

A Critical Assessment of Professor Todd Ryan's, "Philo on the 'Incomprehensible Nature of the Supreme Being' in *Dialogues 2*"

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I begin my comments by acknowledging that Professor Ryan is correct when he states early in his paper that Philo makes common cause with Demea by arguing that philosophical reflection can yield no knowledge of the nature or essence of the divine being. Ryan asserts that Philo's defense of this claim, as set out in the third and fourth paragraphs in Part 2, has not received the attention it deserves from commentators. This, according to Ryan, is surprising, since, if Philo is successful here, he will have effectively shut down the project of natural theology, before it can even begin. Ryan goes further, citing my work, *Scepticism and Belief in Hume's Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1986) to say that Philo's challenge receives no direct answer from Cleanthes. Instead, Cleanthes proceeds directly to formulate his version of the Argument from Design. Ryan concludes his introductory remarks by asserting that, in these two paragraphs, Philo offers not one, but two, distinct arguments for the conclusion that we can achieve no strictly philosophical knowledge of the nature of God. He then proceeds to flesh out these two arguments, and attempts to show that neither of Philo's objections is ultimately telling against Cleanthes' experimental natural theology.

According to Ryan, Philo's first argument ("No Pure Perfections Argument", Ryan's phrase) concerns the fact that we can have no knowledge of the nature of God. Ryan cites the following passage spoken by Philo:

[The original cause of this universe], we call GOD; and piously ascribe to him every species of perfection... But as all perfection is entirely relative, we ought never to imagine, that we comprehend the attributes of this divine Being, or to suppose, that his perfections have any analogy or likeness to the perfections of a human creature. Wisdom, thought, design, knowledge; these we justly ascribe to him; because these words are honourable among men, and we have no other language or other conceptions, by which we can express our adoration of him. But let us beware, lest we think, that our ideas any wise correspond to his perfections, or that his attributes have any resemblance to these qualities among men. (D. 108)

Much of Ryan's paper is focused on this argument of Philo's. Ryan claims that the roots of Philo's argument are to be found in Anselm's philosophy.

Why should the observation that all perfection is relative serve as a caution against the presumption that we "comprehend the divine attributes"? I think we can understand Philo's argument as follows. One prominent answer to the question of how we might come to know the divine nature was to employ a method that has come to be known as *perfect*

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All references to David Hume's *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* are to the Stanley Tweyman edition, edited and with an introduction, Routledge, 1991, London and New York.

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being theology. The method is most closely associated with Anselm, but was adopted in one form or another by a host of medieval and early modern thinkers.¹ The method takes as its starting point the concept of God as the greatest conceivable or supremely perfect being. One then attempts to provide greater specificity by identifying what came to be known “pure perfections” (*perfectiones simpliciter*)—that is, characteristics that it is better “in an unqualified sense” for the subject to have than to lack.² Anselm offers the following criterion for pure perfections: any attribute that it is better, as such, to have than not to have (“what it is absolutely better to be than not to be”) is to count as a genuine or pure perfection.³ Now, given the conception of God as supremely perfect being, we may confidently ascribe to him every attribute that is a pure perfection and deny of him any attribute that is not.⁴ In this way we are able both to form a concept of the divine nature and to arrive at genuine knowledge of that nature.⁵

Ryan is mistaken in connecting Philo's position to Anselm, for two reasons. First, when Hume is concerned with the views of another thinker, he typically mentions, or at least alludes to, that thinker, e.g., Bishop Berkeley on the topic of Abstract Ideas in the First Book of the *Treatise*, and Samuel Clarke and William Wollaston on the origin of moral distinctions in the Third Book of the *Treatise*. In the passage under consideration, there is no direct, or indirect, reference to Anselm, which weakens Ryan's case that Anselm is the philosopher that Hume has in mind here.

In the second place, just before Philo offers his first argument about the unknowability of the divine nature in the third paragraph in Part 2, reference is made by Demea to Nicolas Malebranche on the topic of the unknowability of the divine nature. This is, in part, what Demea says of Malebranche's position:

But lest you should think that my piety has here got the better of my philosophy, I shall support my opinion [of the unknowability of the divine attributes] ...by a very great authority...I shall confine myself, at present, to one equally celebrated for piety and philosophy. It is Father Malebranche, who I remember, thus expressed himself: “One ought not so much...to call God a spirit, in order to express positively what he is, as in order to signify that he is not matter. He is a being infinitely perfect: Of this we cannot doubt. But in the same manner as we ought not to imagine, even supposing him corporeal, that he is clothed with a human body, as the Anthropomorphites asserted...so neither ought we to imagine, that the spirit of God has human ideas, or bears *any* resemblance to our spirit...We ought rather to believe that as he comprehends the perfections of matter without being material...he comprehends also the perfections of created spirits, without being spirit, in the manner we conceive spirit: That his true name is *He that is*, or in other words, Being without restriction, all Being, the Being infinite and universal”. (D. 108)

It is important to understand that Philo expresses agreement with Malebranche's position: “After so great an authority, Demea, replied Philo, as that which you have produced, and a thousand more, which you might produce, it would appear ridiculous in me to add my sentiment or express my approbation of your doctrine” (D. 108). In other words, given Malebranche's stature on the topic of the unknowability of the divine nature, no further support for Malebranche's position is needed.

Now, in light of Philo's agreement with Malebranche on the unknowability of God's nature, and no reference to Anselm anywhere in the *Dialogues*, it is reasonable to conclude that it is Malebranche that Philo has in mind in the third paragraph in Part 2, when the latter says: “But as all perfection is entirely relative, we ought never to imagine, that we comprehend the attributes of this Divine Being, or to suppose, that his perfections have any

¹ References to Anselm's works are to Thomas Williams, ed., *Basic Writings* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2007).

² *Monologion* Ch. 15, 22. The term *perfectiones simpliciter* is from Scotus.

³ *Monologion* Ch. 15, 23.

⁴ Although Anselm pays some attention to potential incompatibilities between pure perfections (for example, between supremely just and merciful), he is not in general preoccupied with the question of compossibility as some later thinkers would be.

⁵ Notice that in the passage from the *Search After Truth* quoted by Demea, Malebranche affirms God's supreme perfection but warns against taking human mental attributes to be pure perfections.

analogy or likeness to the perfections of a human creature” (D. 108). How can we imagine, or comprehend, God’s perfections, when in light of Malebranche’s position, God comprehends the perfections of matter, without being material, and God comprehends the perfections of created spirits, without being spirit? In other words, the necessary condition for understanding God as a perfect being in a *relative* sense, namely, knowing that God resembles mind or matter (or anything else), is not available to us.

I now turn to Ryan’s “Argument from Empiricism” (as he calls it) discussion. The passage in question appears in the fourth paragraph of Part 2:

In reality, Cleanthes, continued he, there is no need of having recourse to that affected scepticism, so displeasing to you, in order to come at this determination. Our ideas reach no farther than our experience: We have no experience of divine attributes and operations; I need not conclude my syllogism; you can draw the inference yourself. And it is a pleasure to me (and I hope to you too) that just reasoning and sound piety here concur in the same conclusion, and both of them establish the adorably mysterious and incomprehensible nature of the Supreme Being. (D. 108)

Ryan holds that Philo is the one in error here, and that Philo’s objection poses no problem for Cleanthes, because (1) Cleanthes contends that the Argument from Design which he offers (D. 109) establishes a resemblance between the cause of the design of the world and the causes of the design of machines, and (2) on the basis of our immediate experience of our own minds, we are able to form some concept of the nature of the deity.

Let us look more closely at Ryan’s defense of his position. He asserts that

because the universe resembles human artifacts with respect to means to ends ordering, their respective causes must likewise resemble. Furthermore, on the basis of our immediate experience of our own minds, we are able to form some concept of the nature of the deity. (Ryan, 2021, p. 11)

Now, to accept what Ryan has written here, namely, that Philo’s objection poses no problem for Cleanthes, is to ignore Philo’s attack on the Design Argument in Parts 2, 4 through 8, and 12. Specifically, Parts 6 through 8 of the *Dialogues* establish that means to ends relations and a coherence of parts are the basis not only of the design of machines, but also of animals and vegetables (organisms). Further, as we learn from Philo in Part 8, even if the universe were the result of a “blind unguided force”, or were “spun from the belly of a spider”, the basis of design would remain the same, in virtue of means to ends relation and a coherence of parts. In short, Philo argues that all design, regardless of the cause or origin of design, must involve the same structure of design, namely, means to ends relations and a coherence of parts; and there is no reason to conclude, on the basis of the presence of these features *alone* in any given instance of design, that the cause, or origin, of its design can be inferred by analogical reasoning. Further, Philo argues in Parts 6 through 8 that, given that the design of the world bears a greater resemblance to organisms than to machines, we should conclude, if we are to reason by analogy at all, that there is a greater resemblance between the cause of the design of the world and the cause of the design of organisms (generation or vegetation) than to the cause of the design of machines (intelligence). We can now see that Ryan’s argument in defense of Cleanthes in Part 2 ignores much of Philo’s critique of Cleanthes’ position. And, while Cleanthes proceeds with confidence in Part 2, by ignoring Philo’s Argument from Empiricism, the text reveals the Hume is not favorably disposed to the Design Argument, as presented by Cleanthes.

I should also like to point out that Ryan is in error, when he writes:

Cleanthes’ argument rests on the claim that we have immediate knowledge of certain attributes of our own minds, in particular “wisdom, thought, design, knowledge”, and that on the basis of these we can form a relative idea of God’s nature

as a mental being, based upon its resemblance to the corresponding human attributes. (Ryan, 2021, p. 11)

In fact, the phrase in this quote, cited by Ryan, “wisdom, thought, design, knowledge”, is spoken by Philo, not Cleanthes, and is in no way used by Philo to support Cleanthes’ position. Rather, as I pointed out earlier, Philo urges that we ascribe “wisdom, thought, design, knowledge” to God “because these words are honourable among men, and we have no other language or other conceptions, by which we can express our adoration of him”. Philo hastens to add: “But let us beware, lest we think, that our ideas any wise correspond to his perfections, or that his attributes have any resemblance to these qualities among men” (D. 108). Ryan had already quoted this passage, when he presented Philo’s argument for the unknowability of God’s nature (Pages 2-3 in his paper); so, it is bewildering as to why he would, later in his paper, attribute the quote to Cleanthes!

Two further comments on Ryan’s paper. (1) On Pages 1-2 of his paper, Ryan recognizes that, following Philo’s challenge against the knowability of God’s nature in Paragraphs 3 and 4 in Part 2, his challenge receives no direct answer from Cleanthes. Rather, Cleanthes proceeds, without further comment, to formulate his version of the Design Argument. Ryan goes on to say that my view of this situation is that Cleanthes’ failure to provide an explicit response might be taken to suggest that he has nothing to say in reply, and that Philo has scored a significant point in favor of scepticism, before the case for experimental theism has even been stated: “Indeed, such seems to be the view of Tweyman himself, who argues that in this passage” (Paragraphs 3 and 4 in Part 2), Philo “clinches his sceptical stand regarding knowledge of divine attributes” and does so “in traditional Humean fashion”. Now, I still hold that, in this passage, Philo clinches his *sceptical* stand on the topic, and that he does so in traditional Humean fashion. However, my book also reveals that Cleanthes has much to say in reply to Philo, *but not by way of a rebuttal of Paragraphs 3 and 4 in Part 2, but by a proposed scientific approach*, which Cleanthes first introduces in Part 1, when he argues that natural theology, in its attempt to know God’s nature, should proceed as natural science proceeds, when the latter attempts to know scientific objects which our senses are unable to perceive:

...[T]he refined and philosophical sceptics fall into an inconsistency of an opposite nature. They push their researches into the most abstruse corners of science; and their assent attends them in every step, proportioned to the evidence, which they meet with. They are even obliged to acknowledge, that the most abstruse and remote objects are those which are best explained by philosophy. Light is in reality anatomized: The true system of the heavenly bodies is discovered and ascertained...These sceptics, therefore, are obliged in every question, to consider each particular evidence apart, and proportion their assent to the precise degree of evidence which occurs. This is their practice in all natural, mathematical, moral, and political science. And why not the same, I ask, in the theological and religious? Why must conclusions of this nature be alone rejected on the general presumption of the insufficiency of human reason, without any particular discussion of evidence? Is not such an unequal conduct a plain proof of prejudice and passion? (D. 103)

In other words, Cleanthes regards natural theology as a further branch of science, along with physics and chemistry, etc. Cleanthes wants to get on with it, namely, with the analogical Argument from Design; for if this argument is successful, then he will have established that we do not require impressions of God’s attributes in order to understand (some of) God’s attributes. In his version of the Argument from Design, Cleanthes argues that the intelligence of God (the cause of the design of the world) can be inferred analogically, once we understand the similarities or resemblances between the design of the world and the design of machines, in virtue of means to ends relations and a coherence of parts. And, if Philo does not find Cleanthes’ Argument from Design convincing, then, according to the latter at the beginning of Part 3, the fault lies in Philo’s prejudice, not in the Design Argument. Cleanthes urges in the opening paragraph of Part 3, that Philo’s objections are “are no better

than the abstruse cavils of those philosophers, who denied motion; and ought to be refuted in the same manner, by illustrations, examples, and instances, rather than by serious argument and philosophy" (D. 117). Hence, the "Articulate Voice" and "Living Vegetable Library" illustrations are presented by Cleanthes with a view to unprejudicing Philo regarding Cleanthes' anthropomorphism. (How Cleanthes seeks to accomplish this through his two illustrative analogies goes well beyond the scope of this paper.)

(2) My second comment concerns Philo's "No Pure Perfections Argument", which I addressed earlier, when I showed that when Philo argues that we cannot understand God as a perfect being, it is Malebranche's position on which Philo is focusing, and not Anselm's position. But, I now want to offer an additional reason beyond what I argued in (1) above, as to why this does not stop Cleanthes from proceeding beyond Paragraphs 3 and 4 in Part 2 of the *Dialogues*. One passage, in particular, is relevant to my argument. It appears in the conclusion of Cleanthes' version of the Argument from Design. In this passage, Cleanthes asserts:

Since therefore the effects resemble each other, we are led to infer, by all the rules of analogy, that the causes also resemble; and that *the Author of Nature is somewhat similar to the mind of man; though possessed of much larger faculties, proportioned to the grandeur of the work, which he has executed.* By this argument *a posteriori*, and by this argument alone, do we prove at once the existence of a Deity, and his similarity to human mind and intelligence. (D. 109, my italics)

Notice that Cleanthes' Design Argument makes no reference to the perfections of God, or to God as a perfect being, but only to the fact that God's mind "is somewhat similar to our mind", and that God's mind is "proportioned to the grandeur of the work, which he has executed". Since his version of the Design Argument does not reference God as a perfect being, Cleanthes does not think that a response to Philo on this matter is appropriate or needed. Again, if I am correct about this, then it is somewhat bewildering as to why Ryan spends so much time on the concern in Paragraphs 3 and 4 of understanding God as a perfect being.

In the first paragraph in Part 11, Cleanthes acknowledges that he is prepared to give up the claim, introduced in Part 10, that God is an infinitely perfect being. The passage is in response to Philo's argument in Part 10, which Cleanthes accepts, that the hypothesis of an infinitely powerful and benevolent Designer cannot account for the mixture of good and evil in the design of the world. At the beginning of Part 11, Cleanthes realizes that he must give up one (or both) of the conjuncts in his hypothesis in Part 10, that is, he must give up the claim that God is an infinitely perfect powerful being, or he must give up the claim that God is benevolent. Since his main concern in Parts 10 and 11 is to establish the benevolence of the Designer of the world, he gives up the claim that God is an infinitely perfect powerful being. Part 11 opens with this concession:

I scruple not to allow, said Cleanthes, that I have been apt to suspect the frequent repletion of the word, infinite, which we meet with in all theological writers, to savour more of panegyric than of philosophy, and that any purposes of reasoning, and even of religion, would be better served, were we to rest contented with more accurate and more moderate expressions. The terms, *admirable, excellent, superlatively great, wise, and holy*, these sufficiently fill the imaginations of men; and any thing beyond, besides that it leads into absurdities, has no influence on the affections or sentiments. (D 161) He then proceeds to propose a new hypothesis regarding the cause of the design of the world:

But supposing the Author of Nature to be finitely perfect, though far exceeding mankind; a satisfactory account may then be given of natural and moral evil, and every untoward phenomenon be explained and adjusted. A less evil may then be chosen, in order to avoid a greater: Inconveniences be submitted to, in order to reach a desirable end: And in a word, benevolence, regulated by wisdom, and limited by necessity, may produce just such a world as the present. (D. 161)

So, whether we examine the conclusion of Cleanthes' Argument from Design in Part 2, or his position on God's nature in the first paragraph in Part 11, we find that, contrary to Ryan's claim, God is not characterized as

an infinitely powerful perfect being. Hence, Ryan's reference to Anselm's view on God as a perfect being in the context of Cleanthes' position on God, once again, seems to be off the mark.

My overall impression of Ryan's paper is that it is too narrowly focused—a mere two paragraphs in Part 2 of the *Dialogues*—and, as a result, much in the *Dialogues* that can assist with understanding these passages is ignored, or not deemed relevant by him.