

## Comments on Michael Jacovides' Paper "Hume and the Rotting Turnip"

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Stanley Tweyman

Faculty of Liberal Arts & Professional Studies, Department of Humanities

York University

Vanier College, Room 233

4700 Keele Street

Toronto, ON M3J 1P3, Canada

Email: stweyman@yorku.ca

### Abstract:

In Part 12 of David Hume's, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, Professor Jacovides attempts to explain how the Rotting Turnip explains the generation of life; and who the various characters mentioned in this Part—Philo, Cleanthes, Demea, the atheist, the theist, dogmatists, sceptics—actually represent. In my paper, I show that the Rotting Turnip cannot explain the generation of life, and that Jacovides' attempt to identify which (actual) philosophers hold what positions in the *Dialogues* does not shed any light on the structure of this work, and the philosophic roles that the speakers—particularly Cleanthes and Philo—play in reaching the final dictum articulated by Philo in the penultimate paragraph in Part 12.

**Keywords:** Rotting Turnip, Design Argument, atheist sceptic, dogmatist, extreme consequent scepticism

Professor Michael Jacovides' paper is somewhat long, and I do not have the time here to address many of the points that he makes. Instead, I will confine myself to his argument in what he calls 'The Rotting Turnip Paragraph', the point at which Hume focusses on the theist and the atheist. Michael spends considerable time trying to figure out who the 'atheist' and the 'theist' are in this paragraph. And he concludes that the atheist is the atheists that Hume met in the 1760's, because they appealed to rotting vegetation as an explanation of the generation of life. Michael offers no more than this on the topic, and, consequently, I find myself somewhat bewildered, namely, as to how rotting vegetation explains the generation of life. Or even, why Michael thinks that the rotting vegetation comment in the *Dialogues* is relevant to an explanation of the generation of life. In fact, 'the rotting of the turnip' is grouped together with 'the generation of an animal' and 'the structure of human thought', for the sole purpose of pointing out to the atheist that "from the coherence and apparent sympathy in all the parts of the world, there [is] a certain degree of analogy among all the operations of nature, in every situation and in every age; whether the rotting of a turnip, the generation of an animal, and the structure of human thought be not

energies that probably bear some remote analogy to each other...(D 176) In other words, Hume is intent on showing that in all design, whether the design pertains to generation, decay, or to the structure of human thought, the same essential features must be present, namely, coherence and apparent sympathy in all the parts of the world.

One further point about this paragraph. Michael thinks that when Philo attempts to reconcile the theist and the atheist, that the theist of the turnip paragraph is not Cleanthes, but Demea. Now, the problem with Demea in this context, as I see it, is that Demea's avowed mysticism prevents him (except in Part 9, when he defends the Cosmological-Ontological Argument) from accepting that God is even the least bit knowable. In the opening paragraph in Part 2, Demea says the following to Cleanthes:

I must own, Cleanthes, said Demea, that nothing can surprise me, than the light in which you have all along, put this argument. By the whole tenor of your discourse, one would imagine that you were maintain the being of God, against the cavils of atheists and infidels...But this, I hope, is not, by any means a question among us...The question is not concerning the Being, but the Nature of God. This I affirm, from the infirmities of human understanding, to be altogether incomprehensible and unknown to us...And next to the impiety of denying his existence, is the temerity of prying into his nature and essence, decrees and attributes. (D 107)

On Michael's view, Demea must have changed his position somewhat on the knowability of God, as the dialogue continues. That this is not the case, can be learned from the final paragraph in Part 11. Pamphilus, the narrator of the dialogue, says there of Demea: "But I could observe that Demea did not at all relish the latter part of the discourse; and he took occasion soon after, on some pretense or other, to leave the company. (D171) Now, if Philo's intent is to reconcile the theist and atheist in Part 12, and if the theist in Part 12 is, as Michael urges, Demea, then, surely, Philo would have encouraged Demea to stay for the final part of the dialogue. But Philo is entirely silent on Demea's departure at the end of Part 11. Therefore, it is most unlikely that Demea is the theist Philo is addressing in Part 12.

In the part of the debate that we are now discussing in Part 12, Hume attempts at least a partial reconciliation between the theist and the atheist on the topic of the divine mind. How to explain that Philo's attention now turns to the theist and the atheist? I submit that the shift to the theist and the atheist is not a move away from the characters, Cleanthes and Philo. The theist represents the Cleanthes-type believer, and the atheist represents the sceptic, given that their atheism "is only nominally so, and can never possibly be in earnest" (D.176). The importance of the shift, therefore, is to move the debate away from the two disputants, Cleanthes and Philo, and render the reconciliation between different *philosophical* positions, each philosophical position represented by Cleanthes and Philo respectively. Similarly, in a footnote in Part 12 of the

*Dialogues* (footnote 18, the only passage in which Hume speaks in his own person) the dispute is held to be between the dogmatists and the sceptics.

It seems evident, that the dispute between the sceptics and dogmatists is entirely verbal, or at least regards only the degrees of doubt and assurance, which we ought to indulge with regard to all reasoning: And such disputes are commonly, at the bottom, verbal, and admit not of any precise determination. No philosophical dogmatist denies that there are difficulties both with regard to the senses and to all science, and that these difficulties are in a regular, logical method, absolutely insolvable. No sceptic denies that we lie under an absolute necessity, notwithstanding these difficulties, of thinking, and believing, and reasoning with regard to all kinds of subjects, and even of frequently assenting with confidence and security. The only difference, then, between these sects, if they merit that name, is, that the sceptic, from habit, caprice, or inclination, insists most on the difficulties; the dogmatist, for like reasons, on the necessity. (D 177)

Cleanthes fits Hume's definition of the dogmatist offered in the *First Enquiry*: "...while they see objects only on one side, and have no idea of any counterpoising argument, they throw themselves precipitately into those principles, to which they are inclined; nor have they any indulgence for those who entertain opposite sentiments". (E. 161) In this regard, it is instructive to recall what Cleanthes states in the very last paragraph of Part 1 of the *Dialogues*:

...[S]urely, nothing can afford a stronger presumption, that any set of principles are true, and ought to be embraced, than to observe, that they tend to the confirmation of true religion, and serve to confound the cavils of atheists, libertines and free thinkers of all denominations.

Cleanthes insists that a set of principles is true, provided that they tend to the confirmation of true religion (presumably, a version of Christianity): accordingly, he sees objects only on one side, and does not consider counterpoising arguments. It is clear that Cleanthes fits Hume's description of a dogmatist.

The shift in footnote 18 in Part 12, once again, moves the debate away from the two disputants, Cleanthes and Philo, and renders the reconciliation between different philosophical positions. This appears to be Hume's goal: to reconcile different philosophical positions (atheist and theist; sceptics and dogmatists), and, therefore, to go beyond the individual thinkers in the dialogue. Cleanthes can now be understood to be variously classified as a theist and a dogmatist, while Philo can be variously described as a (nominal) atheist and a sceptic.

While I do not have time or space here to provide a full accounting of my views on Part 12, I do want to say that the structure of the *Dialogues* appears to me to follow what Hume has to

offer in Section XII of the *First Enquiry*, where he urges that the best antidote to dogmatism is 'extreme consequent scepticism', through which the principles utilized by the dogmatist can be shown to support a number of conclusions-conclusions which are unacceptable to the dogmatist. Once the dogmatist has been shown, through extreme consequent sceptical arguments, that their principles are unable to support the position for which they have argued, and they are brought to a position of indifference (see the final paragraph in Part 8, in which Philo urges that "A total suspense of judgement is here our only reasonable resource"), it is the role of the mitigated sceptic, to "correct" the "undistinguished" doubts generated by the extreme consequent sceptic, through "common sense and reflection" (*Enquiry*, 161). Mitigated scepticism is contrasted by Hume with dogmatism, and it is pyrrhonian doubts which can turn the dogmatist into a mitigated sceptic. On my reading of the dialogues, Cleanthes is the dogmatist; Philo in Parts 1 through 8 is the extreme consequent sceptic; and in Part 12, both Philo and Cleanthes are brought to the position of 'mitigated scepticism', culminating in the final dictum, *that the cause or causes of order in the universe probably bear some remote analogy to human intelligence.* (D 114)

In conclusion, I would urge that Michael's attempt to identify which (actual) philosophers hold what positions in the *Dialogues* does not shed any light on the structure of the *Dialogues*, and the philosophic roles that the speakers-particularly Cleanthes and Philo-play in reaching the final dictum cited above. It is more fruitful, I suggest, to attempt to connect the characters and discussion in the *Dialogues* to other of Hume's writings, particularly Section XII of the *First Enquiry*.

## References

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