

Study Guide: Limits to Reason: Modern Empiricism

LART602

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The Search for Order: The Rational Eye

II. The Moderns

b. Hume

Reading: Hume: *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* (entire)¹

In General

- Hume's *Dialogues* are another treasure of the Western Intellectual Tradition. Not published during his lifetime because of their radical nature, the *Dialogues* constitute a significant challenge to the religious rationalism of the time. For some, Hume's arguments remain the last word on Natural Religion.
- Natural Religion is the methodological stance according to which it is possible for humans to learn religious truth by application of natural human faculties – viz., sense and reason. Natural Religion (or Natural Theology) is contrasted with Revealed Religion (or Theology), which holds that divine truth can be known by humans only by means of divine revelation. As we saw with Descartes, the proposition that it is possible for us to know God by rational means is a hallmark of Modern Rationalism. By the mid-18th Century, however, this notion has come to face formidable challenges.
- The characters of the Dialogue represent three views of religion. Cleanthes represents the Modern era's intellectual height in its devotion to science. He advances the Design Argument, consistent with that scientific outlook, basing our knowledge of God on observation of our surroundings. Demea represents a more traditional and conservative attitude towards religion. In his mouth is put the older-style, First-Cause argument for God's existence, hearkening to pre-enlightenment times. Where Cleanthes is depicted as clever and sophisticated, Demea is depicted as old-fashioned and easily confused. Philo represents a more skeptical, critical attitude towards both and indeed in general. In opposing the Design Argument, he is aligned with Demea, but the two share little in the outlooks so joining them. A final character, Pamphilus, whose narrative reports the discussion among the three points of view, completes the picture. This character might be Hume's subtle representation of his reader – in the end, Pamphilus seems not to have understood what he has heard.
- Hume's style in the *Dialogues* is ornate; you may find the updated text indicated in the footnote easier going.

More Specifically

- Part One: The *Dialogues* begin with a discussion of skepticism in general and of the role of reason in theology. Look here for some of Hume's brilliant observations on the nature and significance of philosophy.

¹ Hume's *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* may be found here: <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/4583/4583-h/4583-h.htm>. See the following link for a somewhat simplified text: <http://www.earlymoderntexts.com/hd.html>

- Part Two: Cleanthes formulates the Design Argument for the existence and nature of God. Philo delivers criticism against the argument directed primarily against the form of evidence Cleanthes can provide. Demea registers shock.
- Part Three (Recommended): Further disputation between Cleanthes and Philo
- Part Four: Attack on Demea's traditional religious views, which are rooted in mysticism. These arguments challenge the intelligibility of his position, which challenges he doesn't appear clearly to appreciate. A regress problem for the Design Argument is raised by Philo.
- Part Five: An important attack on Cleanthes' Design Argument: from human finite experience, we cannot infer an infinite deity.
- Part Seven (Recommended): Further challenges to Cleanthes' argument based as it is in human experience
- Part Nine: Demea sets out the First-Cause argument, an argument *a priori* (for the most part) and thus representative of the pre-scientific era. Cleanthes' objections demolish the argument apparently, as is appropriate, given what the two characters represent.
- Parts Ten and Eleven: The Problem of Evil. If we argue for the existence of God from the nature of human experience, we face a challenge in arguing to His goodness from an experience that is filled with evils.
- Part Twelve (Recommended): After Demea departs in a huff, Cleanthes and Philo offer final thoughts on Natural Religion and human understanding. Note the final remarks by Pamphilus.

Cosmic Order

- As always, be on the lookout for the implications of Hume's remarks for our central topic, the rational order of the universe and our potential for knowledge of it. In many respects, Hume is skeptical of our capacity for knowledge. He believes that human reason is profoundly limited in what it might reveal to us of universal order.

Note: 'a priori' refers to thought conducted without reliance upon the senses ("before experience"); 'a posteriori' refers to thought based upon or deriving from the information of the senses ("after experience").