



## **Theatre and Religious Hypothesis**

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## THEATRE AND RELIGIOUS HYPOTHESIS\*

We are placed in this world, as in a great theatre, where the true springs and causes of every event are entirely concealed from us....

David Hume<sup>1</sup>

La collection des idées s'appelle imagination, dans la mesure où celle-ci désigne, non pas une faculté, mais un ensemble des choses, au sens le plus vague du mot, qui sont ce qu'elles paraissent: collection sans album, pièce sans théâtre, ou flux des perceptions.

Gilles Deleuze<sup>2</sup>

In Part III of Hume's Dialogues concerning Natural Religion the character Demea contests the analogy drawn by Cleanthes between an orderly world and a coherent, articulate speech, stating that,

When I read a volume, I enter into the mind and intention of the author: I become him, in a manner, for the instant; and have an immediate feeling and conception of those ideas, which revolved in his imagination, while employed in that composition.<sup>3</sup>

To begin reading Hume's Dialogues with such false and naive premises would inevitably result in a failure to pick up on all the different voices in this text. In fact, no written text can really enable a reader "to enter into the mind and intention of the author." Moreover, such a predisposition on behalf of a naive reader will become further complicated by the processes of 'distanciation' and avoidance of a central point of view, which are brought into play by Hume in this text, where religion is being considered from a purely speculative point of view. Hume has in fact given the reader a clue in the introduction as to how

to approach reading the Dialogues, when Pamphilus, the narrator, expounds to his friend Hermippus the advantages of presenting a discussion in the form of a dialogue rather than as a direct statement. He argues that by using a dialogue it is possible to avoid any overtones of an author addressing his reader, or a pedagogue his pupil (D 127).

Confronted with a text that is paradoxically both lucid and unclear, any reader whose attitude is still limited by certain metaphysical categories might very well want to know who is actually Hume's spokesman and who he is really addressing in this discussion on the nature and existence of God. These questions are in fact related to traditional oppositions, such as that between a central and subsidiary point of view in a dialogue; between the essential and non-essential of a discussion.

In his Dialogues, Hume creates a second degree of separation between himself and the characters involved in the discussion by using the literary process of 'distanciation', when he introduces the fictitious character Pamphilus, who tells Hermippus of the discussions he has heard. From this point of view the style of the text is immediately more disconcerting than Cicero's De Natura Deorum,<sup>4</sup> (which inspired Hume's text), as Cicero does identify himself with his narrator, such that any effect of distanciation is far smaller. Cicero's narrator does, however, emphasize that the multiplicity of points of view in this text results in a certain degree of scepticism and suspension of judgement: "Though it is possible that they are all of them false, it is impossible that more than one of them is true" (p. 71). As Hume does in his Dialogues, Cicero here tries to avoid imposing a

central point of view or a single authoritative angle to his discussions, as if given by a teacher; in fact, "in a discussion of this kind our interest should be centred not on the weight of the authority but on the weight of the argument" (p. 73).

Thus, wearing the mask of Pamphilus, Hume can play an ironic role, without having to give a central point of view, by having his character present the idea that "reasonable men may be allowed to differ, where no one can reasonably be positive" (D 128). These two texts therefore use the same process of disassociation from a central truth by using a supposedly neutral narrator. When reading the Dialogues one can rely neither on the authority of the author, as he has hidden himself away in the shadows backstage, nor on that of the narrator, as he is part of the whole fictitious structure of the text and is also presented as wearing the mask of "a mere auditor of their disputes." In Cicero's text the very homonymy between 'author' and 'narrator' would seem to suggest that they are one and the same person and that the narrator has Cicero's complete authority, except that the narrator is presented in such a way as to diminish the impression of this supposed authority. In fact, Cicero's narrator is presented in an analogous way to Hume's in that he is portrayed as a "listener, who is impartial and unprejudiced in the matter, and under no obligation to defend willy-nilly the truth of any particular opinion" (p. 77), which is in fact already a definite opinion, in favour of scepticism, in the form of suspension of judgement. This supposed impartiality on behalf of the narrator is really only a mask, as, by their very nature, all narrators have a point of view; the possibility of

having a "mere auditor" of disputes is nothing but a myth related to Western metaphysics. However, in the Dialogues, the very opposition between the central and marginal points of view within the discussion can result in the formation of a hierarchical organisation of the different parts played, some taking on the lead, others a secondary role. But by giving this work a hierarchical focus a reader would fail to pick up on the 'game of masks' nature of this text. By their very structure Hume's Dialogues deter any sensible reader from looking for a definite presentation of the author's opinions, and from singling out a predominant point of view, whether it be of the writer himself or of the narrator acting with the authority of a teacher.

Considering the Dialogues with the rest of Hume's works, it can be seen that the characters that take part in this discussion, such as Philo, Cleanthes and Demea, are, from time to time, to varying degrees, in agreement with the opinions held by Hume himself. This is particularly true in the case of Philo, whose role in the Dialogues is predominantly that of the critic is modelled on Cotta in De Natura Deorum. For all this, Philo should not be considered as the author's spokesman, as Hume is very aware of the psychological advantage over his reader achieved by a character when playing the role of critic. In his essay "Of the Immortality of the Soul" he even contends that, "'tis an infinite advantage in every controversy to defend the negative".<sup>5</sup>

Philo, of course, plays the 'beau role' in the Dialogues but does not necessarily hold the definitive point of view. Similarly, in Book I of De Natura Deorum it is said of Cotta, the defendant of scepti-

cism, that he is one of those people who can more easily see "why something is false than why it is true," (p. 92), such that "it is much easier [for him] to say what [he does] not believe than what [he does] believe, especially in questions of this sort" (p. 123), thus placing him in the most advantageous position.

No doubt it is in order to lighten the impact of this advantage that Cicero, and later Hume, makes use of an interesting artifice at the end of his dialogue, which has the effect of balancing out the apparent victory of his sceptical character. In the third book of De Natura Deorum Cotta seems to have the last word when he argues against the stoic philosophy of divine intervention in the world held by Balbus. However, the narrator then intervenes to comment, and since this happens at the very end of the text it has the effect of counterbalancing the possibility of an unchallengeable victory of Cotta's argument:

This then was the end of our discussion and we went our ways, Velleius thinking that Cotta had the best of the argument while to me it seemed that the reasoning of Balbus brought us nearer to an image of the truth.  
(p. 235)

Although this statement is supported by the authority of the narrator, whose name is the same as the author's, the fact that it is presented simply as an opinion means that it does not carry sufficient weight to counterbalance Cotta's vigorous attack on the thesis of the Epicurean Velleius and the Stoic Balbus (cf. Book 3). In the end it is as if this text is trying once again to confront the reader with the basic problems inherent in an enquiry into the existence and nature of the gods, and so to force him to

suspend judgement, which is the only route to all true reflection. This is what Cotta himself seems to be suggesting, when he says,

...all this that I have said about the nature of the gods was not said in denial of their existence, but to make you realize how difficult a question this is and how dubious is every theory which has been evolved to answer it. (p. 234, my emphasis)

Hume ends his Dialogues in an equally disconcerting way with Pamphilus parodying the commentary by the narrator in De Natura Deorum:

I confess that, upon a serious review of the whole, I cannot but think that Philo's principles are more probable than Demea's; but that those of Cleanthes approach still nearer to the truth. (D 228)

There are at least two effects of this reference to Cicero's work, this sort of ironic pirouette with which the Dialogues end: firstly, by playing down the importance of Philo in the text, and secondly, by preventing the reader from thinking that this enquiry has reached a definitive solution. Also, in referring back to this slight remark in Cicero's text, whether it was intended ironically or not, the ending of the Dialogues (almost as an irony within an irony) can be considered as achieving a second degree of distanciation from any definite conclusion. This lack of conclusion has the effect of leaving the problem of the existence and nature of God hanging in the reader's mind and so it is this ἐποχή which incites further reflection on this unresolved question.

In fact, one can take the whole of Part XII of the Dialogues -- which forms the conclusion of the text without proposing any solution to the problems investigated -- as another piece of evidence for the

idea that it is impossible to think of Philo as being the complete spokesman for Hume's ideas. When Demea leaves at the end of Part XI, the argument becomes less heated and Philo and Cleanthes agree upon a compromise between their initial positions. In fact it is as if Philo bombards his interlocutors with rational arguments in order to weaken their rigid faith in their own ideas; as if Hume considers the role of the sceptic to be that of a weapon of attack against Demea's dogmatic opinions and Cleanthes' fantastic arguments. In The Natural History of Religion Hume himself claims that this use of systematic criticism by a sceptical character in De Natura Deorum is basically a tool for combatting the orthodox dogmatism of his opponents:

This is the artifice of Cotta in the dialogues concerning the nature of the gods. He refutes the whole system of mythology by leading the orthodox gradually, from the more momentous stories, which were believed, to the more frivolous, which everyone ridiculed.... His master, Carneades, had employed the same method of reasoning. (NHR 352)

The critical and corrective role played by Philo is in fact a mask which he will take off by the end of the Dialogues, when Demea has left the battlefield and Cleanthes has moderated his need to give his faith a rational basis. Then Philo can come to a peaceful agreement with Cleanthes; an agreement which is, admittedly, only minimal, and which would be difficult to understand if one had taken Philo's scepticism of the eleven previous parts of the Dialogues as being anything other than simply a tactical manoeuvre. There are even times when the other characters, Cleanthes and even Demea, take on the role

of critic which is usually played by Philo, for example, in Part IX where Cleanthes takes the mask of critic from Philo -- "I shall not leave it to Philo ... (though I know that the starting [of] objections is his chief delight) to point out the weakness of this metaphysical reasoning" (D 189) -- in order to dispute the idea held a priori by Demea, albeit without much persuasive power. Moreover, while playing the role of critic, Cleanthes develops the type of argument often found in Hume's works, therefore temporarily becoming his spokesman:

...there is an evident absurdity in pretending to demonstrate a matter of fact, or to prove it by any arguments a priori. Nothing is demonstrable, unless the contrary implies a contradiction. Whatever we conceive as existent, we can also conceive as non-existent. There is no Being, therefore, whose non-existence implies a contradiction. Consequently there is no Being, whose existence is demonstrable. (D 189)

On the other hand, as the opinion of Pamphilus has favoured Cleanthes' "accurate philosophical turn" from the very beginning of the discourse, he is now on Cleanthes' side and so, to a certain extent at least, this makes it less plausible to view Philo as Hume's spokesman in this work. Even the orthodox Demea, the mystic, sometimes (in Part III, for example) takes on the role of critic which is so dear to Hume, when he denounces the anthropomorphism implicit in Cleanthes' argument.

Thus, overall, if there is any victory at all in the Dialogues, it is not on the part of one or the other of its protagonists, but rather of 'true philosophy' or reason, that calm passion which can, in spite of its inherent vulnerability and limitations, regu-

late any dogmatic tendencies that it might have. From this point of view it was of fundamental importance to study the theories and ideas that were influential at the time, and this was only possible to achieve within the framework of the discussion that takes place among Philo, Cleanthes and Demea, with each character taking his turn at wearing the mask of critic. When Cleanthes embarks on analysing Demea's a priori arguments he is virtually asking Philo's permission to put on this mask, as if it is actually glued to Philo the sceptic's face. In fact this is just an artifice, a kind of role-playing, as on the stage. The most important aspect of this text is the interaction between the different characters' points of view, which, by being in confrontation with each other, undergo reciprocal transformations. When reading this or any other dialogue one should not try to locate a central point of focus but should attempt to extricate what is being discussed by the characters from the entangled 'mesh' used to ensnare an abstruse subject.

In fact the Dialogues involve a discussion of religion, where the debate between the different points of view is reminiscent of a confrontation and exchange between the voices and opinions in a play. Various aspects of the text reinforce this impression of theatre in the Dialogues; firstly, the process of distanciation, used at the beginning of the text, which is a characteristically theatrical technique; secondly, the parts played at times become like masks that can be worn by different characters, and thirdly, the narrator sometimes even indicates the characters' tones of voice and facial expressions, as if this were really a play.<sup>6</sup> Finally, at the end of the text, there is Philo's change of voice, which reveals that his

earlier radically sceptical attitude was nothing but a mask.

It could be suggested that Hume himself is the stage on which this play is being performed, but this would be too psychological an interpretation, although it could perhaps be seen as an 'advantage' by any dissatisfied reader who might have become disconcerted by this play in which the producer is permanently hidden away in the shadows backstage. Such an approach could, however, once again result in the reader slipping through the net of the philosophical questions raised by Hume in his Dialogues. Thus what one really has to do is to try to understand how Hume's use of a fictional, almost theatrical form relates to his philosophy.

It is important to notice that after the lack of success of his first two volumes of A Treatise of Human Nature (1739), Hume was plagued by the problem of presenting his ideas in a lighter and less 'abstruse' way. Thus, motivated by the necessity of changing his style, Hume tirelessly pursued the same themes, but he now approached them in a less austere and therefore more accessible way. In 1748 he published An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding, in which it is interesting to note how the discussion takes a fictional turn when he is dealing with the question of "a particular providence and of a future state" (cf. Section XI), such that a dramatic structure appears in the dialogue. The author changes his mask in order to play the part of a narrator observing an imaginary discussion:

I was lately engaged in conversation with a friend who loves sceptical paradoxes; where, though he advanced many principles, of which I can by no means approve, yet as they seem to be

curious, and to bear some relation to the chain of reasoning carried on throughout this enquiry, I shall here copy them from my memory as accurately as I can, in order to submit them to the judgement of the reader.

Thus these fictional processes come back into play as soon as the text returns to the question of religious hypothesis, particularly the idea of the existence of a divine Providence. First of all the disguise as narrator (the 'I' that opens the passage) provides classic support for the verisimilitude necessary to give the text its mimetic style. Later on in this section this verisimilitude is reinforced by the imaginary conversation between the narrator and one of his friends, who himself suggests that they should stage a fictitious conversation, with the philosopher Epicurus defending his theories in front of a crowd of Athenians. Then, within this imaginary conversation, he asks his friend's permission to enter into another fictitious framework.<sup>8</sup> Therefore, in a similar way to the Dialogues, a game within a game is created, a sort of 'mise en abîme'. Hume also makes use of a parody here of Socrates' Apology by Plato. Throughout his works, as soon as Hume is presenting disputes on religion, he slips into other texts, borrows other characters' words and puts on masks, not so much to hide behind, as one might think, but more to provoke a feeling of complicity in the reader, such that an ironic tinge is added to his reflections. This use of parody, this hybrid form, combining both identification and irony, creates a small but significant gap between his words and those of the original. This sort of commemoration of the original text also contains an element of irreverence. Parody is never totally innocent; although it pays homage to a text it

also removes it from its sacred pedestal, which helps explain why Hume uses this technique when dealing with the religious question.

However, this relationship between the theatre and Hume's philosophy can be taken even further. According to Hume, the human mind is basically an unsystematic collection of ideas, a flux of perceptual processes, or, as Gilles Deleuze put it, "une pièce sans théâtre." Consequently, the dramatic style is most suited to considering the theme of natural religion, where everything is at a purely hypothetical level in the frenzied depths of the human mind. Thus it is no coincidence that Hume himself often uses the theatrical metaphor when he is analysing the ways the human mind functions. In A Treatise of Human Nature, for example, the mind is defined as "a heap or collection of different perceptions, united together by different relations",<sup>9</sup> like "a kind of theatre, where several perceptions successively make their appearance" (T 253). In fact, the theatrical metaphor that Hume uses to describe how the mind functions should be considered more as a kind of description rather than an image:

The comparison of the theatre must not mislead us. They are the successive perceptions only, that constitute the mind; nor have we the most distant notion of the place, where these scenes are represented, or of the materials, of which it is compos'd. (T 253)

This idea reappears in the Enquiry when Hume is criticising the abstruse metaphysical investigations:

Happy, if she [philosophy] be thence sensible of her temerity, when she pries into these sublime mysteries; and leaving a scene so full of obscur-

ities and perplexities, return, with suitable modesty, to her true and proper province, the examination of common life; where she will find difficulties enough to employ her enquiries, without launching into so boundless an ocean of doubt, uncertainty, and contradiction. (E 103, my emphasis)

The human mind is a stage where the play is never performed once and for all; thus anyone wanting to add an artifice of Divine intervention, descending from the Heavens to make the ending clear and reassuring in a spectacular and theatrical way would, in Hume's eyes, be a 'bad stage director'. In Hume's texts, the theatre is not intended to delude; by its very nature, parody presents itself as a mask. Thus it is not by chance that there is a footnote in the above-quoted passage from the Enquiry in which Hume states that one should not resort to a deus ex machina approach, imagining the intervention of a cardboard cut-out God to extricate one from a complex predicament. Introducing a fictional God in this way would only conceal our basic ignorance of "the true springs and causes of every event" (NHR 316), and veil the difficulties we have in understanding the functioning of our mind, this theatre in which the stage and props seem to escape the more methodical processes of an enquiry. One cannot invent a well-structured play in order to gloss over the true depths of the complex and entangled human mind. Nor can one resort to "the veracity of the supreme Being, in order to prove the veracity of our senses" (E 153):

...what must a philosopher think of those vain reasoners, who, instead of regarding the present scene of things as the sole object of their contemplation, so far reverse the whole course of nature, as to render this

life merely a passage to something farther; ... a prologue, which serves only to introduce the piece, and give it more grace and propriety? Whence, do you think, can such philosophers derive their ideas of the gods? From their own conceit and imagination surely. (E 141; my emphasis)

This hypothesis of a Divine Providence, adhered to by the Stoics, is subjected to an analogous criticism by Cicero; similarly, in De Natura Deorum, the Epicurean Velleius likens this theory to a deus ex machina approach, symptomatic of a naive and even misleading dramatisation which would only strengthen the audience's superstitious beliefs by encouraging them to take refuge in the idea of divine intervention:

Our master [Epicurus] has taught us that the world was made by a natural process, without any need of a creator .... But as you cannot see how nature can do this without the intervention of mind, you follow the example of our tragic playwrights, and take refuge in a divine intervention to unravel the intricacies of your plot. (p. 91)

Thus the theatrical approach used by Hume in the Dialogues could not be better suited to a discussion on the existence and nature of God, with a stage on which different opinions cross paths and confront each other as they emerge into the light like the products of an overactive imagination. Hume's Dialogues have no place for a mechanical God who could intervene magically and give the audience the illusory reassurance of a miraculous solution. It is for the spectator/reader to judge the debate and not to give his assent to a point of view presented as the only accurate one, but to the hypothesis that will 'strike' him with enough 'vividness' for total belief. Any

reader who looks for the help of a spokesman of a 'God-like author' fails to appreciate the aims inherent in this text, because this reintroduces exactly the type of deus ex machine device that Hume has been criticising; a centre, truth or certainty. For, according to Hume, since the world is a stage, where the props and all that goes on backstage are inaccessible to us, and, since the depths of the self are nothing but disparate fragments, 'une pièce sans théâtre', man's supposed authority over these abstruse theological questions can only ever be fictitious; as Philo says, "we are like foreigners in a strange country." By their very form, Hume's Dialogues give the reader a passport to this "strange country," where anyone trying to avoid feeling disoriented will not achieve a full appreciation of the text, this 'play' in which there is a conflict between different theories from people with their all too human limited capacity for understanding, and where these hypotheses reflect back at each other in an infinite 'jeu de miroirs'.

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1. David Hume, The Natural History of Religion, in The Philosophical Works, vol. 4, ed. by Thomas Hill Green and Thomas Hodge Grose. Dermstadt, Scientia Verlag Aalen, 1964, p. 316 (my emphasis). Further references will be cited as 'NHR' followed by the relevant page number(s).
  2. Gilles Deleuze, Empirisme et subjectivité. P.U.F., Paris, 1980, p. 3 (my emphasis).

3. David Hume, Dialogues concerning Natural Religion, ed. by Norman Kemp Smith. New York, Bobbs-Merrill, 1947, pp. 155-156. Further references will be cited as 'D' followed by the relevant page number(s).
4. References are to the English edition: Cicero, The Nature of the Gods, trans. by C.P. McGregor, Penguin Books, 1978.
5. The Philosophical Works, vol. 4, p. 405.
6. For example, "Now Cleanthes, said Philo, with an air of alacrity and triumph..." (D 166, my emphasis).
7. David Hume, An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding, ed. by L.A. Selby-Bigge. Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1975, p. 132. Further references will be cited as 'E' followed by the relevant page number(s).
8. "And if you please, I shall suppose myself Epicurus for a moment, and make you stand for the Athenian people..." (E 134).
9. David Hume, A Treatise of Human Nature, ed. by L.A. Selby-Bigge, 2nd edition revised by P.H. Nidditch. Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1978, p. 207. Further references will be cited as 'T' followed by the relevant page number(s).