

Lonergan and Hume III

Critique of Religion (1)

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I

Lonergan sometimes calls his epistemology the *fully critical position* on account of its total rejection of the naive realist notion that reality is an-already-out-there-now and that objectivity consists in sensory extroversion to this already-out-there-now. The residue of the naive realist notion is found in the empiricist assumption of a world of bodies 'out there' and in the Kantian assumption of things in themselves, or noumena, with the debilitating consequence for both that the real becomes unknowable since knowledge is confined either to sense data or sensible phenomena, i.e. appearances. By its rejection of naive realism the fully critical position denies the intelligibility of any mere matter of fact that is simply given in experience. It affirms that the real is what is understood on the basis of experience and affirmed in rationally grounded judgments. Besides the real there is nothing. But the real is, in its very constitution, intelligible. Therefore, besides the intelligible there is nothing. The universe is intelligible.

In a scientific age many would be willing to grant this much, since science itself seems to assume and support the notion of the universe's intelligibility, without seeing any reason for proceeding from this to an affirmation of God's existence. But the fully critical position demands an answer *in terms of itself* to the question of the universe's intelligibility. Science is unable to supply such an answer since science is methodologically restricted to investigating the intelligibility of the data of sense by erecting explanatory hypotheses that stand or fall by appeal to the data of sense. Science has its own autonomous realm – the explanation of sensible data. The question of God does not arise from the questioning of sensible data but from questioning our questioning, that is, when we take a global look at the process of coming to know and ask what are the implications of the mind's demand for explanation at the level of understanding and of the mind's demand for the unconditioned in its movement towards judgment. It follows that the question of God does not arise within the horizon of scientific investigation but rather arises as a legitimate extension of philosophical method: that is, when once philosophy, having establish-

ed the invariant process of coming to know, asks in response to the laws immanent in that process what conditions must obtain to make the process effective.

Reflecting on his cognitional operations the philosopher can ask not simply what explains a particular phenomenon, but why explanation at all? Why should man's drive to understand meet with success at all? What is the explanation of the intelligibility of the real? One answer might be that reality is intelligible because men happen to understand it. But all that shows is *that* reality is intelligible; it does not explain *why* it is intelligible. Man finds or discerns the universe to be intelligible; his mere *fiat* is powerless to create such intelligibility since he is simply confronted by the givenness of the data to be explained. The fully critical position holds for the intrinsic intelligibility of the real. If this cannot be explained it is a mere matter of fact. But a mere matter of fact without explanation is nothing. If this conclusion is to be avoided, an explanation of the real's intelligibility must be given. If the real is coterminous with the intelligible and if *man's* understanding cannot explain the intelligibility of the real, the only satisfying explanation is that the real is an object of an act of understanding that comprehends everything.

Within the fully critical position man's drive to understand is not satisfied with answers that are merely intellectually satisfying but only with understanding that is virtually unconditioned. All the objects of the sensible universe are known only as virtually unconditioned, that is their existence is not necessary but conditioned. They are conditioned beings which do not explain their own existence but whose existence can only be fully explained by something beyond them which is not contingent but self-explanatory. Clearly an infinite regress of contingent beings is not a satisfactory explanation because at the end of the day we are still left with contingent beings whose contingency requires explanation. Nor is it sufficient to say that contingent beings simply *are* as a matter of fact, since this is equivalent to asserting that beings can be unexplained and we have already established the intelligibility of the real, of beings, of facts. It follows that there must exist a being whose existence is absolutely unconditioned to account for the existence of beings which are contingent. Such an absolutely unconditioned is the uncaused cause (taking cause to be a relationship of intelligible dependence), a cause which needs no further conditions for its own intelligibility to be complete, and which is capable of grounding the explanation of everything about everything else.

Two arguments have been put forward, one arising from our questioning the success of our understanding and the other from

our questioning the mind's demand for sufficient reason to accept understanding as true. But the two arguments converge on the same conclusion. The reason lies in the identity of an unrestricted act of understanding, encompassing everything, with an act of absolute knowledge, grasping all the conditions that render all conditioned unconditioned. In man, understanding is tentative and it is only when the conditions surrounding his understanding have been fulfilled that understanding can be affirmed as true. An unrestricted act of understanding, comprehending everything, which can in that sense be described as infinite, clearly suffers from no such limitations. An unrestricted act of understanding grasps everything about everything, grasps all matters of fact in all their intelligible relationships, and so simultaneously grasps all the conditions that render all conditioned unconditioned. The act of full understanding is also the act of absolute knowledge. Or we might say that the coherence theory of truth may not hold for man but holds for God.

The foregoing argument for God's existence, while it does not, I trust, distort Lonergan's position, falls far short of doing justice to his long and detailed reasoning in Chapter XIX of *Insight*. Nor does Lonergan have any illusions about converting anyone to a belief in the existence of God 'by a syllogism'. At this stage it is not my intention to be exhaustive but merely to sketch in the main outline of Lonergan's argument so that this can, as it were, serve as a target for Hume's detailed objections.

II

Penelhum describes Hume's *Dialogue Concerning Natural Religion* quite simply as 'beyond any question the greatest work on philosophy of religion in the English language',¹ and Aiken considers the *Dialogues* as forming, with Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, 'one of the two high water marks in the modern analysis of philosophical theism'.² We also have Kenny's word for it that while most of the best-known analytical philosophers are atheists, when – as is rare – 'they justify their atheism in their professional writings, they tend to do so with arguments drawn, with little modification, from the works of Hume and Kant'.³

Of all the arguments for the existence of God the argument from design has been traditionally the most popular and the most influential. The myriad adaptations of means to ends observable in nature – for example, the instinctual adaptation of animals for the survival and reproduction of their species, or the design of the eye for the purpose of seeing, or the harmonious interlocking of the planets in orbit – have been and still are quoted frequently as proof of the existence of a Supreme Intelligence or Master Craftsman synonymous with God. To the eighteenth century deists, in

particular, this kind of argument was extremely popular. God was seen as the great watchmaker who had set the whole of his creation in motion and kept it in motion by means of the invariable mechanical laws of Nature. It is this kind of reasoning that Hume attacks with a variety of arguments in both the first *Enquiry* and the *Dialogues*. Given the intellectual climate of his times, it served Hume who had an abhorrence of polemics, to put his discussion of the existence of God into the mouths of fictitious characters. This adds a lively, dramatic quality to the arguments, especially in the *Dialogues* where the relationships between Philo the sceptic, Cleanthes the deist, and Demea the fideist are affected by areas of mutual intellectual agreement and disagreement. Cleanthes and Demea share a common religious conviction, but where Cleanthes bases his on reason, Demea insists on the incomprehensibility of the Deity. Philo affects agreement with Demea that it is by faith alone that we can know God, who lies totally beyond the scope of reason, but the strong irony that underlies his protestations of alliance is one of the book's chief delights. Lastly, Cleanthes and Philo agree that experience and inference based on experience are to be regarded as the sole basis of warranted belief, but they differ in the degree of strictness with which they apply this principle to the question of the Deity. The result is an enjoyable mix of argument and personality. There is a long-standing debate among commentators as to which of the three *dramatis personae* represents Hume's own views, but the recent consensus is that it is Philo, who certainly has the lion's share of the argument and emerges an easy victor. Much of the liveliness of the debate will be lost in summary, but a brief itemisation of the main arguments should aid clarity and save unnecessary repetition. I shall, accordingly, give a brief account of each of the arguments Hume puts up against the possibility of the rational inference of the existence of God before going on to discuss the merits of his case in relation to the theistic argument presented in the last section.

In the *Dialogues* the argument from design is put into the mouth of Cleanthes, the deist:

The curious adaptation of means to ends, throughout all nature, resembles exactly, though it much exceeds, the production of human contrivance — of human design, thought, wisdom, and intelligence. 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 the Deity and his similarity to human mind and intelligence.⁴

A number of arguments are put forward against this:

1 The Analogy Argument

Philo draws attention to the weakness of argument from analogy. Analogy is particularly weak when the “dissimilitude” between the entities compared is very great. So while upon seeing a house we can infer that an architect has built it, nevertheless so great is the discrepancy between a house and the entire universe that a similar inference cannot be sustained (p 18). Philo continues:

Stone, wood, brick, iron, brass, have not, at this time, in this minute globe of earth, an order or arrangement without human art and contrivance; therefore, the universe could not originally attain its order and arrangement without something similar to human art. But is a part of nature a rule for another part very wide of the former? Is it a rule for the whole? Is a very small part a rule for the universe? Is nature in one situation a certain rule for nature in another situation vastly different from the former? (p 23)

2 The Argument for Proportion

In the *Enquiry* Hume places certain restrictions on the conclusions of the design argument, presuming it to be valid.

When we infer any particular cause from an effect, we must proportion the one to the other, and can never be allowed to ascribe to the cause any qualities, but what are exactly sufficient to produce the effect (*Enquiry*, p 136).

Hume is challenging the customary attribution to the deity of such qualities as ‘superlative intelligence and benevolence’ when truly the principle of proportioning cause to effect can only allow us to infer from an imperfect world, in which men are frequently unhappy, ‘That precise degree of power, intelligence, and benevolence, which appears in their (the gods’) workmanship’ (p 137). In the *Dialogues* a similar argument is seen to impose severe restrictions on any supposed deity:

First, by this method of reasoning you renounce all claim to infinity in any of the attributes of the Deity. For, as the cause ought only to be proportioned to the effect, and the effect, so far as it falls under our cognizance, is not infinite, what pretensions have we, upon your suppositions, to ascribe that attribute to the Divine Being? . . . Secondly, you have no reason, on your theory, for ascribing perfection to the Deity, even in his finite capacity, or for supposing him free from error, mistake, or incoherence, in his undertaking (p 38).

And what shadow of argument, continued Philo, can you produce from your hypothesis to prove the unity of the Deity?

A great number of men join in building a house or ship, . . . ; why not several deities combine in contriving and forming a world? (p 39)

On the anthropomorphic model of divine intelligence presented by Cleanthes, Hume has lots of fun conjuring up the many possibilities that might account for the world as we know it.

3 The Infinite Regress Argument, and God as a Useless Hypothesis

If the theist insists on ascribing a cause to the world, he can be asked concerning the cause of God himself.

Have we not the same reason to trace that ideal world into another ideal world or new intelligent principle? But if we stop and go no further, why go so far? Why not stop at the material world? How can we satisfy ourselves without going on *in infinitum*? . . . It were better, therefore, never to look beyond the present material world. By supposing it to contain the principle of its order within itself, we really assert it to be God; and the sooner we arrive at that Divine Being so much the better (*Dialogues*, p 34).

The advantage of the atheistic hypothesis, Hume might be understood as saying, lies in its economy. The theist, once he has started on the business of ascribing causes to the whole system of nature, is involved, willy nilly, in an infinite regress. If he refuses to move beyond the assertion of God's existence, saying that God *simply is*, he cannot fault the atheist who, with greater philosophical justification, refuses to speculate on the existence of any being beyond his experience and simply attributes the principle of order found in nature to nature itself.

Intimately linked with this is the notion that the God hypothesis is useless, since it adds nothing 'to the common and experienced course of nature', nor can it 'establish any new principle of conduct and behaviour' (*Enquiry*, p 142). Hume does not go as far as twentieth century logical positivists who would consider talk of an entity whose existence made no observable difference to the course of nature as *meaningless*. He simply regards the God hypothesis as otiose and, therefore, dispensable. His finding is at one with modern naturalism which rejects the dualism of a this world/ other world vision, of a world that is observable and another that is unobservable, and considers the universe to be an enclosed explanatory system which needs no appeal to extraneous forces or powers or agents to explain any of its features.

4 The Unique Cause Argument

For Hume, to claim that a cause-effect relation holds between objects we must have experience of the cause and effect in constant conjunction. This claim can never be made of the supposed rela-

tionship between God and the world since we have no direct experience of God and our experience is limited to the supposed effect.

It is only when two *species* of object are found to be constantly conjoined, that we can infer the one from the other; and were an effect presented, which was entirely singular, and could not be comprehended under any known *species*, I do not see, that we could form any conjecture or inference at all concerning its cause (*Enquiry*, p 148).

It is on the basis of the same reasoning that Philo in the *Dialogues* makes the rhetorical challenge to Cleanthes: 'Have worlds ever been formed under your eye . . .?' (p 25).

It might be objected to this line of reasoning that we frequently infer the existence of a cause without observing the cause and effect in 'constant conjunction'. Thus, upon seeing a combine-harvester we naturally infer some human designer, albeit we have not observed the combine-harvester in the process of its design or construction. But Hume's parenthetical clause, 'and could not be comprehended under any known *species*', anticipates such an objection. For we have experience of the cause-effect relationship between men and their artifacts and this provides the licence for inferring a similar relationship when we meet with an artifact and the cause of that artifact is not present. A more sophisticated objection might refer to the legitimate scientific practice of forming causal hypotheses about such unique phenomena as the origin of the universe as a whole or of the human race, where, by definition, the inferred cause lies beyond the limits of human experience. It would appear, according to this argument, that scientists do make claims concerning causes *external* to the world of known experience. But the Humean reply to such an objection is well developed by Gaskin:

A statement about the internal development of the universe, even if it contains or appears to contain statements about the origin of unique collections of objects such as men or all there is, is arrived at by extrapolation from known regularities which are themselves derived from repeated or repeatable observations. A statement about its external origin is not arrived at in this way (Gaskin, op. cit. p 21).

Even in the case of unique phenomena, the scientist's conclusions depend on extrapolations from known and observed regularities which are far from unique. For example, the genetic and evolutionary regularities observed in relation to other species can be extrapolated and applied to the special case of man's genetic and/or evolutionary origin (*ibid.*). This cannot be done in the case of God who is more strictly an external cause standing quite outside the

regularities and laws that obtain in the physical universe. God is not a cause alongside other causes and in this sense his relationship to the universe is truly unique.

If one takes the various arguments itemised as forming one continuous thesis, it can be seen that the Unique Cause Argument is the central argument of the thesis. For it could be objected to the Analogy Argument that men do argue by way of analogy, for example by extrapolating from the genesis and evolution of certain animal species and applying the conclusions established in these cases to the special case of man. Hume's reply to such an objection would be to point to the *unique* nature of God's relation to the world. (This is, in fact, how Gaskin replies to an objection of this kind, *op. cit.* p 15). The Argument for Proportion works in the opposite direction to the Analogy Argument. Where the latter points to the gross 'dissimilitude' between any part of the universe and the universe considered as a whole, the argument for proportion is designed to show that, if God's existence can be demonstrated from the effects of his workmanship, then God is implicated in the imperfections and finitude which these effects reveal. This argument has the effect of denying the unique status of God, of reducing God to the status of an internal cause, similar to other causes in the universe. The validity of the Design Argument is not, however, granted by Hume. Both the Infinite Regress Argument and the Useless hypothesis Argument combine to show that since the God Hypothesis leads logically to an infinite regress, which provides no intellectual satisfaction, preference is to be given to the naturalistic view of the universe as containing its own principle of order. The notion of God as a unique cause standing outside the regularities observable in nature can provide no experiential difference to the normal course of nature. With the Unique Cause Argument Hume clinches his thesis: 'In a word, I much doubt whether it be possible for a cause to be known only by its effect . . . or to be of so singular and particular a nature as to have no parallel and no similarity with any other cause or object, that has ever fallen under our observation' (*Enquiry*, p 148).

III

Hume's thesis on the impossibility of ascending by means of philosophical argument to the knowledge that God exists is coherent, powerful and persuasive. At the beginning of this article I expounded an argument for God's existence from within the position of Lonergan's critical realism, and I shall now examine Hume's thesis in the light of that position.

1 The Analogy Argument

It is noticeable that Lonergan does not deploy a great many

instances of the adaptation of means to ends observable in nature in order to draw the analogy between the relationship of a human artifact to its designer, on the one hand, and of the universe to the Supreme Craftsman, on the other. Rather, since the real is identified with the intelligible, and since the intelligibility of the universe is conditioned, the mind moves by the laws immanent in W2, to assert that there must be a cause which can make that intelligibility unconditioned. The identification of this cause with the unrestricted act of understanding is founded on an analogy with the human act of understanding. This analogy would be unwarranted if Hume's notion that the real is verified by experience were correct. Within the fully critical position, however, the real is not identified with what is experienced but rather with what is intelligently understood and reasonably affirmed. But human intelligence is not the source of the universe's intelligibility, since the data of experience are given. Human intelligence, as it were, *discovers* the universe to be intelligible. If the real is intelligible and that intelligibility is to be explained – and if it is an unexplained matter of fact it is no different from nothing – there must be a source of such intelligibility. Moreover, the source of such intelligibility must be *similar* to human understanding and knowledge, since the real has been discovered to be isomorphic with such understanding and such knowledge. At the same time it must be *dissimilar* to human understanding and knowledge, since these are not the source of the real's intelligibility. An act of understanding at once similar and dissimilar to human understanding and knowledge in the manner specified will be an unrestricted act of understanding that is, in being unrestricted, also an act of absolute knowledge.

In the *Dialogues* Hume asks, "What peculiar privilege has this little agitation of the brain which we call *thought*, that we must thus make it the model of the whole universe?" (p 22). Within his own position in which experience is the touchstone of what is real, there can of course be no justification of this example of man's 'partiality in (his) favour'. But the grounding of the real on experience has the consequence of calling in question even those 'hidden' laws of the mind which Hume relies on to make sense of his position. In a previous article it was argued that the identification of the real with what is intelligently understood and reasonably affirmed overcomes these difficulties. And it is this identification that gives man the 'peculiar privilege' of explaining the intelligibility of the real by inferring as its source the existence of a being capable of an act of understanding analogous (that is, at once similar and dissimilar) to his own.

2 The Argument for Proportion

This argument rests on the principle that causes should be proportioned to their effects, from which it would appear to follow that finite effects can be adequately explained, if explanation is possible, by finite causes. The fully critical position, however, does not argue in the first instance for the explanation of this world, finite as it is. Rather, it identifies the real with the intelligible and in seeking an explanation of such intelligibility it is seeking an explanation for the real *as such*. A being whose creative power is coterminous with the real is a being who is infinite. Were he finite, his finitude would indicate that part of the real lay beyond his understanding or creative power; but such a part of the real would be a mere matter of fact without explanation and that is no different from nothing. Of course, it may be asked if one can legitimately speak of 'the real as such'. But it is difficult to think of a philosophy that has no position, either explicit or implicit, on what constitutes the real. For Hume, the real is what can be, at least in principle, experienced. True, such a starting-point leads to the calling in question of *almost all* existence but this reflects more on the starting-point than on any talk of the real as such. For Kant the real is the unknowable world of noumena. If this is regarded *strictly* as a 'limiting concept', true or real knowledge is confined to the world of sensory experience and the real becomes, in effect, the world of sensible phenomena.

3 The Infinite Regress and Useless Hypothesis Argument

If causality is understood in terms of temporal succession there can be no answer to the Infinite Regress Argument. Once the doubtful move from an observable effect to an unobservable and temporally antecedent cause is made, there can be no legitimate reason for halting the process of inferring further unobservable causes *ad infinitum*. But if causality is understood as a relation of intelligible dependence, the principle of sufficient reason demands a total explanation, an explanation to which nothing can be added, for the existence of *all* contingent entities. As Copleston says in his famous debate with Russell, 'If you add up chocolates to infinity, you presumably get an infinite number of chocolates. So if you add up contingent beings to infinity, you still get contingent beings, not a necessary being. An infinite series of contingent beings will be, to my way of thinking, as unable to cause itself as one contingent being'.⁶ It is on the principle of sufficient reason that the demand for a cause that is itself uncaused and also the cause of everything else, rests. Unless such a cause is inferred the intelligibility of contingent beings remains unexplained, remains that is, a mere matter of fact indistinguishable from nothing.

That God is a useless hypothesis would follow if God were in-

deed a scientific hypothesis. Science seeks to understand the data of sense and the method of verification in science is, in part, by means of experiment and observation, or, in Popperian language, $W3$ is verified in $W1$. A scientific hypothesis that was incapable in principle of being tested by reference to the behaviour of observable properties of matter would be quite useless. Anthony Kenny has linked Hume with 'big bang' cosmologies, and Aquinas and Hoyle with 'steady state' cosmologies.⁶ Hume admits the possibility of something coming into existence from and by nothing, whereas Aquinas and Hoyle think that the origination of matter calls for a cause. Whatever justice Kenny's remarks might have with reference to Aquinas, they would be inappropriate if applied to Lonergan's argument. For cosmologists' conclusions about the origin of the universe can be considered scientific only if the evidence supporting them consists of extrapolations from known scientific regularities such as the speed of light or the calculated rate of the universe's expansion. Lonergan's argument for the existence of God lies outside the scope of science. As a consequence, his notion of God cannot be used as a 'God of the gaps', that is a hypothesis employed to serve a function within scientific explanation. In the same way, Lonergan's notion of God is different from the functional deities of Descartes and Berkeley (and indeed of Hume's Nature), employed within a philosophical system as a guarantor of the veracity of our perceptions or the permanence of sensible objects. As James Collins remarks, 'A functional deity is a highly expendable commodity once its function can be explained by some other principle', and he credits British Empiricism with the achievement of accounting for human knowledge in ways that do not require a theological guarantee.⁷

The question of God does arise within Lonergan's philosophy, but not in any functionalist way. As I said before, it arises when we question our questions, and ask what it is that makes our operations of intelligent inquiry and critical reflection effective and successful. There is no question here of guaranteeing the success of our mental operations by the employment of a 'god hypothesis'. Rather the opposite, since it is the success of our understanding and knowledge that leads to the inference of a transcendent 'framework' which explains that success. Since God is not instrumental in Lonergan's philosophy, it is true to say that our belief or disbelief in his existence makes no difference to how we understand and explain the normal course of events. But this is only to say that the question of God is significantly different from a scientific question. What might be said, however, and what the logic of Lonergan's position points to, is that if God did not exist, nothing would be intelligible and indeed nothing would exist. That God as a total explanation in this

sense is useless as a scientific hypothesis does not mean that it is not a valid philosophical conclusion. Gaskin, defending Hume's position, says, 'The fundamental assumption . . . is one which almost totally dominates all modern scientific and secular thinking. It is that there is no need to go beyond the world and its contents in explaining either the world or any of its contents. Is this a justifiable assumption?'.⁸ The answer from within the present position would be 'Yes' if the explanation being sought is scientific; if the explanation sought is philosophical, a qualified 'No'. The 'No' is because there is nothing in the nature of causality to prohibit the assertion of the existence of a transcendent being. The qualifications refer to the fact that we have no direct experience of such a being and the legitimacy of the judgment that he exists rests on reflection on matters of which we have direct experience, namely the contingent nature of those entities that fall within our experience, and the demand for sufficient reason which is an integral part of our rational processes. We only know *that* God exists; the qualities attributed to him in natural theology are founded on our reflections on what such a being would have to be, to be an adequate explanation of the existence of the universe. Hume's argument has the great merit of making the theist fully aware that God's relation to the world is unique and that, in consequence, any claim to knowledge of God must be distinguished from knowledge of things in the world.

- 1 *Hume*, Terence Penelhum, Macmillan, 1975, p 171.
- 2 *Hume's Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, edited by H D Aiken, p xvii.
- 3 *The Times Literary Supplement*, 7 February 1975, p 145.
- 4 *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, p 17.
- Other references are to *Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*, edited by Selby-Bigge, Oxford, 1902.
- 5 In *The Existence of God*, edited by J Hick, Macmillan, 1964, p 174.
- 6 *The Five Ways*, London, 1969, p 66.
- 7 *God in Modern Philosophy*, by James Collins, Routledge & Kegan Paul, p 90.
- 8 Gaskin, *op. cit.* p 67.