

Dan Ports

2002/09/19

21L.448

Hume's *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* is a philosophical discussion between three characters: Demea, a traditional theist; Cleanthes, a natural theologian; and Philo, a sceptic. The three share a belief in some form of deity, but disagree as to its characteristics. Cleanthes makes a claim that the world must have been the creation of a deity similar in mind to a human, justifying it with a comparison between the world and a machine.

Cleanthes suggests that the world has a sufficiently complex design that it must have been created with a purpose, and thus one can begin to make inferences about the entity that created it. He asserts that the world is "nothing but one great machine, subdivided into an infinite number of lesser machines, which again admit of subdivisions, to a degree beyond what human senses and faculties can trace and explain" (53). By analogy, he claims, these similarities between nature and a machine can be extended to suppose they have not only similar designs but also similar origins. This implies not only that there is a creator of nature but that "the author of nature is somewhat similar to the mind of man" in that he shares the traits of "human design, thought, wisdom, and intelligence" (53). He later makes a similar argument concerning the structure of the human eye: it is a complex organ that serves a purpose, so "the most obvious conclusion surely is in favor of design" and "the idea of a contriver" (65). In essence, he argues that the elements of nature resemble creations designed by humans, so they must have been created by a deity with human-like attributes.

The other two characters assert that there are problems with Cleanthes' argument. Philo challenges Cleanthes' notions of the nature of the universe, while Demea challenges his assumptions about the creator. Philo claims that man's understanding of nature is so limited that one cannot draw any inferences from such limited knowledge. The "great disproportion" in scale between machines and the universe as a whole is so vast that any conclusions cannot "be transferred from parts to the whole," just as understanding a hair cannot lead to understanding of a man (58). It is arrogant, he claims, to assume that Cleanthes' incomplete knowledge allows him to

draw conclusions about nature or its creator. Demea makes a somewhat similar argument that Cleanthes cannot understand the deity enough to make claims about his nature. Cleanthes ascribes the human characteristics of thought and design to the deity, but Demea insists that “so near an approach we never surely can make to the deity. His ways are not our ways. His attributes are perfect, but incomprehensible.” (67). Much as Philo considers it overconfident to claim understanding of nature, Demea claims it is “presumptuous” to “imagine we comprehend the deity” (67).