

Hume's Critique of Natural Religion: A Thomistic Response

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David Hume's Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion is one of the most influential attacks on traditional religion by an enlightenment thinker. Hume focuses on "natural religion" or "natural theology," that is, conclusions about the existence and nature of God based not on revelation but on reason, attacking in particular two traditional arguments for God's existence, one a version of the teleological argument from design, the other a version of the cosmological argument from the contingency of the universe. Each of these attacks is heavily dependent on Hume's naïve empiricist epistemology, and they fail because his epistemology is so inadequate. Five centuries before Hume, Saint Thomas Aquinas had developed a natural theology based on a much more compelling, less naïve version of empiricism. Hume appears to have been completely unacquainted with Aquinas's thought, even though Aquinas is arguably the greatest natural theologian in the western tradition, and his philosophy provides the tools for assessing and cogently answering Hume's critique of "natural religion."

Introduction

In his famous *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, David Hume (1711-1776) lays out what he takes to be a devastating critique of "natural religion," by which he means belief in God based on reason as opposed to revelation. Hume reduces "natural religion" to two traditional arguments for God's existence, one a version of the cosmological argument from contingency, the other a version of the teleological argument from design. Hume's strategy is to "divide and conquer": in a brief critique, he dismisses the cosmological argument as completely fallacious and incoherent; this allows him to attack the teleological argument in isolation from the cosmological argument in a lengthy critique that leaves only an attenuated version of this argument standing. As Ernest Campbell Mossner points out in his authoritative biography of Hume, the teleological or "empirical" argument for God's existence "always remained for Hume the only philosophical argument [for God] worthy of serious consideration."¹ Hume's rhetorical strategy is to leave the reader with the (false) impression that the teleological argument must alone supply the premises for all natural theological conclusions about God; he then (easily) demonstrates that it collapses under this burden; thus (he thinks) he discredits traditional natural theology.

It is instructive to compare and contrast Hume's critique of natural theology with Thomas Aquinas' defense of it. Aquinas (1225-1274) anticipates many of the criticisms that Hume levels at natural theology, yet Hume shows little or no awareness of this fact. Aquinas' natural theology gives us the resources to begin constructing a cogent rebuttal of Hume's radical attack on classical theism. This paper will accordingly advance two theses, one historical, and one philosophical. The historical claim is that Hume was unacquainted with Aquinas' natural

¹ Ernest Campbell Mossner, *The Life of David Hume*, second edition (Oxford: Clarendon, 1980), 64.

theology. The philosophical thesis is that Aquinas' philosophy, especially his epistemology, is more cogent and sophisticated than Hume's and allows for a version of natural theology that can be defended against Hume's critique.

Part I: Hume on the Cosmological Argument from Contingency

Hume places the cosmological argument from contingency in the mouth of his character Demea, who describes it as an "infallible *a priori* demonstration":

1. It is absolutely impossible for anything to produce itself or be the cause of its own existence.
2. Thus, whatever exists must have a cause or reason of its existence. (from 1)
3. Either there is an infinite succession of causes and effects, without any ultimate cause at all, or there must be some ultimate cause that is necessarily existent.
4. If there is an infinite succession of causes and effects without any ultimate cause at all, then the existence of the whole chain itself has no cause.
5. But the existence of the whole chain must have a cause (from 2)
6. So, there is not an infinite succession of causes and effects without any ultimate cause at all. (from 4+5)
7. So, there is an ultimate cause that is necessarily existent, who carries the reason of his existence in himself, and who cannot be supposed not to exist without an express contradiction. (from 3+6)

In short, Demea maintains that the contingent universe must have a cause that adequately explains its existence; only a necessarily existent being can do this; thus, a necessary being, God, exists.²

Hume attacks this argument through the character of Cleanthes by means of two interlocking syllogisms:

1. Nothing that is distinctly conceivable implies a contradiction.
2. Whatever we conceive as existent, we can also conceive as non-existent.
3. Thus, there is no being whose non-existence implies a contradiction. (from 1+2)
4. Nothing is demonstrable unless the contrary implies a contradiction.
5. Thus, there is no being whose existence is demonstrable. (from 3+4)³

Hume, through Cleanthes, describes this counter-argument as "entirely decisive" and declares that he is "willing to rest the whole controversy upon it." Hume is here rejecting the very notion of a "necessary being." The key premise is the second: "Whatever we conceive as existent, we can also conceive as non-existent." As Hume puts it in his own gloss on this argument, "The words, therefore, *necessary existence* have no meaning; or, which is the same,

² David Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, ed. Richard H. Popkin, second ed. (Indianapolis/Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Co., 1998), 54-55 (Part IX).

³ Hume, *Dialogues*, 55 (Part IX).

none that is consistent.”⁴ In other words, “necessary existence” is an oxymoron, like “four-sided triangle” or “square circle.” Here Hume delineates what he takes to be a universal feature of all “matters of fact or existence,” as opposed to “relations of ideas.” In the *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, Hume writes, “The contrary of any matter of fact is still possible; because it can never imply a contradiction. . . . *That the sun will not rise to-morrow* is no less intelligible a proposition, and implies no more contradiction, than the affirmation, *that it will rise.*”⁵ Hume also writes, “But that CAESAR, or the angel Gabriel, or any being, never existed, may be a false proposition, but still is perfectly conceivable, and implies no contradiction.”⁶

Hume’s argument here is really quite radical. He is not only rejecting one version of the cosmological argument. He is rejecting as incoherent and unintelligible the classical theistic notion of God as a necessary being. If there is a God, Hume implies, he must exist contingently just as Caesar, or the angel Gabriel, or the sun exists contingently. Saint Anselm had argued that God must be a being that cannot even be thought not to exist, because a being that cannot be thought not to exist is greater than a being that can be thought not to exist, and God is a being than which no greater can be thought.⁷ Thomas Aquinas may have disagreed with Anselm’s ontological argument, but he agreed that God is a necessary being.⁸ Indeed, the proposition “God exists” is self-evident in itself (though not to us) for Aquinas, since the predicate is the same as the subject, that is, God is His own existence.⁹

So a lot hinges on Hume’s critique of the cosmological argument. If it is cogent, the classical theistic conception of God must be discarded as incoherent. Fortunately for the classical theist, Hume’s premise that “whatever is, can not be” is open to a decisive counter-attack.

In a doctrine known as “Hume’s Fork,” Hume asserts that “All objects of human reason or inquiry may naturally be divided into two kinds, to wit, *Relations of Ideas*, and *Matters of Fact.*”¹⁰ These two sorts of proposition are known by very different cognitive operations: Relations of Ideas are known either by intuition or by demonstration, while Matters of Fact or Existence are known by sensation, memory of past sensation, or inferences involving our knowledge of cause and effect, which is itself dependent on our sensory experience of the constant conjunction of certain events.

⁴ Hume, *Dialogues*, 55-56 (Part IX).

⁵ David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Eric Steinberg (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., 1977), 15 (Section IV, Part I).

⁶ Hume, *Enquiry*, 113 (Section XII, Part III).

⁷ Anselm, *Proslogion*, Chapter 3, in Anselm, *Monologion and Proslogion with the Replies of Gaunilo and Anselm*, trans. Thomas Williams (Indianapolis/Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Co., 1995), 100-101.

⁸ See Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, translated by the fathers of the English Dominican Province (London: Benziger Brothers, 1911; repr. Westminster, MD: Christian Classics, 1981), Part I, Question II, Article 3, Respondeo. (The “Third Way”).

⁹ Aquinas, *S.T.*, I, Q. II, A.1, Resp.

¹⁰ Hume, *Enquiry*, 15 (Section IV, Part I).

Thus, Hume's assertion that "Whatever we conceive as existent, we can also conceive as non-existent," must be either a Relation of Ideas, or a Matter of Fact. Hume himself does not tell us which it is, and we find evidence for either interpretation in his writings. Either way, it is open to effective counter-arguments.

Consider first the possibility that it is a relation of ideas. Nowhere does Hume give a demonstration of it, nor does he expressly claim that it is self-evident or intuitively certain. Nonetheless, he may well regard it as self-evident or intuitively certain, since he regards the idea of "necessary existence" as an oxymoron, and to deny an oxymoron is to affirm a tautology. For example, to deny that some bachelors are married (a contradiction) is to affirm that all bachelors are unmarried (a tautology). The mark of self-evidence is that the predicate of a self-evident statement is contained in the subject, as bachelorhood contains being unmarried. Is the quality of being conceivable as non-existent included in the very idea of being conceivable as existent? Does the very idea of existence contain the idea of possible non-existence? Think of what it means to exist, and ask yourself, does this meaning include being thinkable as non-existent? I suggest that the answer is no. The possibility of non-existence is not built into the idea of existence in the way that having three sides is built into the idea of a triangle, or being unmarried is built into the idea of being a bachelor (unless one arbitrarily restricts "being" to "sensible or material being," a possibility we shall consider in a moment).

Moreover, many important philosophers have held that things like necessity, eternity, and immutability are essentially connected to existence in the highest degree: Parmenides, Aristotle, Avicenna, Averroes, Anselm, Maimonides, Aquinas, Bonaventure, Scotus, Descartes, Spinoza, Leibniz, Hartshorne, and Malcom come to mind. Surely these men were not so foolish as to have contradicted themselves in some obvious way. Moreover, if "Whatever is may not be" expresses a tautologous relation of ideas, then it is not a matter of fact or existence: it would seem to be more about the meanings of terms than about the real world. As Hume himself writes, "Propositions of this kind [i.e. relations of ideas] are discoverable by the mere operation of thought, without dependence on what is anywhere existent in the universe. Though there never were a circle or triangle in nature, the truths, demonstrated by EUCLID, would forever retain their certainty and evidence."¹¹

Let us now consider the other possibility, that the statement "whatever *is*, can *not be*" is a matter of fact, not a relation of ideas. Hume's own illustrations of it—that it is not self-contradictory to deny that Caesar existed or that the sun will rise tomorrow—suggest that he may regard this premise as a Matter of Fact. As a matter of fact, all the existing things that I experience by my five senses exist contingently or dependently, not necessarily. Plants and animals begin to exist, then decay and die; mountains rise only to be eroded by wind and water; buildings and entire civilizations are erected only to crumble and collapse. Hence, whatever is, can not be.

¹¹ Hume, *Enquiry*, 15 (Section IV, Part I).

However, if the premise is an inductive generalization based on our own human experience, we may rightly criticize Hume for begging the question. Religious believers who affirm the existence of a creator God, a God who causes all else to exist while relying on nothing else for His own existence, are affirming a God who necessarily must stand outside of the created order, which is the only order that our physical senses experience. Whatever we can experience directly is just one thing among other things, a creature and not the creator, limited in its being as we are in ours, contingent and dependent in its being as we are in ours. To simply assume without argument that the only kind of existence is the kind that is contingent and reversible is precisely to beg the question in the argument with the theist, to presuppose the non-existence of the God of theism as a premise in one's anti-theist argument.

Hume's account of the idea of existence, in fact, expressly reduces it to the sensible and imaginable sort. Hume asserts that "we have no general idea of Existence, distinct from every particular Existence."¹² Hume's account of the origin of ideas holds that "All the perceptions of the human mind resolve themselves into two distinct kinds," impressions and ideas,¹³ and "all our ideas or more feeble perceptions are copies of our more lively ones [i.e. our impressions]."¹⁴ Hume denies that we have any general or abstract ideas: rather, every idea is a particular image of a thing, and those we call abstract are simply particular ideas annexed to a general term recalling to our minds others that are similar.¹⁵ In other words, for Hume, all the perceptions of the human mind are particular images. Our idea of existence "is the very same with the idea of what we conceive to be existent. . . . Whatever we conceive, we conceive to be existent."¹⁶ Hume is thus committed to saying that we literally have no conception of existence that is not sensible (an impression) or imaginable (an idea), and as such qualitatively and quantitatively determinate, limited, and contingent in its being. "Existence" or "being" is synonymous with being as revealed by our senses and preserved in our memory or imagination: "Any idea we please to form is the idea of a being; and the idea of a being is any idea we please to form,"¹⁷ and every one of our ideas is a copy of an impression derived from sense experience. Of course it follows that existence so conceived is not necessary existence: a taste, a smell, an emotion; a dog, a cat; a unicorn, a centaur, a triangle, a square: each can be thought of as beginning to exist and then as ceasing to exist. Each exists contingently. Each is limited. This is clearly question-begging, since it arbitrarily restricts "being" to the finite, contingent, created, sensible (or imaginable) order.

¹² David Hume, *A Letter from a Gentleman to his friend in Edinburgh*, in David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Eric Steinberg (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., 1977), 120. See also David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. Ernest C. Mossner (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin Books, 1969), 114-6 (Book I, Part II, Section VI, "Of the idea of existence and external existence").

¹³ Hume, *Treatise*, 49 (Book I, Part I, Section I, "Of the origin of our ideas").

¹⁴ Hume, *Enquiry*, p. 11 (Section II). See also Hume, *Treatise*, 49-55 (Book I, Part I, Section I: "Of the origin of our ideas").

¹⁵ Hume asserts "that there is no such thing as abstract or general ideas, properly speaking; but that all general ideas are, in reality, particular ones, attached to a general term, which recalls, upon occasion, other particular ones, that resemble, in certain circumstances, the idea present to the mind." *Enquiry*, 109 (Section XII, Part II, note). See also Hume, *Treatise*, 64-73 (Book I, Part I, Section VII, "Of abstract ideas").

¹⁶ Hume, *Treatise*, 115 (Book I, Part II, Section VI, "Of the idea of existence and external existence").

¹⁷ Hume, *Treatise*, 115 (Book I, Part II, Section VI, "Of the idea of existence and external existence").

There is another problem with thinking of “Whatever is, may not be” as an inductive generalization. If it is, then it falls prey to Hume’s own critique of induction: I can never be certain that the unobserved will resemble the observed, that the future will resemble the past. Maybe there is a kind of existence that I have not yet encountered such that its non-existence is inconceivable. After all, Hume writes that “all our experimental conclusions proceed on the supposition that the future will be conformable to the past,”¹⁸ and there is no non-circular way of proving this supposition. How then can Hume be so sure that there is not and never will be a counter-example to his claim that “whatever is, may *not* be?”

Another way of putting the point is that Hume’s premise that “whatever is, may *not* be” does not fit easily into either side of “Hume’s Fork:” it is not clearly either a “relation of ideas” or a “matter of fact and existence,” and this may be why Hume fails to classify it. Indeed, it seems to be a counter-example to Hume’s assertion that “All objects of human reason or inquiry may naturally be divided into two kinds, to wit, *Relations of Ideas*, and *Matters of Fact*.”¹⁹ But Hume’s Fork faces an even bigger problem: It is a counter-example to itself. It is not a relation of ideas, for it is not self-evident or intuitively certain, nor does Hume give a demonstration of it; moreover, if it were a relation of ideas, it would only be about the meanings of words and not about the real world. It is not a matter of fact or existence, for then it would be a mere inductive generalization, and as such it would fall prey to Hume’s critique of induction. In the famous concluding paragraph of his *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, Hume writes:

When we run over libraries, persuaded of these principles, what havoc must we make? If we take in our hand any volume; of divinity or school metaphysics, for instance: let us ask, *Does it contain any abstract reasoning concerning quantity or number?* No. *Does it contain any experimental reasoning concerning matter of fact or existence?* No. Commit it then to the flames: For it can contain nothing but sophistry and illusion.²⁰

By Hume’s criteria, his very own theory of knowledge contains nothing but sophistry and illusion and ought to be committed to the flames. Less flamboyantly: If Hume’s theory of knowledge is true, then Hume’s theory of knowledge is false; therefore, Hume’s theory of knowledge is false.

Hume never considers the possibility that the human mind can abstract some notions from matter altogether, including notions like being, unity, power, and act. This is precisely what Thomas Aquinas argues in his account of abstraction.²¹ Here Hume is hampered by his own naïve account of the origin of ideas, according to which all perceptions of the mind are either impressions or ideas, the latter being mere copies of the former. Indeed, as noted already, Hume denies that we have any general or abstract ideas at all, strictly speaking, but only particular ideas

¹⁸ Hume, *Enquiry*, 23 (Section IV, Part II).

¹⁹ Hume, *Enquiry*, 15 (Section IV, Part I).

²⁰ Hume, *Enquiry*, 114 (Section XII, Part III).

²¹ See Aquinas, *S.T.*, I, Q. 85, A. 1, Repl. Obj. 2.

attached to general terms. But Hume is confused. As A. J. Ayer observes, Hume “is handicapped by his false assumption that the use of a concept consists in the framing of an image.”²² Abstract ideas are not faint photographic images of sensible particulars.²³ A picture of a particular thing is just another particular thing. An abstracted concept or idea is a universal, not a particular. Triangularity is not an image of a triangle; it is what all and only triangles have in common, which cannot itself be a particular triangle. Any particular triangle has a color, for example, but triangularity does not. In other words, it makes no sense to call my idea of a thing a copy or image or representation of it, since my idea of it *is* its very intelligibility, and you cannot copy intelligibility in the way you can copy a particular thing (for instance, you can make a copy of a particular circle, but you cannot make a copy of circularity).

As Aquinas explains,

the things which belong to the species of a material thing, such as a stone, or a man, or a horse, can be thought of apart from the individualizing principles which do not belong to the notion of the species. This is what we mean by abstracting the universal from the particular, or the intelligible species from the phantasm; that is, by considering the nature of the species apart from its individual qualities represented by the phantasms.²⁴

Aquinas distinguishes three levels of abstraction, the first appropriate to the natural sciences like physics, the second to math and geometry, the third to metaphysics and natural theology.²⁵ He makes it clear that at the third level abstraction can be applied to notions like unity, power, act, and also to the notion of being itself:

We say that being and substance are separate from matter and motion not because it is of their nature to be without them, as it is of the nature of ass to be without reason, but because it is not of their nature to be in matter and motion, although sometimes they are in matter and motion, as animal abstracts from reason, although some animals are rational.²⁶

Aquinas’s sophisticated, multi-layered account of abstraction allows him to acknowledge that all human knowledge in some way originates in sense experience while avoiding Hume’s untenable claim that every idea is a *copy* of a sense impression. Hume’s naïve epistemology, in contrast, is mired in a plainly question-begging account of the origin of ideas. Hume asserts that

²² A. J. Ayer, *Hume: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 41.

²³ Hume writes: “All ideas, especially abstract ones, are naturally faint and obscure. . . . On the contrary, all impressions, that is, all sensations, either outward or inward, are strong and vivid . . .” Hume, *Enquiry*, 13 (Section II, emphasis added).

²⁴ Aquinas, *S.T.*, I, Q. 85, A. 1, Repl. Obj. 1.

²⁵ Aquinas, *S.T.*, I, Q. 85, A. 1, Repl. Obj. 2.

²⁶ Saint Thomas Aquinas, *The Division and Methods of the Sciences: Questions V and VI of his Commentary on the De Trinitate of Boethius*, Armand Maurer translator, third revised edition (Toronto: The Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1963), 48-9 (*In Boet. De Trin.*, Q. V, Art. 4, Reply to 5). Also Aquinas, *S.T.*, I, Q. 85, A. 1, Repl. Obj. 2.

those who disagree with his claim that every idea is a copy of a sense impression can refute this claim simply “by producing that idea, which, in their opinion, is not derived from this source.”²⁷ Yet Hume asserts only a few paragraphs later that any term can be proven to be meaningless by showing that its alleged meaning or idea cannot be traced back to an impression.²⁸ Hume writes, “Every idea is copied from some preceding impression or sentiment; and where we cannot find any impression, we may be certain that there is no idea.”²⁹ In other words: every idea is a copy of an impression because no one can produce a counter-example of an idea that is not a copy of an impression; yet anyone who produces such a counter-example is told that the term he is using is meaningless, since its meaning is not an idea that is a copy of an impression. Hume’s reasoning is thus straightforwardly circular.

We may conclude that Hume’s main critique of the cosmological argument is not “entirely decisive,” as he describes it, after all, for it rests on a questionable, and question-begging, conflation of “sensible or physical existence” with “existence in general,” as if the human mind were incapable of abstracting being in general from sensible and material conditions.

Hume advances several other criticisms of Demea’s version of the cosmological argument. He asks, “why may not the material universe be the necessarily existent Being . . . ?”³⁰ Hume shows no awareness of the arguments that Aquinas advances precisely on this point, demonstrating why the first cause of the cosmos cannot be a material being,³¹ or a composite of form and matter,³² or any sort of composite being.³³ Hume also suggests that an eternal succession of finite causes need not have a “general cause or first author,” asking, “How can anything that exists from eternity have a cause, since that relation implies a priority in time and a beginning of existence?”³⁴ Here Hume reveals his ignorance of the extensive medieval debates on the question of the eternity of the universe.³⁵ Aquinas writes, “by faith alone do we hold, and by no demonstration can it be proved, that the world did not always exist”³⁶ Thus, for Aquinas, demonstrations of the existence of a first cause of the universe are emphatically *not* demonstrations that the universe began to exist. When Aquinas speaks of the “first cause” of the universe, he means “first” causally, not chronologically.³⁷ Thus, Aquinas writes, “since God is very being by His own essence, created being must be His proper effect. . . . Now God causes

²⁷ Hume, *Enquiry*, 11-2 (Section II).

²⁸ Hume, *Enquiry*, 13 (Section II).

²⁹ Hume, *Enquiry*, 52 (Section VII).

³⁰ Hume, *Dialogues*, 56 (Part IX).

³¹ Aquinas, *S.T.*, I, Q. 3, A. 1.

³² Aquinas, *S.T.*, I, Q. 3, A. 2.

³³ Aquinas, *S.T.*, I, Q. 3, A. 7.

³⁴ Hume, *Dialogues*, 56 (Part IX).

³⁵ See Frederick Copleston, S.J., *A History of Philosophy*, Volume II, *Medieval Philosophy From Augustine to Duns Scotus* (New York: Doubleday/Image Books, 1962), 125, 203, 210, 219, 231, 236, 262f, 441.

³⁶ Aquinas, *S.T.*, I, Q. 46, A. 2, *Sed contra*.

³⁷ On the distinction between causal and chronological priority, see Michael Augros, *Who Designed the Designer? A Rediscovered Path to God’s Existence* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2015), 29-40, and Richard Taylor, *Metaphysics*, fourth edition (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1991), 103-4, 108.

this effect in things not only when they first begin to be, but as long as they are preserved in being; as light is caused in the air by the sun as long as the air remains illuminated.”³⁸ For Aquinas, then, there is no real distinction between God’s creation of the universe and God’s conservation of His creation in existence at every moment of its existence.

Hume’s assertion that causation “implies a priority in time and a beginning of existence” is no doubt related to his famous definition of “cause” as “an object followed by another, and whose appearance always conveys the thought to that other.”³⁹ This idea is in turn derived from the sentiment or impression in which we feel this customary transition from cause to effect.⁴⁰ Like his idea of being, Hume’s idea of causation remains bound by the limits of sensation and imagination. Aquinas, in contrast, employs his theory of abstraction, as we have seen, to arrive at notions of being and power (or cause) that are detached altogether from such limits.⁴¹

Hume further objects to the cosmological argument that, in a chain of causes and effects, if each explains what comes after it and is explained by what comes before it, it is “very unreasonable” to ask about the cause of the whole chain. “This is sufficiently explained in explaining the cause of the parts.”⁴² Here Hume seems to have forgotten his own observation that the non-existence of any physical being is as conceivable as its existence. From this it seems to follow that the non-existence of the whole set of physical objects is also conceivable. Of course, we must be cautious here about the fallacy of composition: just because each part of a whole has a certain property, it does not follow that the whole has that same property.⁴³ As Richard Taylor points out, “it is logically possible that the totality of all perishable things might itself be imperishable, and hence that the world might exist by its own nature, even though it is composed exclusively of things that are contingent.”⁴⁴ While this may be logically possible, Taylor is surely right to add that “it is not plausible.” After all, “there seems not to be the slightest difficulty in imagining that the world should never have existed in the first place.”⁴⁵ Aquinas observes of finite, natural beings that “their being is other than their essence,” and “their being is received and limited, because they have their being from another.”⁴⁶ Aquinas discusses the objection to theism that the existence of every natural thing might be traced only to some set of natural

³⁸ Aquinas, *S.T.*, I, Q. 8, A. 1, Respondeo. Descartes makes the same point in the third of his *Meditations*, noting that “preservation differs from creation solely by virtue of a distinction of reason.” René Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, trans. Donald A. Cress (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., 1979), 32.

³⁹ Hume, *Enquiry*, 51 (Section VII, Part II).

⁴⁰ Hume, *Enquiry*, 50 (Section VII, Part II).

⁴¹ Aquinas, *S.T.*, I, Q. 85, A. 1, Repl. Obj. 2.

⁴² Hume, *Dialogues*, 56 (Part IX).

⁴³ From the fact that each part of a building weighs less than ten pounds it does not follow that the whole building weighs less than ten pounds. On the other hand, if each part weighs more than one pound, has mass, is red, and is three-dimensional, we can be sure that the whole building has each of these properties. Thus, inferences from parts to whole can be fallacious or not, depending on the nature of the properties. See Patrick Hurley, *A Concise Introduction to Logic*, eighth edition (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth/Thomson Learning, 2003), 158-9.

⁴⁴ Taylor, *Metaphysics*, 106.

⁴⁵ Taylor, *Metaphysics*, 106.

⁴⁶ Thomas Aquinas, *On Being and Essence*, trans. Armand Maurer (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1968), 62, 65.

causes, without positing any supernatural cause.⁴⁷ His answer is terse: all things that can change and fail “must be traced back to an immovable and self-necessary first principle,” as demonstrated by the five ways.⁴⁸ In other words, we have no adequate answer to the question, “Why is there something rather than nothing?”, unless we posit a first cause of the universe that exists necessarily.

Part II: Hume on the Teleological Argument from Design

We turn now to Hume’s critique of the teleological argument from design, which he places in the mouth of his character Cleanthes, as follows:

1. The world is one great machine, with many intricate, interlocking parts, with a precise adjustment of means to ends.
2. The machine of nature resembles yet greatly exceeds in intricacy the machines made by human beings.
3. Similar effects must have similar causes.
4. So, “the Author of nature is somewhat similar to the mind of man, though possessed of much larger faculties”⁴⁹

Cleanthes concludes, “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.”

Speaking through his characters Demea and Philo, Hume advances several criticisms of this argument. (1) All our reasoning concerning cause and effect is based on past experience, but we have had no experience of the creation of worlds.⁵⁰ (2) The universe is finite, so it cannot prove the existence of an infinite author, since the cause ought to be proportioned to the effect.⁵¹ (3) The universe is imperfect, so it cannot prove the perfection of God.⁵² (4) Many men cooperate to build man-made machines like ships or houses, so the argument from design cannot prove the unity of God.⁵³ (5) The universe bears as much resemblance to an animal as to a man-made machine, so perhaps God is the soul of the universe, as the Stoics held, and not transcendent at all, and the universe is caused by generation rather than by reason or design.⁵⁴

Thomas Aquinas is aware of these objections and has answers to them. Aquinas presents a lengthy series of carefully crafted, interlocking arguments demonstrating the simplicity,⁵⁵

⁴⁷ Aquinas, *S.T.*, I, Q. 2, A. 3, Obj. 2.

⁴⁸ Aquinas, *S.T.*, I, Q. 2, A. 3, Reply Obj. 2.

⁴⁹ Hume, *Dialogues*, 15 (Part II).

⁵⁰ Hume, *Dialogues*, 18-22 (Part II).

⁵¹ Hume, *Dialogues*, 35 (Part V).

⁵² Hume, *Dialogues*, 35-36 (Part V), 58-76 (Parts X-XI).

⁵³ Hume, *Dialogues*, 36 (Part V).

⁵⁴ Hume, *Dialogues*, 39-43 (Part VI).

⁵⁵ Aquinas, *S.T.*, I, Q. 3.

perfection,⁵⁶ goodness,⁵⁷ infinity,⁵⁸ immutability,⁵⁹ eternity,⁶⁰ and unity⁶¹ of God. These arguments all rely, not on the fifth of the five ways, Aquinas' version of the teleological argument, but on first four of the five ways, which establish God as the unchanging cause of change, the uncaused first efficient cause, the necessary being, and the most true, good, noble, and real being. Aquinas would thus reject Hume's "divide and conquer" strategy: the teleological argument, and the God whose existence it establishes, cannot be understood (or criticized) in isolation from the first four ways. Hume seems to have believed that the teleological argument was meant to bear the whole weight of traditional natural theology, but this was not an assumption that Aquinas shared.⁶²

Part III: Aquinas on Analogy

Another important part of Thomistic thought for which Hume has no appreciation is the doctrine of analogy. The reader of Hume's *Dialogues* is repeatedly whipsawed between two extremes: on the one hand is Cleanthes, who is portrayed as a naïve "anthropomorphite,"⁶³ attributing to God a mind much like the human mind; on the other hand are Demea and Philo, who insist that God's nature is "altogether incomprehensible and unknown to us."⁶⁴ For Cleanthes, what is said of God and creatures is predicated univocally; for Philo and Demea, it is predicated equivocally. Nowhere does Hume's reader get any inkling that there is a mean between these two extremes, that of analogical predication. Aquinas grants that "between the finite and the infinite there is no proportion," and thus we cannot know God perfectly as He is in His essence, since "from effects not proportioned to the cause no perfect knowledge of that cause can be obtained."⁶⁵ Aquinas argues that, while in this life we cannot know the essence of God as it is in itself, we nonetheless can know that whatever good we attribute to creatures pre-exists in God, and in a higher way.⁶⁶

⁵⁶ Aquinas, *S.T.*, I, Q. 4.

⁵⁷ Aquinas, *S.T.*, I, Q. 6.

⁵⁸ Aquinas, *S.T.*, I, Q. 7.

⁵⁹ Aquinas, *S.T.*, I, Q. 9.

⁶⁰ Aquinas, *S.T.*, I, Q. 10.

⁶¹ Aquinas, *S.T.*, I, Q. 11.

⁶² I assume here that there is some substantial similarity between Hume's version of the argument from design and Aquinas' fifth way. Not all Aquinas experts would agree, however. Vernon Bourke, writing in 1967, asserted that most Thomists favor the view that the Five Ways are five formulations of one basic argument: Vernon Bourke, "Thomas Aquinas, St.," in Paul Edwards ed., *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Volume 8, (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., and London: Collier Macmillan Publishers, 1967), 110. Joseph Owens says of the fifth way, "The argument is hardly the one from design that has been made notorious by Kant and Paley." Joseph Owens, "Aquinas and the Five Ways," in John R. Catan ed., *St. Thomas Aquinas on the Existence of God: Collected Papers of Joseph Owens, C.Ss.R.* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1980), 137. Owens argues for the unity of the five ways, asserting that "the five ways are exemplifications of the same metaphysical procedure from accidentally possessed existence to its ultimate source, subsistent existence" (141). If Owens is right, then we have even more reason for rejecting Hume's apparent assumption that the "argument from design" as he states it is meant to bear the full weight of all natural theological conclusions about the nature of God.

⁶³ Hume, *Dialogues*, 30-31 (Part IV), 37 (Part V), 63 (Part X).

⁶⁴ Hume, *Dialogues*, 13 (Part II); cf. 14-15 (Part II), 35 (Part V), 80-81 (Part XII).

⁶⁵ Aquinas, *S.T.*, I, Q. 2, A. 2, Repl. Obj. 3.

⁶⁶ Aquinas, *S.T.*, I, Q. 13, A. 2.

Part IV: The Problem of Evil

One of Hume's central preoccupations in the *Dialogues* is to attack the teleological argument by highlighting the problem of evil: "Is [God] willing to prevent evil, but not able? Then is he impotent. Is he able, but not willing? Then is he malevolent. Is he both able and willing? Whence then is evil?"⁶⁷ Cleanthes, the defender of the teleological argument, answers this in two ways. His first answer "is to deny absolutely the misery and wickedness of man."⁶⁸ Philo demolishes this argument easily: the champion of the teleological argument must do more than show the "mere logical compatibility" of God's existence and the existence of evil. Rather, Philo points out to Cleanthes, "You must *prove* these pure, unmixed, and uncontrollable attributes [i.e. God's infinite power and goodness] from the present mixed and confused phenomena—and from these alone."⁶⁹ Cleanthes then gives a second answer to Philo's challenge, retreating from his claim that God is infinite and satisfying himself with affirming that God is "finitely perfect" and "superlatively great." Philo rejects this description of God on the grounds that evil is rooted in four features of nature that are in no way necessary and could easily be corrected even by a finite yet "superlatively great" creator: (1) Nature employs pains as well as pleasures to motivate animals, when pleasures alone would have sufficed. (2) Nature operates by general laws, when God could have chosen "particular volitions" instead, avoiding all suffering by means of such volitions. (3) Nature is extremely stingy in the distribution of powers and faculties, especially in distributing a (generally inadequate) propensity to industry and labor in human beings. (4) There is "inaccurate workmanship in all the springs and principles of the great machine of nature."⁷⁰

Like any theist, Aquinas is obliged to provide an account of how an infinitely good and powerful God could permit evil in His creation. However, there are several crucial features of Aquinas' natural theology that make him less vulnerable than Cleanthes in the face of a critique such as Philo's.

First, Aquinas' version of the teleological argument is much more cautious and limited in its claims than is Cleanthes' version. In his fifth way, Aquinas merely observes that "we see things which lack intelligence, such as natural bodies, act for an end." His evidence for this is that such bodies act "always, or nearly always, in the same way, so as to attain the best result."⁷¹ Aquinas has in mind the growth and development of plants and animals, but like his mentor Aristotle, he is well aware of the defects and monstrosities that make the phrase "or nearly always" necessary.⁷² In contrast, Cleanthes is much more effusive and unrestrained in stating the evidence of design in nature: "All these various machines, and even their most minute parts, are

⁶⁷ Hume, *Dialogues*, 63 (Part X).

⁶⁸ Hume, *Dialogues*, 64 (Part X).

⁶⁹ Hume, *Dialogues*, 66 (Part X).

⁷⁰ Hume, *Dialogues*, 67-74 (Part XI).

⁷¹ Aquinas, *S.T.*, I, Q. 2, A. 3, Respondeo.

⁷² See Aristotle, *Physics*, Book II, Chapter 8 (199a-199b).

adjusted to each other with an accuracy which ravishes into admiration all men who have ever contemplated them.”⁷³ Aquinas needs only to show that some natural things that lack intelligence appear to act for an end; Cleanthes needs to show a precise adjusting of means to ends that “ravishes into admiration” all who contemplate it. The latter task is clearly more daunting than the former.

Moreover, Cleanthes cannot rely on the cosmological argument to establish the goodness, perfection, or unity of God, since he is the main critic of this argument in the *Dialogues*. Thus, as noted above, Hume portrays the argument from design as standing on its own in establishing these attributes of the deity. Aquinas, as we have seen, faces no such artificial limitation. Aquinas accepts that philosophical conclusions about the existence and nature of God must be based on observations of the natural world—inferring the cause from the effects⁷⁴—but he would never accept that the goodness, perfection, or unity of the first cause can be inferred by means of the fifth way alone.

Aquinas handles the problem of evil in the classical Augustinian manner, by maintaining that “Since God is the highest good, He would not allow any evil to exist in His works, unless His omnipotence and goodness were such as to bring good even out of evil.”⁷⁵ In his discussion of divine providence, Aquinas considers the objection that “a wise provider excludes any defect or evil, as far as he can, from those over whom he has a care. But we see many evils existing in things. Either, then, God cannot hinder these, and thus is not omnipotent; or else He does not have care for everything.”⁷⁶ In his reply to this objection, Aquinas asserts that human and divine providence cannot be identical, since God’s providence is universal. Designing and sustaining an entire universe is very different from having care for some small portion of the cosmos for a limited time. It makes sense that God might allow the possibility of certain evils for the sake of other goods that could not otherwise exist. If all evil were prevented, much good would be absent from the universe. Thus, “a lion would cease to live, if there were no slaying of animals; and there would be no patience of martyrs if there were no tyrannical persecution.”⁷⁷ We might phrase Aquinas’ point as follows: when we attribute the virtue of providence to God and to human beings, we use the term “providence” analogically, not univocally.

This is not to say that, for Aquinas, God incorporates evil into His plan for the universe in order to enhance the goodness or beauty of the whole. As Eleonore Stump points out, for both Augustine and Aquinas, “God’s original plan for the world was that the world have in it only good and not evil. On the view that Augustine and Aquinas share, evil is first introduced into a good world created by a good God through the misuse of free will by creatures created good by

⁷³ Hume, *Dialogues*, 15 (Part II).

⁷⁴ Aquinas, *S.T.*, I, Q. 2, A. 1, Respondeo.

⁷⁵ Aquinas, *S.T.*, I, Q. 2, A. 3, Reply Obj. 1. For a contemporary Thomistic treatment of the problem of evil, see Eleonore Stump, *Wandering In Darkness: Narrative and the Problem of Suffering* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2010).

⁷⁶ Aquinas, *S.T.*, I, Q. 22, A. 2, Obj. 2.

⁷⁷ Aquinas, *S.T.*, I, Q. 22, A. 2, Reply Obj. 2.

God [note omitted].”⁷⁸ By creating rational creatures with free will, God created the possibility of evil, not because He willed the evil, but because he willed the friendship that only free, rational beings are capable of entering. As Stump puts it, God’s omnipotence and providential wisdom are such that “God is able to make a world with suffering in it even more beautiful than the world would have been had there been neither moral evil nor suffering.”⁷⁹ God does so, in part, by taking care of His “saints” (those who live in friendship with Him) for their own sakes, and not merely for the sake of others: “He takes care of them in such a way that he doesn’t allow any evil for them which he doesn’t turn into their good.”⁸⁰ Aquinas thus does not endorse the morally repulsive view that suffering has an aesthetic value for God, as if He were sacrificing individuals for the greater good of the whole.⁸¹

Hume expresses a preference for an occasionalist universe governed not by general laws, but by particular divine volitions, such that God would intervene whenever necessary to “exterminate all ill, wherever it were to be found, and produce all good.”⁸² This would be a universe in which no human agent exercises genuine responsibility. Human beings would remain eternal children, with no real responsibility for any outcome, and God would be the almighty, ever-hovering parent ensuring happy endings no matter what. Aquinas, in contrast, insists that part of God’s providential plan was to create human beings in His own image and likeness, “in so far as the image implies an intelligent being endowed with free-will and self-movement.”⁸³ A universe in which human beings have free will and genuine causal efficacy is a frightening one, no doubt, given what human beings are capable of, but it is also a universe of high drama in which each human life, and each human choice, can possess tremendous importance. It is also a universe in which human beings are genuinely free to accept or reject God’s offer of friendship, and for Aquinas, “the unending shared union of loving personal relationship with God is the best thing for human beings; the worst thing is its unending absence.”⁸⁴ Without freedom, such relationship is not possible, yet with freedom comes the possibility of evil, i.e., rejecting God’s offer of friendship. An infinitely good and powerful creator thus has good reason for creating a universe in which evil can arise.⁸⁵

Part V: Hume and Aquinas on Creation

After spending most of the *Dialogues* criticizing the teleological argument, in the concluding section, Hume somewhat surprisingly ends up endorsing a weakened version of the

⁷⁸ Stump, *Wandering in Darkness: Narrative and the Problem of Suffering*, 385.

⁷⁹ Stump, *Wandering In Darkness: Narrative and the Problem of Suffering*, 386.

⁸⁰ This quotation is from Aquinas’ commentary on St. Paul’s *Letter to the Romans* cited in Stump, *Wandering in Darkness: Narrative and the Problem of Suffering*, 385.

⁸¹ Stump, *Wandering in Darkness: Narrative and the Problem of Suffering*, 384.

⁸² Hume *Dialogues*, 70 (Part XI).

⁸³ Aquinas, *S.T.*, I-II, Prologue. On human free will, see also *S.T.*, I, Q. 83, A. 1. For Aquinas’ account of free will, see Eleonore Stump, *Aquinas* (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), 277-306, 389-404.

⁸⁴ Stump, *Wandering in Darkness: Narrative and the Problem of Suffering*, 388.

⁸⁵ See also Eleonore Stump, “The Problem of Evil” *Faith and Philosophy* 2, No. 4 (1985): 392-423, and Stump, *Aquinas*, 455-478.

argument. In contemplating nature, Hume writes, “A purpose, an intention, a design strikes everywhere the most careless, the most stupid thinker,” so that “the existence of a *Deity* is plainly ascertained by reason.”⁸⁶ However, the great gulf between our minds and that of this Deity is such as to render that Deity “incomprehensible” to us.⁸⁷ Hume concludes that “the whole of natural theology” can be summed up in “one simple, though somewhat ambiguous, at least undefined, proposition, *That the cause or causes of order in the universe probably bear some remote analogy to human intelligence...*”, a proposition that “affords no inference that affects human life.”⁸⁸

In the penultimate section of the *Dialogues*, however, Hume does venture a guess about the nature of the “cause or causes of the universe.” He observes that there are only four possible hypotheses concerning the first causes of the universe: that they are perfectly good; that they are perfectly malicious; that some are good and some malicious (as the Manichaeans believed); or that they have neither goodness nor malice. The first hypothesis is ruled out by the existence of evil in the world, the second by the existence of good, and the third by “the uniformity and steadiness” of the laws of nature. Hume’s conclusion: “The fourth, therefore, seems by far the most probable.”⁸⁹ Hume can therefore give no answer to the question of why the first cause or causes of the universe took the trouble to create or at least organize the universe at all. These causes bear some remote analogy to human intelligence, yet they act from no discernible motive. Neither malicious nor benevolent, they appear to be completely indifferent to human welfare. Why, then, did they take the trouble to create or design the cosmos? The act of creation for Hume is in the end unmotivated and thus incomprehensible.

Aquinas, in contrast, has no difficulty in giving a straightforward answer to the question of why God creates the universe: God does so out of love. Aquinas reasons that the existence of things is itself a good, and all things exist because God wills them to exist. “To every existing thing, then, God wills some good. Hence, since to love anything is nothing else than to will good to that thing, it is manifest that God loves everything that exists.”⁹⁰

Conclusion

A student of Aquinas who reads Hume’s *Dialogues* will recognize that Aquinas anticipates and answers virtually all the objections to natural theology that Hume raises. Aquinas’ epistemology, with its sophisticated account of abstraction, avoids the naïve “picture-thinking” of Hume. It also avoids begging the question by assuming an unnecessarily narrow account of being or causality. Aquinas repeatedly manifests his acquaintance with the naïve

⁸⁶ Hume, *Dialogues*, 77-80 (Part XII).

⁸⁷ Hume, *Dialogues*, 80 (Part XII).

⁸⁸ Hume, *Dialogues*, 88 (Part XII).

⁸⁹ Hume, *Dialogues*, 75 (Part XI).

⁹⁰ Aquinas, *S.T.*, I, Q. 20, A. 2, Respondeo. Of course, in creating, God loves not as creatures do, by responding to an already existing person and willing good to him or her; rather, “the love of God infuses and creates goodness.” Perhaps an analogy would be the way in which the love of a married couple causes the conception of an as yet non-existing child.

empiricism of those early Greek philosophers such as Democritus who, like Hume, conflated knowledge with sense-experience.⁹¹ Hume, in contrast, gives no sign of being acquainted with Aquinas' thought, especially his epistemology, but also his metaphysics, his doctrine of analogy, and his theodicy. Hume assumes that the teleological argument alone must bear the whole weight of reaching reason-based conclusions about the existence and nature of God, while Aquinas has good reasons for rejecting this unwarranted assumption, based as it is on Hume's failed critique of the cosmological argument.

It is more than a little incongruous that Hume should have embarked on an ambitious refutation of classical natural theology without first having studied what had been written on that subject five hundred years earlier by the greatest natural theologian in the history of Western philosophy.⁹²

⁹¹ E.g., Aquinas, *S.T.*, I, Q. 84, A. 6, Respondeo.

⁹² Hume's reading of the history of Western philosophy seems to have encompassed the ancients and the moderns but to have passed over the medievals altogether. See Mossner, *The Life of David Hume*, 35-66, 92-105. Mossner points out that Hume had a very negative opinion of "the Dark Ages" (47). Mossner also points out that the three perspectives articulated in the *Dialogues* were those of Bishop Butler (through the character Cleanthes), Samuel Clarke (as Demea), and Hume himself (as Philo) (319). This again confirms that Hume was not really engaged in any sort of dialogue with medieval natural theologians such as Aquinas.