

**The Drama of Reason:  
Hume's Dialogue Concerning Natural Religion  
and the Antinomies of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason***

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Scholars have puzzled over the relation between philosophical argument and literary form in Hume's *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* for decades. The dialogue presents the reader with three principle speakers. Each figure offers exposition and critique of natural theology. The plurality of voices afforded by the dialogue genre, however, makes it difficult for the reader to determine Hume's stance concerning the epistemic status of the natural theology in this late composed work.

According to the received view, sometimes called the „camouflage“ interpretation, Hume chooses the dialogue form in order to lead readers to conclude “that the design argument is a failure and that there are no other rational arguments for religious belief that are not failures.”<sup>1</sup> This assessment has been contested in recent years by scholars such as Prince, who, more optimistically, maintains that the purpose of Hume's choice of genre is to enable readers to “see their own conflicting opinions, their own uncertainties, played out before their eyes” such that “in the resolution of the dialogue they find a resolution for themselves.”<sup>2</sup> Dancy, more reasonably, advocates a “balance” interpretation, according to which Hume critiques but, nevertheless, recognizes the natural tendency “to infer” a supreme being from natural theological argument.<sup>3</sup> Although Hume is highly critical of speculative arguments for the existence of God, he recognizes that speculative proofs do possess a certain degree of natural persuasiveness. If Dancy is correct, Hume's final assessment of the epistemic import of natural theology would bear close likeness to that of Kant. Indeed, it is unlikely that the similarity is an accident.

Manfred Kuehn, more than any recent scholar, has succeeded in shining light on the influence Scottish Enlightenment figures such as David Hume

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<sup>1</sup> Martin Bell, “The Relation Between Literary Form and Philosophical Argument in Hume's *Dialogues*,” *Hume Studies* 27 (2001): 229.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 239.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 230.

exerted on German Enlightenment successors—most importantly, Kant. Kuehn has pointed out that, in both the *Treatise* and the *Enquiry*, Hume, while disputing the possibility of arriving at final determinations in natural theology, nevertheless sees the human mind as uniquely susceptible to specific, though contradictory, metaphysical arguments that yield opposing solutions regarding the source and origin of the cosmos.<sup>4</sup> Hume’s account of natural theology, according to Kuehn, paves the way for the antinomies of Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason*. Indeed, Kuehn’s suggestion finds vivid expression in *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*.

Hume, in *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, dramatically represents the inherent uncertainty of natural theological investigation through his three principle personages. To discuss natural theology, Hume elects the dialogue form, since, so far as he is concerned, there is no single, rationally demonstrable, cogent solution to the cosmological question. Through this genre, Hume is able to consider a multiplicity of viewpoints, weighing them against one another without necessarily committing himself to an exact resolution. According to Hume, when Reason takes cosmological questions into consideration, it falls necessarily into paradox and contradiction. Hume therefore anticipates Kant’s assertion that speculative demonstrations of the existence or non-existence of a divinity that resides beyond the realm of sense cannot be regarded as determinately reliable.

Hume affirms, through his three main characters, three alternative possibilities. First, as stated through the voice of Demea, there is a necessarily existent being residing outside the causal chain which serves as its source and originator. The second view is that it is impossible, as Cleanthes affirms, to ascertain the necessary existence of any being. Therefore, any formulation of the cosmological argument, a proof in essence reducible to the ontological argument, is spurious. According to the final possibility, implied by Philo, necessary being is the totality of necessary causal connections that constitute the cosmos itself. One may, therefore, not appeal to an extrinsic source. The indeterminate resolution, conveyed through the three personages conveys, to the reader, at once, the persuasive character of alternative viewpoints pertaining to an ultimate source while, at the same time, questioning their validity. The power of these arguments is, for Hume, dramatic rather than demonstrative in character.

Hume’s chief intention, in writing the *Treatise*, is to demonstrate “*that all our reasonings concerning causes and effects are derived from nothing but custom; and that belief is more properly an act of the sensitive, than of the cogitative power.*”<sup>5</sup> Philosophers ought not, therefore, to be primarily concerned to arrive at certain demonstrations with respect to matters of fact. Instead, it is “*demande*” how “*it happens, that even after all we retain a degree of belief, which is sufficient for our purpose, either in philosophy or common life.*”<sup>6</sup> Hume

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<sup>4</sup> Manfred Kuehn, “Hume’s Antinomies,” *Hume Studies* 9 (1983): 31.

<sup>5</sup> David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, Great Books of Western Civilization, vol. 35 (Toronto: Encyclopedia Britannica, 1952), Part 4, Section 1, 131.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 132.

answers that the relative “vigor” with which we perceive certain ideas determines their epistemological worth. “Where the mind reaches not its objects with easiness and facility, the same principles have not the same effect as in a more natural conception of the ideas; nor does the imagination feel a sensation, which holds any proportion with that which arises from its common judgments and opinions.”<sup>7</sup>

Hume affirms that in “metaphysics” the mind is naturally, though indefinitely, disposed towards different possibilities. Legitimate inquiry in such disciplines as “history or politics” is founded upon copious and reliable data. Conclusions based upon such cogent sense evidence yields within us a relatively stable degree of credence. In contrast, Hume likens metaphysical discourse to dramatic representation. The metaphysical dialectician is akin to an inept “tragic poet,” who, in representing his heroes as “ingenious and witty in their misfortunes,” fails to “touch the passions.”<sup>8</sup> In other words, the metaphysician fails to yield stable conviction, the sort of conviction that attends the impressions of sense experience. Insofar as speculative arguments lack full grounding in the senses, they do not have the capacity to yield in us stable belief. “No wonder, then, the conviction, which arises from a subtle reasoning, diminishes in proportion to the efforts, which the imagination makes to enter into the reasoning, and to conceive it in all its parts. Belief, being a lively conception, can never be entire, where „tis not founded on something natural and easy.”<sup>9</sup>

The notion that pure reason is able to arrive at final demonstrative conclusions with respect to the non-sensible is, therefore, fundamentally misguided. Reason may first appear “in possession of the throne, prescribing laws, and imposing maxims, with an absolute sway and authority.”<sup>10</sup> Reason may be employed skeptically, however, with equal force in order to undermine the very metaphysical assertions it once positively demonstrated. That is, the contradictory character of metaphysical argument “gradually diminishes the force of that governing power.”<sup>11</sup> When entertaining the purely speculative demonstrations of natural theology, the human subject ordinarily undergoes a dramatic change of belief, shifting from initial conviction in a particular speculative proof, such as the ontological argument, to a state of disillusionment.

Metaphysical proofs may at first appear convincing. By virtue of “scepticism with regard to the senses,” engendered by such thinkers as Descartes, “we are necessitated by reasoning to contradict or depart from the primary instincts of nature, and to embrace a new system with regard to the evidence of our sense.”<sup>12</sup> When a particular speculative determination is subjected to skeptical attack, however, “philosophy finds herself extremely embarrassed,

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 132-133.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 133.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 133-134.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 134.

<sup>12</sup> David Hume, *An Enquiry into the Principles of Understanding* (New York: Dover, 2003), Section 12, Part 1, 119.

when she would” attempt to “justify this new system, and obviate the cavils and objections of the new skeptics.”<sup>13</sup> Therefore, philosophy can “no longer plead the infallible and irresistible instinct of nature: for that led us to a quite different system, which is acknowledged fallible and even erroneous.”<sup>14</sup> Indeed, it “exceeds the power of all human capacity” to “justify” any given “pretended philosophical system, by a chain of clear and convincing argument, or even any appearance of argument.”<sup>15</sup> This drama of Reason, outlined in the *Treatise*, unfolds in the *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*. A series of three metaphysical proofs follow, each making contradictory assertions with comparable degrees of persuasiveness.

Many of the finest scientific minds of Europe, among them Descartes, Leibniz, and Samuel Clark, had, during the early modern period, proffered the greatest esteem and respect to the ontological argument for the existence of God, regarding this proof as one of the firmest intellectual foundations for orthodox religious conviction. It is, therefore, not surprising that when in Chapter IX of the *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, Demea, the paradigm of traditional orthodoxy, having been confronted with “so many difficulties” that attend the argument *a posteriori*, insists upon the necessity to “adhere to that simple and sublime argument *a priori*, which, by offering to us infallible demonstration, cuts off at once all doubt and difficulty.”<sup>16</sup> According to Demea, the *a priori* proof has the advantage over all others, for, by this argument, with surety, one “may prove the infinity of the divine attributes” in a manner that “can never be ascertained with certainty from any other topic.”<sup>17</sup> Through Demea, Hume amalgamates the ontological argument with the cosmological argument, traditionally regarded as separate.

Both the cosmological and ontological arguments depend upon the notion of necessary existence. Whatever “exists must have a cause or reason of its existence.”<sup>18</sup> Consequently, once one accepts this principle, one may trace back “from effects to causes” an “infinite succession, without any ultimate cause, that is *necessarily* existent.”<sup>19</sup> In this manner, through Demea, Hume is able to reduce the cosmological proof to the ontological. Demea maintains that in “the infinite chain or succession of causes and effects, each single effect is determined to exist by the power and efficacy of its cause, which immediately preceded it.”<sup>20</sup> That is, each individual effect must be regarded as contingently dependent upon its cause. Demea, furthermore, insists that “the whole eternal chain or succession, taken together” cannot be “determined or caused by anything.”<sup>21</sup> Demea rejects as absurd the notion that the chain of causes and effects can itself be without

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> David Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* (New York: Penguin, 1990), 98.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 98.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 98.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 99.

cause; it cannot, that is, have originated from “*nothing*.” Consequently, one must “have recourse to a necessarily existent being who carries the reason of his existence in himself.” Demea identifies this being with the Divinity of Orthodox theology. According to the orthodox apologist, moreover, this divine being “cannot be supposed not to exist without an express contradiction.”<sup>22</sup> Therefore, it must be asserted, with certainty, that there is such a Being.

The argument falls prey, significantly, to the attack of Cleanthes, rather than Philo. Cleanthes’s refutation hinges upon the distinction between relations of ideas and matters of fact. According to Cleanthes, “there is an evident absurdity in pretending to demonstrate matter of fact, or to prove it by any arguments *a priori*.”<sup>23</sup> This is consonant with a notion Hume expresses both in the *Treatise* and, more fully, in the *Enquiry*. According to the Humean characterization of abstract demonstration, nothing “is demonstrable unless the contrary implies a contradiction.”<sup>24</sup> That is to say, nothing “that is distinctly conceivable implies a contradiction.”<sup>25</sup> However, any being “we conceive as existent, we can also conceive as non-existent.”<sup>26</sup> For this reason, “there is no being, whose existence is demonstrable.”<sup>27</sup> Cleanthes applies this principle to the ontological argument. Assertions of existence are, by definition, assertions that may be either affirmed or denied.

It is pretended, that the deity is a necessarily existent being, and this necessity of his existence is attempted to be explained by asserting, that, if we knew his whole essence or nature, we should perceive it to be as impossible for him not to exist as for twice two not to be four. But it is evident, that this can never happen, while our faculties

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid. The position here advanced by Cleanthes recapitulates what Hume expresses at the end of the *Treatise*. Hume offers two legitimate domains of human enquiry. Demonstrations concerning “quantity and number” which Hume regards as the only legitimate “abstract” science, and those which regard matter of fact and existence.” Considerations with regard to fact and existence are, furthermore, “incapable of demonstration.” Hume, *Treatise*, 135. To affirm that one may demonstrate, in a manner that exceeds the limits of experience, the existence of a particular thing *a priori* enables one to justify any given proposition: “The falling of a pebble may, for aught we know, extinguish the sun; or the wish of a man control the planets in their orbits.” According to Hume, the arbiter must be experience: “It is only experience, which teaches us the nature and bounds of cause and effect, and enables us to infer the existence of one object from that of another. Such is the foundation of moral reasoning, which forms the greater part of human knowledge, and is the source of all human action and behavior.” Hume, *Treatise*, 135. Sense experience is the only condition that enables us to affirm the existence of a particular thing. It may only be affirmed, through experience, that a thing exists or does not exist. One may just as well affirm the “existence of Augustus Caesar or of the archangel Gabriel.” Both may be affirmed or denied without applying contradiction. In contrast, according to Hume, a false mathematical proposition, for instance, that “the cube root of 64 is equal to the half of 10, is a false proposition, and can never be distinctly conceived.” Hume, *Enquiry*, Section 12, Part 3, 132.

remain the same as at present. It will still be possible for us, at any time, to conceive the non-existence of what we formerly conceive to exist; nor can the mind ever lie under a necessity of supposing any object to remain always in being; in the same manner as we lie under a necessity of always conceiving twice two to be four. The words, therefore, necessary existence have no meaning; or which is the same thing, none that is consistent.<sup>28</sup>

Thus, the ontological argument, which first appeared so convincing, succumbs to skeptical critique. Cleanthes refutation of Demea is loudly applauded by Philo. Curiously, however, Philo's elaboration implies that necessary existence can be affirmed, though not for the purposes for which Cleanthes intended.

Philo asserts, after affirming the validity of Cleanthes's refutation of the ontological argument, that he "cannot forbear insisting still upon another topic." His comments are brief, his presentation evasive. However, they have considerable import. The necessary, existent being demonstrated by the ontological argument cannot be, according to Philo, a voluntary agent, a personal, creative divinity. Instead, the necessary being might simply be identified with the impersonal totality of the cosmos itself.

To assert that there is necessary existence is to assert that there is causal necessity. To assert absolute causal necessity is to deny the possibility of spontaneous voluntary action. Philo wonders whether it is "not probable . . . that the whole economy of the universe is conducted by" a natural, rather than supernatural "necessity, though no human algebra can furnish a key, which solves the difficulty."<sup>29</sup> That is, in spite of the fact that humans are incapable of arriving at absolute knowledge, since the universe is governed, as Descartes maintained, by cause and effect relations that necessarily follow from one another, there can be no freedom, if freedom retains its ordinarily understood meaning. Philo employs a mathematical analogy to convey his point.

The discovery of such idiosyncratic regularities in arithmetic had been regarded as indirect proof for intelligent order.<sup>30</sup> To the eyes of "a superficial observer," the "wonderful" regularities in arithmetic and other mathematical disciplines "may be admired as the effect either of chance or design, but a skilful algebraist states, that it must for ever result from the nature of these numbers."<sup>31</sup> A "skilled algebraist" ought, however, not to regard the capacity to observe that "the products of 9 compose always either 9 or some lesser product of 9" as a sign of operating supersensible intelligence. However, competent mathematicians

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<sup>28</sup>Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, 100.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 101.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.* As example Hume employs the following: "It is observed by arithmeticians, that the products of 9 compose always either 9 or some lesser product of 9; if you add together all the characters, of which any of the former products is composed. Thus, of 18, 27, 36, which are products of 9, you make 9 by adding 1 to 8, 2 to 7, 3 to 6. Thus 369, is a product also of 9; and if you add 3, 6, and 9, you make 18, a lesser product of 9." *Ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

recognize that these features are a function of the natural property of the number nine, rather than orderly regularities instituted by mind. Philo thereby indirectly presents the Spinozistic view of cosmic necessity.

If one is to hold, with Spinoza, that there is necessary connection of cause and effect among physical bodies, even if one does not have a clear understanding of specific causes and effects, then one is committed to denying voluntary agency, in the conventionally understood sense, both to the human and divine.<sup>32</sup> Philo, consequently, recognizes it as “dangerous” to introduce such a conception “of necessity into the present question.”<sup>33</sup> Such a view “naturally” affords “an inference directly opposite to the religious hypothesis.”<sup>34</sup> In short, causal necessity leads to Spinozistic pantheism.

The ontological argument, according to Philo, far from affirming the existence of the Divinity characterized by orthodox theological doctrines, instead robs the Divinity of its free creative capacity. For Spinoza, God or self-existing Being, is simply the totality of the cosmos, existing necessarily, in and of itself. The ontological argument, quite apart from demonstrating unambiguously the necessary existence of a free, creative divinity, may, instead, be used to deny the possibility of such a Being.

Hume’s influence upon Kant is well attested. However, the full extent of the debt the Prussian critical philosopher holds to the Scottish skeptic is seldom fully recognized. If my thesis is correct, not only is Kant beholden to Hume’s influence in the “Transcendental Analytic” but the “Transcendental Dialectic” as well. For Kant, confronting the cosmological argument, which he reduces also to the ontological, characterizes the proof in comparable, theatrical terms.

The cosmological argument, according to Kant, is replete with “sophistical principles” that “speculative reason seems to have summoned up all its dialectical art so as to produce the greatest possible transcendental illusion.”<sup>35</sup> Kant, like Cleanthes, maintains that one cannot affirm the necessary from the contingent. Furthermore, this “unfortunate ontological proof” brings “no satisfaction either to the natural and healthy understanding or to scholastically correct examination.”<sup>36</sup> Kant, moreover, likely following Hume, asserts that “the cosmological proof,” which “retains the connection of absolute necessity with the highest reality,” although ostensibly more convincing than the ontological proof, in fact, hinges upon it.

The cosmological proof, for Kant, depends upon the ontological in the following way: on the basis of experience, which is, itself, contingent, the “cosmological proof avails itself of this experience only to make a single step,

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<sup>32</sup> Spinoza, *Ethica* 1, *Axioma* 3: “Ex data causa determinate necessario sequitur effectus, & contra, si nulla detur determinate causa, impossibile est, ut effectus sequatur.”  
<http://www.thelatinlibrary.com/spinoza.ethica1.html>. Accessed 14 May 2010.

<sup>33</sup> Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, 102.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 102.

<sup>35</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Paul Guyer and Allen Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), A606/B634.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, A603/B631-A604/B632.

namely to the existence of a necessary being in general.”<sup>37</sup>

The assertion of an “*ens realissimum*,” however, requires us to “abandon all experience at once and seek among pure concepts for the one that might contain the conditions for the possibility of an absolutely necessary being.”<sup>38</sup> However, “the merely intellectual concept of the contingent cannot produce any synthetic proposition, such as that of causality, and the principle of causality has no significance at all and no mark of its use except in the world of sense; here, however, it is supposed to serve precisely to get beyond the world of sense.”<sup>39</sup> Kant does not assent, with Hume, that causal relations are necessarily contingent. However, he does affirm, with Hume, that one cannot infer the necessary from the contingent.

Kant’s criticism of the *a priori* argument is, formally, nearly identical to that advanced by Cleanthes in *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*. “[The] condition that one demands for absolute necessity can be encountered only in a single being, which therefore must contain everything in its concept that is required for absolute necessity.”<sup>40</sup> One may assert the existence of a necessary being as a hypothesis. However, one cannot determine the necessary existence of any particular being with certainty.<sup>41</sup> Indeed, Kant, like Hume, recognizes the dramatic force of speculative arguments regarding the source and origin of the cosmos by characterizing them as the outgrowth of a dialectical art of illusion. For all that, he denies their demonstrative import.

Hume regards natural theological demonstrations of the existence of a necessary being as alternately persuasive, though, ultimately, lacking the status of proof. Such arguments are merely spectacles, conveyed with dramatic rather than demonstrative force. The orthodox formulation of the ontological argument, articulated by Demea, contains a degree of persuasive power. This power is, however, almost effortlessly undermined by Cleanthes. Philo is able, furthermore, to resurrect the notion of necessary Being in order to affirm the non-existent of a voluntary creator. Natural theology is, as a result, a domain of inquiry that entails demonstrations that are alternately convincing, though incapable of conclusive, demonstrative proof.

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., A609/B634.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., A606/B643-A608/B636.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., A609/B637.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., A610/B638-A612/B640.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., A612/B640.