspective. From which perspective does Philo criticize the analogy: the immensity of one side or the smallness of the other? This would be very weak.[11] (What, for example, is the relation between the size of one atom and the whole body?) Now, if the perspective is the ordered harmony we discern everywhere (and this is definitely Cleanthes's point), then why is this analogy not good? After all, do we not see order everywhere? If we take it slowly, we see that, either way, this analogy seems to lead to a dead end. If one tries to reject the analogy, one should point out more chaos than order in the universe. This is actually what Philo will try to do in discussing the problem of evil in the world. As Plantinga (1990) shows in such a masterly manner in "The Problem of Evil", there is no logical contradiction in holding the existence of both an almighty God and of evil in the world. So, the contradiction must be discerned on the empirical level. And here is the dead end, because we do not have the all-encompassing empirical perspective required to claim that there is more chaos than order. (Philo would nevertheless be absolutely right to claim that we also lack the vocabulary to state that dying babies in Africa or six million Jews murdered by the Nazis are part of a necessary benign Divine plan. Compare the critique Voltaire, 1759/1986, ascribes to Leibniz in *Candide*). Let us go the other way and assume that we discern more order than chaos in the universe. Now, we could use this claim only if we could take a step back from the two sides that are to be compared. For example, I can prove and compare the achievements of two different computer programmes; I can compare the bad and the good deeds of one person or of a few persons. But how could I take a step back and compare the universe with the human being? Is it not a fact that the universe is the precondition of how a human being conceives it? The answer is either yes or no. If yes, what reason it there to claim (as Cleanthes does) that more order than chaos can be discerned? If no (i.e. order is nothing but our own projection), we remain with the same problem.

We have just bumped up again against an aporia. Philo cannot push his critique further without being involved in the problems pointed to above. Cleanthes cannot reply to his critique without being entangled in the same trap. But Philo can still contend that, once we have eliminated the transcendental God from our discussion, we are free of all those problems.

Another two critiques that Philo turns against the analogy sharpen the lack of a definite perspective in which the analogy is treated by the interlocutors. First of all, Philo claims that the mind with which we are familiar is *finite*, while the mind we want to analogize (i.e. God's) is supposed to be *infinite* (ibid., Dialogue V). This critique is, of course, very weak without a definite perspective: we can, for example, compare a biological mind with an artificial one. Secondly, Philo does not see any reason why we should not analogize a plurality of gods rather than a single one (ibid). Well, once we let God become involved with number (be it even *one*), we open the door to polytheism, that is, of relating singularity to plurality. God is beyond enumeration, as Maimonides (1190/1974, §§50-58), for example, would say. But, leaving that critique aside, what reason has Philo to claim it, after having already declared that "To multiply causes, without necessity, is indeed contrary to true philosophy" (Hume, 1779/2000a, p. 229)?

Although Philo's arguments are far from convincing,

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[10] See, for example, Craig (2002, pp. 92-113).

[11] Philo repeats this strange analogy: "For as the cause ought only to be proportioned to the effect, and the effect, so far as it falls under our cognisance, is not infinite; what pretensions have we, upon your suppositions, to ascribe that attribute to the divine Being?" (Hume, 1779/2000a, pp. 227-228).

he has the option to throw the blame on Cleanthes and say that, since he has no better solutions to those problems, it is the insertion of the transcendental substance that introduces those problems into the discussion. Once we have dropped the idea of substance, we are free of the problems.

In discussing true religion, Philo proposes his own "analogy" to account for the order we discern everywhere. It is not the analogy of a human designer with a transcendental divine one, but rather with an inherent principle, as is the case in the zoological realm. There is, of course, no longer any analogy once the transcendental substance has disappeared.

> Now if we survey the universe, so far as it falls under our knowledge, it bears a great resemblance to an animal or organized body, and seems actuated with a like principle of life and motion. A continual circulation of matter in it produces no disorder: a continual waste in every part is incessantly repaired: the closest sympathy is perceived throughout the entire system: and each part or member, in performing its proper offices, operates both to its own preservation and to that of the whole. The world, therefore, I infer, is an animal, and the Deity is the SOUL of the world, actuating it, and actuated by it. (ibid., p. 232)

The core of this "analogy" is that we can never *experience* "mind without body" (ibid., p. 233).[12] So, according to Philo, there is reason to endorse *immanent* principle but not *transcendental* pure mind. What this implies is a dispersed order or reason. Now, the mental is something we experience only in the first person; it is what Russell (1927/2008) calls "knowledge by acquaintance". To say that we do not have an experience of "pure mental acts", as intention or personal dislike, for example, is therefore simply wrong. Philo leaves aside the principal impossibility to relate mental to corporeal acts. And, had he continued to develop this line of thought, he would probably have entangled himself with another non-commonsensical mystical metaphysical doctrine: monism. His point is, however, to suggest a better analogy, one that bears greater similarity to the human creature: order and life achieved through the will to survive and to preserve.[13] But Cleanthes refuses to admit the possibility of an immanent *dispersed* principle. He claims:

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[12] Compare also Hume's "Of the Immortality of the Soul" (1783/2003b).
[13] Compare also Dialogue X.

> … the analogy [with animal] [is] also defective in many circumstances, the most material: *no organ of sense*; *no seat of thought or reason*; *no one precise origin of motion and action*. In short, it seems to bear a stronger resemblance to a plant than to an animal, and your inference would be so far inconclusive in favour of the soul of the world. (ibid., p. 234; emphasis added)

The thesis of "seat of thought or reason" would entangle Cleanthes in irresolvable problems. Philo goes on to claim against Cleanthes that the world consists of four principles: "*Reason*, *Instinct*, *Generation*, and *Vegetation*" (ibid., p. 240). He asks why Cleanthes wants to give reason primacy over the other principles.

Philo's goal is clear: to dismiss God as a transcendence factor from the discussion. Philo explains how the universe can function just as well without a first transcendental reason:

> Instead of supposing matter infinite, as EPICURUS did; let us suppose it finite. A finite number of particles is only susceptible of finite transpositions: and it must happen, in an eternal duration, that every possible order or position must be tried an infinite number of times. This world, therefore, with all its events, even the most minute, has before been produced and destroyed, and will again be produced and destroyed, without any bounds and limitations. No one, who has conception of the powers of infinite, in comparison of finite, will ever scruple this determination. (ibid., p. 244)

In other words, a finite mass of matter in infinite time must undergo every possible combination. (This strange theory is one of the trademarks of Nietzsche's philosophy; see *The Will to Power*, 1901/1996, §§1053-1067.) Add to this the tendency of perseverance and it follows that the best combination is the one that perseveres (ibid., p. 245). As to Demea's question about first cause, about the first agent who sets everything in motion, Philo gives three different answers: (1) Matter itself can initiate motion (ibid., p. 244); (2) "The beginning of motion in matter itself is as conceivable *a priori* as its communication from mind and intelligence" (ibid., pp. 244-245); (3) "… why may not motion have been propagated by impulse through all eternity, and the same stock of it, or nearly the same, be still upheld in the universe?" (ibid., p. 245). On close examination, however, we see that only the third answer is relevant to the thesis

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Philo pursues and defends here, that is, a finite mass of matter in an infinite span of time. Philo's first answer implies that there is a beginning in time, while his second answer suggests that, either way, we will come up with aporia. Philo's goal is to explain the order in the universe without appealing to a first transcendental agent. There is no beginning, no act of creation, which would invite questions regarding an agent. And still the thesis is far from clear: how could the *same* combination return in *different* temporal periods? And why does infinite time not "infinitize" matter – or vice versa: why does finite matter not "finitize" infinite time? But *linear* infinity would entangle him with the paradoxes of the set theory according to which an actual infinity is a contradiction in terms, as Craig (2002) demonstrates with the aid of Hilbert's hotel-paradox. Linear finitude, on the other hand, would mean a transcendental agent, that is, a creator. The thesis Philo pursues here is so problematic and weak, whichever way we look at it, that it is amazing that neither Cleanthes nor Demea tries to rebuff it right away.

Philo's arguments are unconvincing – the epitome of astute syllogisms. But he can always claim that inserting God or a transcendental substance would not make it any better. He can always claim that paradoxes appear once we try to transgress the scope of our mundane experience and posit pure reason or a transcendental substance.

The deflation and evaporation of the transcendental substance clears the way for the discussion regarding true religion. Is religion thinkable without a transcendental God? Are moral principles thinkable without a transcendental God? Is human society thinkable without a transcendental God? In my opinion, it is precisely this discussion – and not the epistemological-ontological – that is the climax of the text. For, once the subject of any epistemological-ontological discussion (that is, the transcendental substance) has been removed, it would be futile to adhere to it. And this discussion is the climax in that it is only at this point that it becomes clear why Cleanthes and Philo cling so dogmatically to their starting points even though they have not really defended them well. Both admit the wonderful harmony and order that pervades the world, and both have their own concept of religion. But, while the one thinks that only religion without a transcendental God is true and advantageous to society, the other thinks that only an anthropomorphic religion – that is, only a religion with a transcendental God achieved through analogy to human beings – is either possible or advantageous to society.

Moral Positions

Dialogue XII turns out to be the climax of the whole text, because it reveals for the first time the real meaning behind Cleanthes's and Philo's theses. Cleanthes has been representing the analogical inference from the order and design found in nature to a *transcendental* substance. Philo, in contrast, has been representing the thesis of an *inherent* order. He pretends to represent another kind of analogy – to animal and to plant life – but this is in fact no longer an analogy, and instead merely points to the same principles being found in the different species on earth. Philo has been corroborating his thesis by negating transcendental substance. As we have seen, his arguments are far from being perfect and flawless, but Cleanthes fails to answer and rebut them. So why does Cleanthes keep doggedly repeating his failed analogy thesis and the idea of a transcendental substance? Philo's plant-life alternative is also not free of bugs and problems (see also ibid., pp. 242 & 244). *Prima facie*, it is all about an epistemological-ontological issue or way of explaining the world as it is with regard to our way of knowing it. But this interpretation is very weak. Firstly, Cleanthes's epistemological-ontological way has failed and Philo has not managed to prove that his alternative is better. Secondly, after the transcendental substance has been eliminated, there can no longer be any debate between Cleanthes and Philo about the analogy.

The fact of the matter is that both Cleanthes and Philo are led solely by their *moral* attitudes: Cleanthes thinks that, without a transcendental substance – in other words, without hope for afterlife and ultimate justice – our moral and social structure must collapse:

> My inclination, replied Cleanthes, lies, I own, a contrary way. Religion, however corrupted, is still better than no religion at all. The doctrine of a future state is so strong and necessary a security to morals that we never ought to abandon or neglect it. For if finite and temporary rewards and punishments have so great effect, as we daily find; how much greater must be expected from such as are infinite and eternal? (ibid., p. 283)

So, the crux of the discussion is by no means epistemological-ontological, but rather moral. It is not at all a question of whether there is a God and whether we can know Him or not, but rather of whether it is advantageous to society to believe and to assume that He exists rather than not.

Philo's greatest concern is also not epistemological-

ontological, but, instead, *moral*. The assumption of a transcendental substance leads necessarily to a personification of God. This leads directly to submissiveness and to degrading our freedom and free reason. It results in terror rather than in freedom and happiness; that is to say, it works against our natural inclinations:

> It is contrary to common sense to entertain apprehensions or terrors, upon account of any opinion whatsoever, or to imagine that we run risk hereafter, by the freest use of our reason. … *To know God, says Seneca, is to worship him*. All other worship is indeed absurd, superstitious, and even impious. It degrades him to the low condition of mankind, who are delighted with entreaty, solicitude, presents, and flattery. (ibid., pp. 290-291)

Religion, according to Philo, overturns the natural order, in that it replaces the closest with the farthest: in the place of our most natural inclinations to do what is good and avoid the bad, it gives us a distant transcendental substance. In that way it destroys moral principles:

> … where the interests of religion are concerned, no morality can be forcible enough to bind the enthusiastic zealot. The sacredness of the cause sanctifies every measure which can be made use of to promote it.

> The steady attention alone to so important an interest as that of eternal salvation is apt to extinguish the benevolent affections, to beget a narrow, contracted selfishness. And when such a temper is encouraged, it easily eludes all the general precepts of charity and benevolence. (ibid., p. 286)

As Philo claims, the oaths in the "custom-house" are respected and held not because of fear of God, but rather because of a natural and cultivated respect and concern for the benefit of the society (ibid., p. 287).

Conclusion

It has turned out that the heart of the discussion cannot be epistemological-ontological. On the one hand, Cleanthes takes no serious trouble to defend the design arguments against Philo, whose critiques are by no means flawless and logically sound. Philo, on the other hand, does not really do better with his alternative, and repeatedly recommends no more than scepticism, calling us "to suspend all judgment with regard to such sublime and such extraordinary subjects" (ibid., p. 291). The issue is a moral one, because it does not end with the failure of the design-argument, as many commentators believe to be the case (see Everitt, 2005, pp. 85ff; Mackie, 1982, p. 133). Instead, it remains open to further discussions whether religion as *social* fact, and as such detached from any epistemological-ontological aspects, is advantageous and beneficial to society or detrimental to it. None of the interlocutors in the *Dialogues* represents Hume on a one to one basis. Each of them contributes to the real crux of the *Dialogues* – that is, the moral issue. And it is Demea, with whom probably no commentator would want to identify Hume, who introduces the moral issue into the discussion right at the beginning of Dialogue I, in that way determining the moral question as the most dominant in the *Dialogues*. It seems that, for Hume, the sole relevant question regarding religion is the moral one (see Segev, 2008). And this question is never allowed to be decided on the epistemological-ontological level. Philo prescribes some interdictions to ensure that we will never extend the analogy between nature and artifacts to a transcendental substance, and therefore that God will never play a role and will never affect our conduct or decision-making (Hume, 1779/2000a, p. 291). The question regarding religion should rather be resolved on the *social* level. It should be asked whether religion is beneficial or detrimental to society. As Hume puts it in the *Principles* (1751/1913):

> Celibacy, fasting, penance, mortification, self-denial, humility, silence, solitude, and the whole train of monkish virtues; for what reason are they everywhere rejected by men of sense, but because they serve to no manner of purpose; neither advance a man's fortune in the world, nor render him a more valuable member of society; neither qualify him for the entertainment of company, nor increase his power of self-enjoyment? (p. 108)

> A gloomy, hair-brained enthusiast, after his death, may have a place in the calendar; but will scarcely ever be admitted, when alive, into intimacy and society, except by those who are as delirious and dismal as himself (p. 109).

About the Author

Alon Segev obtained his PhD in Philosophy in 2003 from the University of Haifa in Israel with a dissertation dealing with Martin Heidegger (*Four Ways in the Phenomenology of Being*). He was awarded the "Lady Davies Fellowship" (2002-2003) for an outstanding young scholar by the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, and later (2003-2007) the Max-Planck ("Minerva") grant for an outstanding young scholar by Heidelberg University, Germany. Dr Segev currently holds the DFG Grant and Professorship at the Martin-Buber Institute in the Faculty of Philosophy, University of Cologne. His interests range broadly across the fields of Continental Philosophy, Modern Philosophy (from Descartes to Kant), the Philosophy of Religion, Jewish Philosophy, German Culture, Aesthetics, Hermeneutics, Phenomenology, Political Thought, British Empiricism, Hume, and Holocaust Studies. He has published extensively (in both German and English) in Religious Studies, Modern Philosophy, Phenomenology and Hermeneutics.

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