

**PAUL RUSSELL AND THE “IRRELIGIOUS INTERPRETATION”  
OF *SCEPTICISM WITH REGARD TO THE SENSES***

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One of Paul Russell’s signal contributions to Hume scholarship has been to challenge the assumption, common among contemporary scholars, that in the *Treatise of Human Nature* Hume largely refrains from critically engaging with natural religion. Having made the conscious decision to “castrate” his work so as to make it less objectionable to certain of his religiously minded readers, so the story goes, it is only in his later writings that Hume draws out the negative implications of his theory of human nature for the project of natural theology. Against this reading, Russell advocates for what he refers to as the “irreligious interpretation” of Hume’s *Treatise*. On this view, many of the best known discussions in the *Treatise* are unmistakably anti-religious, both in their implications and intent (Russell 2021, xix-xx).

In Chapter Three of *Recasting Hume and Early Modern Philosophy* (“The Material World and Natural Religion in Hume’s *Treatise*”), Russell extends this reading to Hume’s discussion of our belief in the material world at *Treatise* 1.4.2 (*Scepticism with regard to the senses*). Russell maintains that not only does Hume’s discussion carry negative implications for the project of natural theology, and in particular proofs of the existence of God, but that Hume’s “fundamental aims and motivation” in that section are “essentially *irreligious* in character” (Russell 2021, 65; Russell’s italics).

Russell begins by reminding the reader of the historical context in which Hume was working. In particular, he recalls Descartes’s well-known appeal to divine veracity in an attempt to secure our knowledge of the material world. Russell reconstructs the argument as follows:

1. We naturally believe that there exists a material world.
2. If God exists, and the material world does not, then God is a deceiver.
3. God cannot be a deceiver.
4. God exists.
5. Therefore, the material world exists.

Russell then recalls how subsequent philosophers, including Malebranche, Locke, Bayle and Berkeley, grappled with the worry that Descartes’s argument might be turned against the natural theologian, should our belief in the external world prove unjustified or even false. Russell summarizes this worry as follows: if matter does not exist, then “given our natural inclination to believe in matter, it follows that God must be a deceiver” (Russell 2021, 72). However, as Russell himself recognizes, this is not quite right. For whatever Descartes may hold, both

Malebranche and Berkeley maintain that God could be fairly charged with deception only if our natural inclination to believe in the existence of external, material objects is not only false, but irresistible. And this latter claim, Malebranche and Berkeley, each in their own way, are at pains to deny. As Russell points out, Malebranche rejects Descartes's *Sixth Meditation* proof of the existence of material substance on the grounds that while we have a strong propensity to believe that our sensible ideas are caused by external, material objects this belief is not irresistible (Russell 2021, 67-8). For Malebranche the absence of a clear and distinct perception of the existence of external bodies leaves one free to choose to believe or no.<sup>1</sup> Consequently, if I do so believe, it is by virtue of a voluntary act for which I alone bear responsibility. Similarly, Berkeley maintains that one should take a given belief to be imparted by God only if "it is so evident to our natural faculties, which were framed and given us by God, that it is impossible we should withhold our assent from it" (3D: 125).<sup>2</sup>

While Russell acknowledges that no explicit mention of natural theology is made in *Treatise* 1.4.2, he notes that Hume does connect the two issues in the corresponding discussion in the first *Enquiry*. In particular, Russell calls attention to the following passage:

To have recourse to the veracity of the Supreme Being, in order to prove the veracity of our senses, is surely making a very unexpected circuit. If his veracity were at all concerned in this matter, our senses would be entirely infallible; because it is not possible that he can ever deceive. Not to mention, that, if the external world be once called in question, we shall be at a loss to find arguments, by which we may prove the existence of that Being or any of his attributes (EHU 12.13; SBN 153).

Citing Hume's comment that Berkeley's arguments for immaterialism are merely sceptical in so far as they "admit of no answer and produce no conviction", Russell characterizes Hume's own position with regard to our knowledge of the material world as consisting in two theses, which Russell refers to as Hume's "sceptical thesis" and his "naturalist thesis" (Russell 2021, 76-9). With regard to the former, Russell distinguishes a weak and a strong version. Hume's weak sceptical thesis is that our natural belief in a material world is unjustified—that is, it lacks adequate evidential support. The strong sceptical thesis goes farther and maintains that this belief is not merely unjustified, but "contrary to reason"—that is to say, false. According to what Russell refers to as Hume's "naturalist thesis" our belief in external, material objects is impervious to sceptical doubt. That is, the arguments of the sceptic do not—indeed, cannot—lead us to abandon our natural belief. As Russell summarizes the thesis "the vulgar view is...one that we are constrained to believe and about which we have no choice" (Russell 2021, 78).

Having distinguished these two key theses, Russell turns to consider what he takes to be their implications for the project of natural theology. Russell distinguishes two challenges to natural theology that he claims to find embedded in Hume's discussion of scepticism with regard to the external world. First, and more modestly, Russell argues that Hume's skeptical conclusion concerning our knowledge of the external world effectively undermines what Hume takes to be the

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<sup>1</sup> Thus, in the *Sixth Elucidation* Malebranche affirms: "I agree that faith obliges us to believe that there are bodies; but as for evidence, it seems to me that it is incomplete and that we are [not] invincibly led to believe there is something other than God and our own mind" (OM III, 62; LO 573).

<sup>2</sup> Berkeley, *Three Dialogues between Hylas and Philonous*, edited by Jonathan Dancy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).

only two serious attempts to establish the existence of God by philosophical argument: the a priori argument as formulated by Samuel Clarke and the a posteriori argument—that is, the analogical design argument—that would later be championed by Cleanthes in the *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion*.<sup>3</sup> Following Russell, I shall refer to this first challenge to natural theology as Hume’s “sceptical challenge”. Beyond this, however, Russell maintains that Hume implicitly constructs a stronger argument, one that seeks not merely to undermine rational proofs of the existence of God, but to prove positively that the God of theism does not exist. Russell labels this second, more ambitious argument, the “deception challenge”. I shall begin with the latter.

Russell reconstructs the deception challenge as follows:

1. We naturally and inescapably believe in the existence of body (i.e., usually and primarily in the vulgar form)
2. Our belief in the existence of body is false and based on illusion (i.e., we are deceived about this).
3. If God exists, and we are naturally deceived about the existence of body, then God is a deceiver.
4. God cannot be a deceiver.
5. If we are deceived in our natural belief about body, then God does not exist.
6. Therefore, God does not exist. (Russell 2021, 83)

I shall examine the evidence for ascribing such an argument to Hume presently. First, however, a word about precisely which beliefs about the material world are at issue. As is well-known Hume distinguishes our natural (“vulgar”) belief in body from the representative realism of the modern philosophers. While Russell devotes a good bit of discussion to Hume’s treatment of the philosopher’s view of double existence, arguably, the theory is neither here nor there with regard to the question of divine veracity. For the modern philosopher’s theory is just that—a philosophical theory. That these philosophers have run into a hypothesis that at best lacks evidential support and at worst is “absurd” and “meaningless” would not seem to tell against God’s veracity. For as Hume himself emphasizes, the modern philosophers’ theory of mind-independent objects is neither natural nor unavoidable. As Hume puts the point, in advancing the theory of double existence, the philosopher “can no longer plead the infallible and irresistible instinct of nature” (EHU 12.10; SBN 152). Thus, it is difficult to see how such a belief, be it ever so false, can be used to support the claim that if God existed, he would be a deceiver. As Philonous observes to Hylas, “that every epidemical opinion arising from prejudice, or passion, or thoughtlessness, may be imputed to God, as the Author of it, I believe you will not affirm” (3D: 243).

Thus, if Hume is intending to establish God’s non-existence on the basis of *Treatise* 1.4.2, it can only be with regard to the vulgar belief that the “very images, presented by the senses” are external objects that continue to exist unperceived (EHU 12.8; SBN 151). And here it must be acknowledged that Hume considers the vulgar view to be not merely unjustified, but false. Is it not then the case that God is a deceiver? Russell concedes that “not all of [the deception challenge] premises of this argument are explicitly stated” by Hume (Russell 2021, 83). Nevertheless, he maintains that Hume commits himself to all of them and so can plausibly be read as propounding, if only implicitly, an argument along these lines. More specifically, Russell argues that premises 1 and 2 summarize the main results of *Treatise* 1.4.2

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<sup>3</sup> Hume also recognizes Descartes’s arguments for the existence of God in the Third and Fifth Meditations as a priori arguments. However, his principal interest seems to lie with the version formulated by Clarke.

with regard to the vulgar belief in continued unsensed existence of independent bodies, what Russell calls the naturalist thesis and the skeptical thesis respectively. Furthermore, while Russell acknowledges that Hume does not explicitly invoke divine veracity in *Treatise* 1.4.2, he points out that in the previously cited passage from the first *Enquiry*, Hume clearly endorses premise 4, observing that “it is not possible that [God] can ever deceive” (EHU 12.13; SBN 153).

But what about premise 3? According to this premise, if our natural belief in body is both false and irresistible, then if God did exist, he would be a deceiver. Here again Russell acknowledges that Hume makes no specific mention of God or the prospect of divine deception in *Of Scepticism with regard to the senses*. However, he maintains that Hume commits himself to this premise in the crucial discussion at EHU 12.13. And, indeed, on a superficial reading of that passage, this might appear to be the case. Here again is Hume:

to have recourse to the veracity of the Supreme Being, in order to prove the veracity of our senses, is surely making a very unexpected circuit. If his veracity were at all concerned in this matter, our senses would be entirely infallible; because it is not possible that he can ever deceive (EHU 12.13; SBN 153).

To be sure, Hume does introduce God’s nature as a non-deceiver in the context of his sceptical worries about our knowledge of the external world. More specifically, Hume is directly criticizing Descartes’s *Sixth Meditation* argument from elimination. Nevertheless, I do not believe this passage provides the evidence that Russell requires. Notice that in the first sentence Hume asserts that the appeal to God’s nature as a non-deceiver is out of place in a philosophical argument for the existence of the external world. He then argues that if God’s veracity *were* at issue, then our senses would never deceive us, which is patently not the case. Hume’s claim, then, is that divine veracity is “not at all” at issue in questions about our knowledge of the external world.<sup>4</sup> In short, Hume *is denying* that if the material world does not exist, then God would be a deceiver—precisely the opposite what Russell ascribes to him in premise 3.<sup>5</sup>

Unfortunately, Hume does not tell us *why* he thinks divine veracity is not impugned by the errors of our senses. Thus, any attempt to answer that question is, of necessity, speculative. One reason Hume may have had for not advancing an argument along the lines of Russell’s deception challenge is that, as previously noted, any proof of the non-existence of God would require that our natural belief in the material world be not only false, but irresistible, and on Hume’s view this is not unambiguously the case. Of course, as is well known, Hume argues on numerous occasions that nature is too strong for philosophy and that not only the

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<sup>4</sup> This problem also finds expression in Russell’s claim that Hume sees the natural theologian as falling into a “‘circle’ problem”—namely that unless it can be proved that God exists and is not a deceiver, we cannot secure knowledge of the external world, but at the same time knowledge of the existence of the material world is the only possible basis on which the existence of God could be proved (Russell 2021, 66n5). This reading presupposes that Hume believes that knowledge of the existence and veracity of the deity is directly implicated in the issue of our knowledge of the existence of the material world, which I take Hume to be explicitly denying.

<sup>5</sup> Notice that Russell’s gloss on this sentence is somewhat misleading. According to Russell Hume is asserting that “God—unless he is a deceiver (which is absurd)—cannot be ‘concerned in this matter’” (Russell 2021, 83). But Hume does not say that God is not concerned, but that God’s *veracity*—his inability to deceive—is not at issue in the question of the reliability of our senses. In other words, Hume is rejecting the claim that if God exists, then given that our natural belief in the external world is false, God is guilty of deception.

modern philosopher, but even the sceptic, inevitably reverts to vulgar belief in the continued existence of sensible objects when she lays aside her philosophical reflections and reenters the world of everyday life. Thus, Hume observes that

tho' we clearly perceive the dependence and interruption of our perceptions, we stop short in our career, and never upon that account reject the notion of an independent and continu'd existence. That opinion has taken such deep root in the imagination, that 'tis impossible ever to eradicate it, nor will any strain'd metaphysical conviction of the dependence of our perceptions be sufficient for that purpose (T 1.4.2.52; SBN 214).

And, yet, for all that, it remains the case that the philosopher *can* formulate arguments that undermine our natural belief. Indeed, according to Hume the reasoning is astonishingly simple. As Hume tells us, “a very little reflection and philosophy is sufficient to make us perceive the fallacy of that [natural] opinion” (T 1.4.2.44; SBN 210).<sup>6</sup> Perhaps then Hume thought that our ability to perceive—indeed, prove—the falsity of our natural belief, even if we cannot long abstain from it, is enough to exonerate God from being a deceiver. For we are endowed us with a rational faculty by which we can perceive the falsity of our natural belief (here it is worth comparing Descartes’s defense of the reliability of clear and distinct perception on the grounds that God has given me no higher faculty by which I could show that my clear and distinct perceptions are doubtful).

However, it is not my business to speculate as to why Hume says what he does. The crucial point is that in the *Treatise* Hume does not invoke the claim that if matter does not exist, the God would be a deceiver, while in the *Enquiry* he specifically rejects it. Thus, I find the claim that Hume’s intention in *Treatise* 1.4.2 was to propound—even implicitly—the “deception challenge” to be unsustainable.

However, there is a further way in which the previously cited passage undermines rather than supports the “irreligious interpretation” of *Of scepticism with regard to the senses*. For Russell maintains not only that the denial of God’s existence follows from Hume’s criticism of natural belief in the external world, but that Hume’s intention in *Of scepticism with regard to the senses* is to press home this point. However, as we have just seen, in the second sentence of the passage at *Enquiry* 12.13, Hume claims that if God’s veracity were at stake, then our senses would be “entirely infallible”. In this case, every error of our senses would suffice to show that God, if he exists, is a deceiver. Every “crooked appearance of an oar in water”, every double image “which arises from pressing one eye” (EHU 12.6; SBN 151) would constitute conclusive evidence that the God of theism does not exist. Now, if that were the case, we would hardly need any elaborate discussion of the falsity of the vulgar existence of the external world of the kind offered in *Of scepticism with regard to the senses* in order to establish the non-existence of the supremely perfect being. A single appearance of a square tower as round would do the job. Thus, even if Hume did accept premise 3 (as I have argued he did not), it would still be implausible to maintain that his “fundamental aims and motivation” in raising sceptical arguments against our knowledge of the material world both in T 1.4.2 and Section 12 of the *Enquiry* were to mount an (implicit) argument that God does

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<sup>6</sup> Thus, it is somewhat misleading to claim, as Russell does, that it is “by means of intense philosophical reflections” that we are able to temporarily overcome our natural belief in the continued existence of distinct sensible objects (Russell 2021, 88).



not exist.<sup>7</sup> He could simply have reminded his readers of the many more mundane perceptual errors to which the senses are subject.

Let us turn then to the second, less ambitious, irreligious argument that Russell claims to find in *Of Scepticism with regard to the senses*. This objection, which Russell refers to as Hume's "skeptical challenge" aims to show that scepticism regarding knowledge of the material world undermines philosophical arguments for God's existence. Here the situation is quite otherwise than with regard to the deception challenge. For although, as previously indicated, Hume draws no conclusions concerning the cogency of the analogical design argument in *Treatise* 1.4.2, in the *Enquiry* he explicitly maintains that if our belief in the external world is once called into doubt we shall be "at a loss" to find compelling arguments for either the existence or attributes of God (EHU 12.13; SBN 153). Thus, Hume is on record as claiming that without knowledge of the material world, there can be no philosophical proof of God's existence. However, the question we must now ask ourselves is why does he believe this to be the case?

Before examining this question, however, I wish to comment briefly on the scope of Hume's assertion that proofs of God's existence presuppose knowledge of the material world. Hume recognizes various kinds of philosophical argument for God's existence. However, if we are to judge by the *Dialogues*, there are only two that he considers worthy of detailed criticism. These are the argument a priori as formulated by Samuel Clarke in his *Demonstration of the Being and Attributes of God* and the argument a posteriori, or analogical design argument, championed by Cleanthes. According to Russell, Humean scepticism with regard to the external world "will suffice to discredit the ambitions of both the argument a priori and the argument a posteriori" (Russell 2021, 82). Thus, on Russell's reading, when Hume states that if we once call the existence of the material world in question, "we shall be at a loss to find arguments, by which we may prove the existence of that Being, or any of his attributes" (EHU 12.13; SBN 151), he is claiming that both the argument a priori and the argument a posteriori essentially depend on the premise that the external material world exists.

In support of this view, Russell notes that Clarke himself had denounced Berkeley's immaterialism on the grounds that it subverts both scientific knowledge

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<sup>7</sup> In reading *Of scepticism with regard to the senses* as advancing the deception challenge, Russell is, in effect, ascribing to Hume a particular form of the logical problem of evil, what we might call the logical problem of epistemic evil. The burden of this objection is to show that there is a logical inconsistency in the claims that (1) God exists, (2) God is essentially incapable of deception and (3) our natural belief in the material world is both false and irresistible. Thus, in weighing Russell's claim that it is Hume's *intention* to propound the deception challenge, it would be instructive to consider Hume's complex attitude toward the logical problem of evil as it appears in *Dialogues* 10 and 11. On the one hand, Philo presents a forceful version of the logical problem of evil (D 10.34: 103). However, he later seems to soften his stance and acknowledge that if we had some antecedent knowledge that God exists and is perfect we would have to accept that there must be a way of reconciling his nature with the existence of evil. According to Philo, "however consistent the world may be, allowing certain suppositions and conjectures, with the idea of such a Deity, it can never afford us an inference concerning his existence. The consistence is not absolutely denied, only the inference. Conjectures, especially where infinity is excluded from the divine attributes, may, perhaps, be sufficient to prove a consistence; but can never be foundations for any inference" (D 11.4: 107). Thus, even here where Hume is much more explicit, his ultimate intentions regarding the logical problem of evil are less than clear. This, I suggest, should give us pause when reconstructing on Hume's behalf a parallel argument from epistemic evil, based on premises that are, at best, merely implicit in Hume's discussion.

(and in particular Newtonian physics) and natural theology. According to Russell, he does so because “the entire edifice of Clarke’s celebrated ‘argument *a priori*,’ as presented in his *Demonstration of the Being and Attributes of God*, rests on an unquestioned belief that we know that the material world exists” (Russell 2021, 80). I shall not pause to examine this claim as it pertains to Clarke’s particular formulation of the argument. For the issue at hand is whether *every* version of that argument essentially depends on knowledge of an independently existing material world and consequently whether it can plausibly be maintained that in challenging that knowledge, Hume intended to undermine the argument *a priori*. However, I think there is good reason to doubt this. To see why, let us consider Hume’s own formulation of the argument *a priori* in part 9 of the *Dialogues*.<sup>8</sup> There Demea presents the argument as follows:

Whatever exists must have a cause or reason of its existence; it being absolutely impossible for any thing to produce itself, or be the cause of its own existence. In mounting up, therefore, from effects to causes, we must either go on in tracing an infinite succession, without any ultimate cause at all, or must at last have recourse to some ultimate cause, that is *necessarily* existent. (D 9.3: 90; Hume’s emphasis)

Demea goes on to claim that the first alternative of a succession without an ultimate cause is impossible, since although in the infinite chain of causes and effects every member of the chain will have a cause, the entire “chain or succession” will not. However, this violates the principle that every contingent being must have a cause of its existence, since the chain itself taken as a whole is just such a being. Thus, Demea concludes that there must be a necessarily existing first cause of the succession of contingent objects.

Demea’s argument turns on the contingency of the individual elements that compose the universe. He claims that every contingent being requires a cause of its existence. This will apply not only to external, material bodies—if such things exist—but also to individual perceptions in the mind. Because all such perceptions can be conceived not to exist, they are by Demea’s criterion, contingent beings and, as such, will require a cause of their existence. Of course, the same will hold of any causal succession of perceptions considered as a whole. It follows that the same dilemma can be posed in regard to a succession of perceptions as to a succession of bodies: either we must countenance an infinite chain of perceptions “without any ultimate cause at all” or there must be a necessarily existing being that is the ultimate cause of the entire succession. To be sure, Hume has well known reasons for rejecting any inference to a necessarily existing first cause based on the existence of contingent beings. However, the question at hand is not whether Hume ultimately accepts the argument *a priori*, but whether scepticism with regard to the material world provides an *independent* reason for rejecting it. And it would seem, *pace* Russell, that the answer is clearly, “no”. There is nothing in Demea’s formulation of the argument that requires that the chain of causes and effects be physical rather than mental, external rather than internal. Consequently, sceptical challenges to our knowledge of body—or indeed the outright denial that such entities exist—will have no material effect on the cogency of the cosmological argument from contingency.

In light of this, I think we can safely confine our attention to the argument *a posteriori*. When Hume says that if we once call the existence of the external world into doubt we will be left with no arguments for the existence of God, what he must

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<sup>8</sup> *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, edited by J. C. A. Gaskin (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

mean is that because all of the various forms of the argument a priori obviously fail, the only argument with any chance of success is the design argument, and that argument, if it is to succeed, depends on our being justified in believing that the material world exists.

Once again, however, the question I wish to consider is why? Of course, Berkeley is at pains to distance himself from any sceptical implications of his immaterialist thesis for our knowledge of God's existence (Russell 2021, 84). However, as Russell notes, Berkeley's contemporaries were quick to point out the apparently adverse implications of Berkeley's immaterialism for natural theology and that Hume was undoubtedly aware of this line of criticism. Why did he think this line of criticism was a good one? After all Berkeley himself does not merely deny the allegedly sceptical implications for our knowledge of God's existence. He formulates a version of the design argument based on our mind-dependent sensible ideas. Thus, Berkeley argues that "from the variety, order, and manner of these, I conclude the Author of them to be *wise, powerful and good beyond comprehension* (§D: 215; Berkeley's emphasis).<sup>9</sup> Once again, the question is whether scepticism about the continued, independent existence of sensible objects offers any *independent* reason for rejecting the design argument, and it is not clear to me that it does. In any case, it remains an open question as to why Hume should have thought that it did.

This question is made more acute by considering an important objection to Cleanthes's version of the design argument in *Dialogues* 4.<sup>10</sup> Philo attempts to show that Cleanthes's principle that means-end order requires an intelligent cause leads to an infinite regress of causes. According to Philo the ideas in the mind of the deity will be isomorphic with the physical world that is said to be its effect. That is, for every object in physical creation there will be a corresponding idea in God's mind, and these ideas will stand in the same relations of order as the corresponding physical objects. Philo goes on to argue that

a mental world or universe of ideas requires a cause as much as does a material world or universe of objects; and if similar in its arrangement must require a similar cause. For what is there in this subject, which should occasion a different conclusion or inference? In an abstract view, they are entirely alike; and no difficulty attends the one supposition, which is not common to both of them (D 4.7: 62).

According to Philo there is in principle no relevant difference between physical and mental systems with regard to the kind of cause they require. If a physical system by virtue of its means end-ordering requires a cause endowed with human-like intelligence, so too will a correspondingly arranged system of ideas or mental perceptions. Philo concludes that if Cleanthes's inference from the organization of material objects to an intelligent designer were good, one would be equally entitled to infer an intelligent cause of the ideas in the mind of the designer. Philo asks,

how therefore shall we satisfy ourselves concerning the cause of that Being, whom you suppose the Author of nature, or, according to your system of anthropomorphism, the ideal world, into which you trace the

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<sup>9</sup> Cf. Berkeley, "this consistent uniform working, which so evidently displays the goodness and wisdom of that governing spirit whose will constitutes the Laws of Nature" (PHK 32).

<sup>10</sup> For an extended analysis of Philo's argument, see my "Pierre Bayle and the Regress Argument in Hume's *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*" in *Libertinage et philosophie du 17<sup>e</sup> siècle*, 14, (Paris: Garnier, 2017), 161-188.



material? Have we not the same reason to trace that ideal world into another ideal world, or new intelligent principle? (D 4.9: 63)

Thus Philo seems committed to the view that if a suitably arranged system of material objects requires an intelligent cause, so too will a similarly arranged system of mental perceptions. Needless to say, Hume has compelling reasons for rejecting the inference to a designing mind. However, once again, the issue is whether (weak) scepticism about the material world affords any *independent* reason for rejecting the a posteriori argument for the existence of God. Once again, it is not obvious why this should be so.

Still, however that may be, Hume does state unequivocally that doubt about the material world leaves us with no convincing argument for God’s existence. Therefore, it does appear that Hume believes that the analogical design argument depends in some crucial sense on the existence of the material world. This much, I think, must be conceded to Russell. By itself, however, this is not yet enough to vindicate Russell’s “irreligious interpretation” of *Of scepticism with regard to the senses*. For Russell’s claim is not merely that Hume’s discussion of our natural belief in the existence of body effectively undermines the argument from design, nor even that Hume believes that it does so. Rather, Russell, needs to show that making this point (even if only implicitly) was among Hume’s “fundamental aims and motivation” in composing *Treatise* 1.4.2. Here I think the evidence is much less clear. The best guide we have concerning Hume’s critical strategy with regard to the design argument is, of course, the *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion*. It is a striking fact that although Philo alludes to Pyrrhonian doubts about the material world, he does not ultimately treat such doubts as a conclusive argument against Cleanthes’s “experimental theism”.<sup>11</sup>

Early on in part 1 of the *Dialogues*, Philo urges:

let us become thoroughly sensible of the weakness, blindness, and narrow limits of human reason: Let us duly consider its uncertainty and endless contrarieties, even in subjects of common life and practice: *Let the errors and deceits of our very senses be set before us*; the insuperable difficulties, which attend first principles in all systems; *the contradictions, which adhere to the very ideas of matter*, cause and effect, extension, space, time, motion... When these topics are displayed in their full light...who can retain such confidence in this frail faculty of reason as to pay any regard to its determinations in points so sublime, so abstruse, so remote from common life and experience? (D 1.3: 33; italics added)

Here Philo clearly alludes to (without fully developing) the arguments of the Pyrrhonian or “excessive sceptic” against the existence of the material world. However, when Cleanthes questions the sincerity and sustainability of such radical scepticism, Philo acknowledges that not only must we engage in common sense reasoning in ordinary life, but that we are under no obligation to justify our doing so. Thus, in response to Cleanthes’s questioning of the sceptic’s sincerity, Philo avers

to whatever length any one may push his speculative principles of scepticism, he must act, I own, and live, and converse like other men; *and for this conduct he is not obliged to give any other reason, than the absolute necessity he lies under of so doing*. If he ever carries his speculations farther

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<sup>11</sup> I develop this reading of Part 1 of the *Dialogues* in “Academic Scepticism and Mitigated Scepticism in Hume’s *Dialogues*” in Sébastien Charles and Plínio Junqueira Smith, eds, *Academic Scepticism in the Development of Early Modern Philosophy* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2017), 319-343.

than this necessity constrains him, and philosophises, either on natural or moral subjects, he is allured by a certain pleasure and satisfaction, which he finds in employing himself after that manner. He considers besides, that every one, even in common life, is constrained to have more or less of this philosophy; that from our earliest infancy we make continual advances in forming more general principles of conduct and reasoning; that the larger experience we acquire, and the stronger reason we are endued with, we always render our principles the more general and comprehensive; and that what we call *philosophy* is nothing but a more regular and methodical operation of the same kind. To philosophise on such subjects is nothing essentially different from reasoning on common life. (D 1.9; 36)

Seizing on this concession, Cleanthes accuses Philo of holding a double standard. On the one hand, Philo accepts not only common sense belief in the existence and causal functioning of the material world, but even the most “remote” conclusions of natural science. Yet on the other hand he questions the legitimacy of any attempt to establish the existence and nature of the deity, even though (at least for an experimental theist such as Cleanthes) the arguments of natural religion appeal to the same empirical data and invoke the same principles of reasoning (for example, like effects imply like cases) as those we employ both in ordinary life and in the sciences. Cleanthes summarizes his argument as follows:

our senses, you say, are fallacious, our understanding erroneous, our ideas even of the most familiar objects, extension, duration, motion, full of absurdities and contradictions. You defy me to solve the difficulties, or reconcile the repugnancies, which you discover in them. I have not capacity for so great an undertaking: I have not leisure for it: I perceive it to be superfluous. Your own conduct, in every circumstance, refutes your principles; and shows the firmest reliance on all the received maxims of science, morals, prudence, and behavior. (D 1.14: 39)

In effect, Cleanthes presents Philo with a dilemma: either he embraces Pyrrhonian scepticism with regard to the existence of the external world and causal reasoning and thereby rejects such beliefs even in ordinary life, or he allows the legitimacy of causal reasoning in ordinary life and science, in which case by parity of reasoning, he must allow its possibility in the case of the design argument as well.<sup>12</sup> Thus, Cleanthes denies that doubts about the existence of the material world can be consistently brought to bear against the arguments of natural theology—and in particular the analogical design argument—at least by a “moderate” septic such as Philo.

Although Philo offers no direct response, he shows no inclination in the subsequent discussion to treat the general doubts about the “errors and deceits of our very senses” to have put an end to the debate. On the contrary, it is only after a detailed criticism of the argument across the next seven dialogues, that Philo feels he is finally in a position to declare victory (D 8.12: 88-9). The implication is that appeal to radical scepticism about (among other things) the existence of the external world is unavailing, since it would equally require rejecting all claims to knowledge in the domains of science and morals, and even common life. Thus, it

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<sup>12</sup> Naturally, this is not to say that Philo, much less Hume, must acknowledge the cogency of the design argument. As the subsequent dialogues will make abundantly clear, Hume has many detailed criticisms of the logic of the argument. The point is rather that Philo cannot consistently appeal to radical scepticism against senses and reason to preemptively dismiss the design argument without further examination unless he is willing to do the same for reasoning in the natural sciences and ordinary life.

would seem that Hume doesn't want to rely on a sceptical argument that would undermine not only the argument a posteriori, but also the reasoning of natural science, morals and ordinary life. Or to put the point another way, there is little advantage to undermining the design argument by means of what Hume himself labels “excessive” scepticism, since the theist need not be overly concerned by a kind of sceptical worry that in undermining natural theology is destructive of all claims knowledge. As Bayle might say, such an argument proves too much, and therefore it proves nothing.