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# Commentary on Maurice A. Finocchiaro's "Meta-Argumentation in Hume's Critique of the Design Argument"

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Let me note straight off that the theory of argumentation is not one of the areas of philosophy in which I work. It is not even a secondary area for me. I have a wide range of philosophical specializations in which I think, read, teach, and publish, and a second tier of areas in which I also engage in at least three of the listed activities; but, to my regret, argumentation theory isn't among either group. I have done a certain amount of work in formal logic, above all, in modal logic; but this, I know, is at some distance from the comparative analysis of arguments (including meta-arguments) and their structures. One of the areas which *is* in my primary group is early modern philosophy, and very centrally among the thinkers of the 1600-1800 period, Hume. So I come to Professor Finocchiaro's interesting paper principally as a Hume scholar. I hope that that background may enable me to say some things which may be pertinent in one way or other to the topics of Professor Finocchiaro's paper.

In fact Finocchiaro's paper has led me to what I think is an insight about Hume—at any rate, something which I have found an extremely arresting idea—so I am extremely grateful to him, and his paper, for having occasioned this thought. This thought, which others may well also have had in one form or other—the secondary literature on Hume is so immense that it is entirely possible—is concerned with the design argument in Hume's *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, its advocacy by Cleanthes, and its critique by Philo. It is also concerned with the structure of argumentation in Hume's work, or a structure of argumentation which *may* occur in Hume's work—I think it does, but this would be contested by some, perhaps many readers and interpreters of Hume. At any rate, these are all reasons to bring this thought or insight forward in this context. Whether original or not, my 'thought' was prompted by the realization that there is something importantly incomplete in Finocchiaro's, as also in Barker's earlier analysis of the structure and content of Philo's argument ('meta-argument') which critiques the design argument of the *Dialogues*. I think that both Finocchiaro's and Barker's analyses are plausible accounts of the structure and deficiencies of Cleanthes' design argument—they differ above all in the precise role of analogy in Cleanthes' successive arguments as the work advances. On *that* matter I will

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say that I think that Finocchiaro has a stricter notion of analogy than many philosophers—including, I would suggest, Philo, Cleanthes, and Hume—have. For that many, analogical arguments as to probable causes can as well invoke *similarity* as *sameness*. For example, many would argue (as they would *say*), by analogy, that non-human animals suffer because behaviour they exhibit when given electric shock (say) is *similar* to what humans do when that happens to them. To put this just a little more formally, consider two arguments, each with the same two first premises: (1) Carl the cat and Henry the human have had electric shock applied to them; (2) Carl screams and writhes, as does Henry. The third premise will be either (3) Henry’s screaming and writhing is produced by inner feeling-states; or (3)’ Henry’s screaming and writhing is produced by human inner feeling-states. In either case, I would say, we can infer a conclusion, by analogy, viz., (4) Carl’s screaming and writhing is produced by the same causes as Henry’s, namely, inner feeling-states; or (4)’ Carl’s screaming and writhing is produced by causes similar to those of Henry’s behaviour. That is to say, one person’s similarity-analogy will (be able to) amount, by alternative formulations readily supplied, to pretty much the same thing as another person’s sameness-analogy.

I will make one other remark on Finocchiaro’s very detailed analysis of Philo’s meta-argument. Hume is often criticized, in other contexts, for showing unawareness of what we now call inference to the best explanation. It will be of considerable importance, I would say, if the case is warranted that he shows awareness of that pattern of reasoning in the critique of Cleanthes, as Finocchiaro argues. The matter seems to me to deserve an exploration that I will not have the opportunity to undertake on this occasion.

But Finocchiaro leaves out (as many others of Hume’s readers also do) the fact that towards the end of the work things take a somewhat surprising turn.

## 2. PHILO’S REVERSAL

One of the puzzles which Hume’s *Dialogues* poses for its readers is something which appears in Part XII. Philo has—it appears—more or less wiped the floor with Cleanthes, and Demea. It is not surprising, accordingly—but also because of what we know (or think we know) about Hume’s views on theism and religion from other sources—that most interpreters take Philo to be Hume’s mouthpiece. Cleanthes represents natural religion and its advocacy, Demea fideistic (but also a priorist) commitment, and Philo is the sceptic, raining, devastatingly, on both of the other discussants’ parades; frequently, by stratagems which have him appear to adopt a component of the position of one of the other two to show fatal weaknesses in the position of the other. The three are also supposed to be, as Hume has set the dialogue up, good friends, all of them (allegedly) sound theists, who have been having a vigorous philosophical set-to (just as a group of good friends may get together for a vigorous round of chess, or squash, one of them managing thoroughly to thrash the others). Hume’s model is Cicero’s *De Natura Deorum*, where the same sort of thing goes on, also among friends, in the same spirited—sometimes *extremely* spirited and partisan—way, and also concerned with the existence and nature of God(s), including the role and relevance of the problem of evil for the topic. What happens in Part XII is that Demea leaves, and the two special friends, Cleanthes and Philo, remain, and Cleanthes says, in effect: okay, Philo, you have been clever and impressive, but the match is now over, so tell me what your real view is. Philo obliges.

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He says that a version of the argument from design is indeed cogent. It doesn't get us very far. It is limited. It will provide no basis for popular or developed theoretical religion or theology. And it will, especially, provide no basis for linking morality, or moral dimensions of human life, to what was responsible for the order we rightly discern in the world—i.e., order requiring the creative operation of some sort of significant intelligence or other. The whole of natural theology—i.e., of what is justifiably there—may be summed up, Philo concludes, in the proposition “that the cause or causes of order in the universe probably bear some remote analogy to human intelligence.” The position Philo espouses—confesses, we may say—is a variety of deism. It is a *minimalist* deism, it is true—no affirmation of a life after death, nor of any impressive goodness of the world, nor need the creator be omniscient, omnipotent, or singular—but it is a deism nonetheless. The *argument* for it Philo gives in XII-2-4 (especially paragraph 3); it is to be noted that nothing in the remainder of Part XII repudiates the argument. There is a Deity, a divine Being (both of these are Philo's phrases), and there is rationally compelling reason to believe that there is above all from the complexities of the species of living things and their fit within their terrestrial habitat, indication of pattern and system which while it would be logically possible that it be there without plan and a planner, this is something which cannot be maintained “seriously”; which will make a particularly powerful case for analogies with human “art and contrivance” (though not, Philo insists, to human moral traits or goals). Against priests, priestcraft, and the vulgar masses of superstitious believers whom they feed and are fed by, Philo remains implacable. But there is a True Religion—it is a philosopher's religion; though Philo is even prepared to say that “[t]o be a philosophical sceptic is, in a man of letters, the first and most essential step towards being a sound, believing Christian.”

None of this is mentioned at all in Finocchiaro's paper. To be sure, his topic of investigation is *Cleanthes'* design argument in the *Dialogues*, and Philo's extremely thorough destructive critique of it. But the—surprising—fact that Hume then presents the same *Philo* as providing his own design argument would seem clearly to indicate that the work of the argument theorist, as indeed of anyone trying to interpret and understand what is going on in this rich and interesting text, specifically under the heading of its *design arguments for a God of some kind*, has not come to its end.

Commentators have long noted that arguments from design, or teleological arguments, for the existence of God, may be placed in two distinct groups, according as *the world as a whole*, or *very significant proper parts of the world*, are taken, by the argument, to be the primary objects which exhibit the pattern, structure, and complexity the explanation of which is held either absolutely necessarily to require, or overwhelmingly probably to have involved, a creative role of high intelligence and power in its production. These arguments then exhibit disjunctions of empirical object of (supposed) design, and of whether the character of the argument is deductive or inductive. Interestingly, although the argument of Cleanthes which Philo critiques (and both of which Professor Finocchiaro discusses) takes the world as a whole as the relevant empirical object, Philo, in Part XII, gives primary focus to very significant proper parts of the world, namely, the structure, complexity, and adjustment to habitat, of living species and their parts and organs, as the ‘object’ requiring a divine cause. Cleanthes, then, is like Paley; and Philo (rather amazingly) is like Aquinas, in the Fifth Way. Both Cleanthes and Philo evidently (Philo, explicitly) think of the arguments they affirm as inductive;

extremely powerful inductive arguments. Although Philo, in XII, doesn't present *his* argument for (a) God *explicitly* as an argument from analogy, or involving analogy with human production of artefacts, the fact seems evident; whether it be the whole of nature, or just (the whole of) living nature, the evidentiary force of appeal to or a claim of divine creative agency looks essentially to involve, in both cases, analogy with just such familiar features of *our* experience.

### 3. OPTIONS

So: what gives? What happened to the devastating argumentation Philo gave earlier in the *Dialogues*, and which Finocchiaro, and Barker, have analyzed at such length? Was Philo, then, insincere? And anyway, they were very powerful arguments; and seem indeed to be as devastating when applied to *living* nature as to nature as a whole. No argument from design *does* show, or even point to, even inductively, the existence of a God. None of the actual evidence from the world discloses anything other than an entirely *natural* world, one which *gave rise to* mind and intelligence, at any rate in its tiny, meager terrestrial component, but without a shred of reason, from analogy or anything else, to suppose that it was mind and intelligence, of any kind, which produced mind and intelligence (in our version of it), or other complex and arresting features of living things. And—Philo aside—what about his creator? What are we supposed to infer that *Hume* thinks? Is he, then, a deist, a “philosophical Christian”; does he really think that some version of an argument from design is in fact (inductively) cogent?

The puzzle then is what to make of the argument Philo accepts in Part XII, which Philo's own arguments in earlier parts will have refuted—and why Hume has Philo take this apparently inconsistent stance. We need, it seems, to undertake a project in ‘meta-meta-argumentation.’ (That Hume is a very complicated guy.) Interpreters have proposed a variety of explanations. Some have tried to argue that there really is no inconsistency: that Part XII's deism is *so* minimalist—Philo *does* say that the quoted formulation is “somewhat ambiguous,” and endeavours to show that the theist and the atheist, at least when thoughtful, and when they tone down the rhetoric and hyperbole in their first enunciated position, can be budged or coaxed into positions differences between which can be viewed as merely verbal.<sup>1</sup> Others take the Philo of Part XII to be a creature of cunning and artifice on Hume's part. The earlier, sceptical, and argumentatively successful, Philo, is the one we (the philosophically attuned reader with ears to hear and eyes to see) are to take to be the real one, and Hume's voice; the sham Philo is there in the finale as a device of coy, traditional conclusion—the ‘happy ending’ asked for by conventional piety, and which Hume, tongue in cheek, is supplying; we note that the last words of the *Dialogues* claim—its second conjunct definitely unconvincingly—“that Philo's principles are more probable than Demea's; but [...] those of Cleanthes approach still nearer to the truth.” (The latter is even teasingly ambiguous: it at least *permits* being

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<sup>1</sup> William A. Parent, “An Interpretation of Hume's *Dialogues*,” *The Review of Metaphysics*, vol. xxx, no. 1 (117), Sept. 1976, 96-114, argues not only that Philo is consistent throughout the work, and that Philo *is* Hume, but that the deism which Hume advocates is considerably more than ‘minimalist,’ involving a commitment to a supreme and perfect creator. It is importantly to be observed, however, that Philo's ‘reversal’ does not reverse the claim which the earlier sceptical Philo has made that there is no evidence of a moral, or good, character of the (supposed) creator/designer; very much, rather, the contrary.

construed as saying that Cleanthes' principles approach nearer to the truth than do *Demea's*.) Still another interpretive option, similar to the last, is that Hume is being essentially *literary* in his finale. We are to be left with a deliberately inconclusive 'lady or the tiger' pair of options—atheism or minimalist deism. Still another view is very interestingly and powerfully argued by Rich Foley.<sup>2</sup> Foley contends that Philo is *not* Hume's mouthpiece, that the inconsistency between refuting *any* version of an argument from design, which the earlier Philonian case does so overwhelmingly, and the revived design argument from Part XII, is so glaring that the adroit philosophical reader is to be seen as intended to catch it, and to connect the relevant dots—i.e., to apply the demonstrations of fallacy and empirically implausible or irrelevant considerations which Philo has earlier supplied to Philo's own latter-day enunciation of a version of the same. We were enrolled in a course of study of natural religion, and by the time Part XII arrives, we have reached graduate school, and are now well-grounded atheists, equipped to put our lessons to work.

Quite a number of options, then.<sup>3</sup> Which if any of them is right? I myself am drawn to an interpretation which will yield a consistent Philo, at least after a fashion, and produce a philosophically honest, interesting, but more *complicated* Hume than is sometimes seen. Some of the features of this position's complexity will involve features, and considerations, of or for argumentation theory. In my sublime ignorance of the latter I simply don't know whether anyone identifies the features or considerations to which I refer. I hope that they do, and that I will be able to receive instruction and illumination on the matter. At any rate, *if* I am right, this feature or consideration will be able to be seen in at least two or three other important places in Hume's philosophical work, and will have significant consequences for aspects of its overall interpretation.

There is, I believe, a mode of argumentation which might usefully be styled *hyperbolic argument*. The latter consists in providing 'raised bar' argumentation, where

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<sup>2</sup> Rich Foley, "Unnatural Religion: Indoctrination and Philo's Reversal in Hume's *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*," *Hume Studies*, vol. 32, no. 1, April 2006, 83-112. Among the many virtues of this important essay are Foley's detailed review of the huge secondary literature on whether Philo is Hume, and on alternative attempts to explain the meaning of Philo's 'reversal' in Part XII, and the implications of XII-2-5 for the interpretation of the *Dialogues* as a whole.

<sup>3</sup> Still another, which has had its advocates, is that for Hume theistic conviction of some sort is (what he calls, and which has for him considerable theoretical resonance) a *natural belief*—something we will just inevitably and inexpungibly believe, irrespective of evidence or its lack. While plausible perhaps for belief in an external world, other minds, causality, etc., this seems a considerably less persuasive view to take of belief in a God or gods.

Yet one more interpretive view to mention, at least in an endnote, is that of Simon Blackburn. He, in *How to Read Hume* (Granta, 2008—ch. 9) argues that Hume's aim in the *Dialogues* is primarily to argue that theistic metaphysical issues don't, or shouldn't (an unclarity in Blackburn's analysis is which of these is the right or the primary vector) *matter* for human life. So, one can affirm a minimalist deism, as Philo does in the end, and it is all really, for Hume, a matter of indifference, since no theistic stance which reason or evidence can support can justify, or even plausibly lead to, religious practice or socio-cultural or legal actions or policies. Sounds good; perhaps. Blackburn's interpretation, though, suffers from is/ought as well as other unclaritys. Philo either has or has not reversed himself, in Part XII, and the stance he takes in the latter section—and we would like to know just what that stance is—either does or does not represent Hume's own actual view. (Sometimes one has a view which one will nonetheless hold doesn't matter very much; and sometimes also of course there are issues on which one really doesn't have a view, one way or the other.)

the standards for the acceptability of premises, or of the success of an inductive inference, will be higher than ‘normally’ required or demanded or offered. Typically ‘hyperbolic argument’ will be mounted as critique of an adversary’s argument. The term ‘normally’ is, and deliberately, on a sliding or variable scale. Perhaps there are, for a community of reasoners, canons and requirements ‘suitable’ for everyday life, or for a scientific context, and still others appropriate for philosophy. Maybe within the latter some requirements are appropriate (i.e., held to be appropriate, by some community of reasoners) for moral debates, others for metaphysics or philosophy of science, and still others for the most rigorous epistemology, where ultra-radical scepticism is on the scene, a contender to be confronted. Sometimes a reasoner ‘doesn’t play by the rules.’ They insist—for one reason, or purpose, or other—that a higher standard, or bar, be operative, in a particular area of investigation, than has been usual. Sometimes such a reasoner has a missionary or ideal purpose: they think that the thinking in this area has been sloppy, and has led to woolly thinking or falsehood. Or they may be a cantankerous or playful or anarchic writer or thinker, who wants just to ‘stir things up’—an *emmerdeur*, as one says in French. Or possibly, in some instances, the reasoner concerned thinks they (or someone) has come up with seriously good even if destructive, possibly sceptical-conclusion-reaching arguments which they *don’t know how to answer*, and don’t think anyone else does either, and which they want to lay on the table, because they are an honest reasoner, and the argument or arguments are relevant to a matter at hand. One won’t (or may not) accept their conclusions; but one also won’t know what to say about them. One will lay them out, present them in their full power without pretending that they are spurious or fallacious or other than devastating; and then move on, perhaps indicating while or soon after doing so what one’s real view is on the matter about which a devastating result was reached (or perhaps not). Although there may possibly be a case for an ‘*emmerdeur*’ Hume, I will suggest that Hume is (on particular occasions) more plausibly interpreted as a hyperbolic reasoner of this latter kind.

If Hume is a philosopher who engages, sometimes at least, in hyperbolic argumentation, there is one particularly natural place in his writings to see him doing this: namely, in the famous (for some, infamous) sceptical sections of *A Treatise of Human Nature*.<sup>4</sup> They too pose a puzzle. The work starts out with a declared intention of producing a ‘science of man’—a Newton-like scientific psychology. Along the way we encounter argumentation which, if sound, would make it impossible that there be knowledge, including scientific knowledge, of anything beyond an immediate sensory state. Hume interpreters ask here too: what gives? And produce a (somewhat bewildering) variety of answers. If Hume is engaging here in hyperbolic argumentation, these sections, and what he is doing, may make (at least greater) sense. He is exploring human cognition, these ideas and arguments come to mind, they are relevant, and he thinks no one (including himself) has any idea how to refute them. He also doesn’t believe their conclusions; and settles on an allegedly middle-ground position he calls mitigated (or Academic) scepticism—which in fact would be no more defensible than would the most dogmatic rationalist position if the *really* sceptical arguments had been

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<sup>4</sup> They occur in Part IV of Book I of the *Treatise* (‘Of the sceptical and other systems of philosophy’), but above all in its first two sections (‘Of scepticism with regard to reason’ and ‘Of scepticism with regard to the senses’).

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successful—but which Hume thinks will at least equip him with a suitably cautionary mantle of never-over-rash commitment.

Other issues in Hume's work in the *Treatise* and first *Enquiry* also come to mind for hyperbolic argumentation analysis. Hume—confusingly—seems some of the time to argue against so-called 'double-existence' theories of sense perception, according to which immediate objects of sensory experiences are 'images,' which may a little or a lot resemble actually existing external physical objects; and some of the time appears to accept just such a theory, which was the prevailing one, very notably among 'scientific' thinkers, in his day. Here too, I believe, there is a reasonable case for thinking that Hume is being 'arch,' at any rate hyperbolic, and that he is actually a 'double-existence' theorist. One *might*—here I at least would be more cautious—take a 'hyperbolic' stance also with regard to apparent Humean scepticism about 'hidden powers,' objective natural necessities, selves, or induction. (Some Hume scholars definitely do reject Humean scepticism on one or more of these items; commonly they profess simply not to see anything other than merely superficial appearances of scepticism in the relevant places in Hume's texts. I recommend the 'hyperbolic' approach to them. That said, I for my part think that Hume *really* is sceptical about some, perhaps most of the listed things.)

### 4. CONCLUSION

Back to the *Dialogues*. I suggest that hyperbolic argumentation is at work (at play?) here, as far as Hume is concerned, in the earlier Philonian sections. It is (just) *hyperbolic*—exaggerated—not wholly spurious, or fallacious. The straight goods, as Hume sees it, are there in Part XII. A truncated, minimalist version of an argument from design is cogent (Hume thinks, and has his mouthpiece, Philo, say). Hume is wrong so to think; this time he should have hearkened more fully to the arguments he had produced for Philo earlier.

Why doesn't he? I think the answer, in a nut shell, is that Hume *hasn't* thought of, or anticipated, Darwinian natural selection. He is an honest inquirer, and he just can't see but that astonishingly involved intricate complexities of animal organs, adaptations of living things to habitats, and similar features of observable biology (and some also of physics), point to some sort of intelligence having been at work in their production. He finds it puzzling, is sure there is no good evidence for a moral component in the operation (Hume's God will be some sort of version of 'Mother Nature'), and most of it is and will remain impenetrable mystery.<sup>5</sup> But Philo—Hume—means it—hence the earlier argumentation—Philo's critique of Cleanthes' argument from design—is hyperbolic, as far as the sincere Hume is concerned. This will be entirely compatible with the structural analysis of that critique, which Professor Finocchario provides. (It will be compatible also with the contrasting Barker analysis.) As a hyperbolic reasoner, Philo/Hume means to display flaws in Cleanthes' argument. They will seem to make the argument irreversibly or unrevisably flawed; what Philo/Hume really thinks is that this is not so, and that a suitably scaled down version, which will get only a somewhat modest part of what a theist wants, will (inductively) succeed, as Philo will affirm in Part XII.

[Link to paper](#)

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<sup>5</sup> This line of interpretation is similar to the one taken by Daniel C. Dennett, *Darwin's Dangerous Idea* (Simon and Schuster, 1995), pp. 28-34 ("Hume's Close Encounter").