



On Franco-Ferraz, Theism and the Theatre of the Mind

Miguel A. Badia-Cabrera

Hume Studies Volume XVI, Number 2 (November, 1990) 131-140.

Your use of the HUME STUDIES archive indicates your acceptance of HUME STUDIES' Terms and Conditions of Use, available at

<http://www.humesociety.org/hs/about/terms.html>.

HUME STUDIES' Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the HUME STUDIES archive only for your personal, non-commercial use. Each copy of any part of a HUME STUDIES transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

For more information on HUME STUDIES contact humestudies-info@humesociety.org

<http://www.humesociety.org/hs/>

On Franco-Ferraz, Theism and the Theatre of the Mind

Miguel A. Badía-Cabrera

In "Theatre and Religious Hypothesis,"¹ Maria Franco-Ferraz offers an eloquent and reasoned argument in favour of a fresh and different sort of hermeneutic approach to the *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*² as a suitable means to disentangle the web of proverbially difficult philosophical questions posed by Hume in that work.

In order to arrive at a coherent understanding of the *Dialogues* as a whole and perhaps also to calm the sense of bafflement which the confrontation with this enigmatical text always provokes, many Hume scholars have taken as a point of departure and clue for unravelling it either one or two of Hume's principal philosophical doctrines or a presumed unitary view of Hume's philosophy in general. Equipped with one or both of these instruments, they proceed to dissect the arguments of the *Dialogues* with the intention of determining what Hume's position really is. This task also almost invariably ends by assigning the victory in the dialectical struggle and the representation of the author's 'true' opinions to the character (sometimes even more than one) in whom they are more or less able to find the purest expression of what they have previously decided is the kernel or essence of Hume's philosophy.

Franco-Ferraz has taken a very different route. For her the key point of the *Dialogues* lies in the fictional setting in which the theological discussion takes place. She goes on to show that the literary form of the *Dialogues* is intrinsically connected with its philosophical content³ so as to serve to elucidate the precise nature of the conclusion which is established at the end, in Part XII. In other words, the theatrical structure facilitates a more profound and detailed investigation of the problems dealing with the existence and nature of God. In fact, Hume offers no final solutions to these problems and thereby none of the characters of the *Dialogues* can properly be said to present the victorious point of view or the one counting with the complete authority of the author of the play:

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. (Franco-Ferraz, 228)

With this one cannot but agree. In addition she clinches her case by 'artfully' and convincingly showing that there is a profound relation between this theatrical form and some substantive philosophical theses which Hume developed in the *Treatise*, the first *Enquiry*, and *The Natural History of Religion*. In reality, the theatre metaphor clarifies the sense of those philosophical doctrines, which in turn throw light on and corroborate her main contention about the conclusion of the *Dialogues*. For according to her, any definitive solution to the problems of natural theology is not presented at the end by any of the characters on behalf of a God-like author (*Dieu auteur*), and furthermore this *deus ex machina* solution would conflict especially with Hume's conception of the mind as being *une pièce sans théâtre*, a drama without a stage (Franco-Ferraz, 234).

Such is the substance of her thesis, if I have succeeded in giving a fair representation of it. I think that her interpretation provides a novel outlook and one fruitful means of access to an adequate understanding of the *Dialogues*. But I am quite hesitant with some particular and important aspects of her reading of that text for the 'inconveniences', in Philo's sense of the word, which seem to follow from it, and also have a few difficulties in assessing the exact import of one or two of her central claims due to the somewhat vague manner in which, I think, these are formulated.

First, at the very beginning of her paper, Franco-Ferraz quotes the following passage from Part III of the *Dialogues* in which Demea objects to Cleanthes' claim, defended by two very ingenious analogies, that an orderly world like a coherent, articulate speech will always be taken as a sign of intelligent design:

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. (D 155-56)

I take issue with almost everything she offers as a commentary on Demea's words. I won't try to identify, though, those "certain metaphysical categories" which may becloud the mind of any reader who should approach the *Dialogues* with Demea's "naive" and "false" premises. What are those premises? In short, that a written text may enable a reader to enter into the mind of its author, thus gaining access to the author's ideas and intentions, "becom[ing]," as Demea puts it, "him, in a manner, for the instant" (D 155). Franco-Ferraz seems to categorically deny this. Although perhaps her overall interpretation would stand even if she were wrong about Demea's contention, it seems

to me that there are more reasons to approve of Demea's premises than to call them naive and false.

I think it is safer to follow here as a maxim for interpretation Peter Gay's observation that Demea is certainly a foil but not a fool.⁴ On the one hand, it is precisely Demea who will voice at the end of Part III (D 156-57) Hume's conception of the mind as a flux of fleeting and successive perceptions in order to deny the resemblance between the human and the divine mind. On the other hand, it is curious that in the passage she quotes, Demea is relying, in order to retort to Cleanthes' almost Platonic-like allegories of the voice from the clouds and the vegetative library, on another and complementary aspect of Hume's theory of the mind, which instead of emphasizing the flux and plurality of the mind, stresses those principles which allow for the mind being a bundle, or for the systematic union between the perceptions which constitute it. Hume would have said about the human mind what Aristotle asserted about a world governed by Mind (*Noûs*), that is, that it is not a bad tragedy.⁵ Not in vain did he also compare it to a republic or commonwealth:

the true idea of the human mind, is to consider it as a system of different perceptions or different existences, which are link'd together by the relation of cause and effect, and mutually produce, destroy, influence, and modify each other. (T 261, emphasis added)

When Hume is describing those other principles which make the mind a system and which also render the communication of emotions and ideas between different persons possible, he elucidates them through another fine metaphor, that of the mirror:

the minds of men are mirrors to one another, not only because they reflect each others emotions, but also because those rays of passions, sentiments and opinions may be often reverberated, and may decay away by insensible degrees. (T 365, emphasis added)

Thus, it seems as if religious hypotheses can reflect upon each other in an infinite *jeu de miroirs*, as Franco-Ferraz has splendidly put it, only because human minds are themselves mirrors which reflect each others emotions and opinions.

I do concede, of course, that Demea's presuppositions may be wrong after all. But to put it mildly, it is debatable that they were so for Hume, who in the *Treatise* went to such pains to give a causal explanation—in terms of the mechanism of association—of the principles which form

the basis of our access to the world of common life, intersubjective communication, and sympathy. He says accordingly that association is a “gentle force, which *commonly prevails*, [among thoughts] and is the *cause why, among other things, languages so nearly correspond to each other*” (T 10, emphasis added). And furthermore, “so far as regards the mind, these [associative connections] are the only links that bind the parts of the universe together, or *connect us with any person or object exterior to ourselves*” (T 662, emphasis added).⁶ Neither can I view Demea’s premises as naive except in the sense that they are tacitly believed to be true by everybody (even by the philosopher when he is not in his closet). But the context of Demea’s strictures against Cleanthes’ hypothesis makes clear that they are not naively held. It is certainly through sympathy that we gain some access into the passions, sentiments, and opinions of another person, but Demea is careful to add that we only become the other, or sympathize with him, “in a manner,” that is, I think, by analogy. Let us remember that no passion (as well as no intention) of another is ever directly apprehended; it is inferred rather from “external signs” (T 317-18) or “its causes and effects” (T 576); in other words, from what the other person does or says. In turn, what makes this knowledge possible is that there is a specific resemblance between human minds:

The minds of all men are similar in their feelings and operations, nor can any one be actuated by any affection, of which all others are not, in some degree, susceptible (T 575-76; see also T 316-18).

If sympathy with another person’s passions, sentiments and opinions is grounded upon a causal sort of inference, and if it is a well-established Humean doctrine that valid causal claims rest on the experienced union between species of objects, then although hearing (the voice from the clouds) or seeing (the vegetative library) a coherent, articulate speech would certainly enable one to pick up the intelligent thoughts and intentions of its author, the same inference cannot be made from the experienced order of nature to its presumably intelligent cause or God. Here we lack the required specific resemblance to other experienced types of objects that would legitimate the inference from the effect, the Universe, to its cause, God. This is what Demea, I think, is really pointing at immediately after the last sentence of the passage quoted by Franco-Ferraz:

But so near an approach we never surely can make to the Deity. His ways are not our ways. His attributes are perfect, but incomprehensible. And this volume of Nature contains a great

and inexplicable riddle, more than any intelligible discourse or reasoning. (D 156, emphasis added)

It should be noted in passing that she omits the above sentences without which the passage of Demea she transforms into the basis for a major hermeneutic discussion cannot be adequately comprehended. This I find to be, at the very least, an open to question procedure as an interpretative approach to a philosophical text. But if one does not split Demea's argument, then it appears to be *ad hominen*. Demea is not saying that our access to the other person's ideas and intentions is perfect; he is just establishing a comparative relation between it and our presumed knowledge of God's intelligent nature. He seems to assert that—once granted—our access in the first case is easier, and that there are great, if not insuperable, difficulties in the second case; that is, concerning our access to God's intelligence based on the "visible signs" on the "volume of nature."

In the end one wonders whether or not Franco-Ferraz should share Demea's assumption that a text can enable a reader to enter into the mind of its author. On the one hand, Pamphilus, through whom Hume himself would, according to her, be giving the clue for understanding the *Dialogues*, seems to share Demea's objectionable principles:

if the subject be curious and interesting, *the book carries us, in a manner, into company*, and unites the two greatest and purest pleasures of human life, study and society. (D 128, emphasis added).

On the other hand, Franco-Ferraz herself concludes that "any reader looking for the help of a spokesman of a 'God-like author' would be failing to appreciate the aims inherent in the text" (Franco-Ferraz, 234). Thus, it appears that she needs Demea's assumption in order to give intelligibility to her conclusion. But, all in all, her defense of that thesis is plausible, resting on a lucid philosophical analysis of the literary structure of the *Dialogues* and also on a brief but subtle comparative study of that text with Hume's model, Cicero's *De natura deorum*.

Franco-Ferraz's most daring and up-hill claim is that it is a "mistake" to search in the *Dialogues* for clues as to who Hume's spokesman really is. I will not dispute that assertion, since I believe that it comprises a sound methodological principle for the interpretation of the *Dialogues*. Yet one could say that she is, as it were, rowing against the main current of almost two centuries of Humean scholarship. It may be argued that Hume himself has encouraged at least some Hume scholars to fall into that "mistake," since in a letter

of 1753 to James Balfour he asserted that "in every Dialogue, no more than one person can be supposed to represent the author."⁷ I am not saying, by any means, that Hume's assertion precludes her claim from being true. What I am suggesting instead is that she should have addressed the issue in order to show that it does not conflict with her interpretation. In addition, she appears to hold that her thesis follows from the very dramatic structure of Hume's text. On that count, too, she should have paid some attention to the fact that, while composing the *Dialogues*, Hume affirmed in a letter to his friend Gilbert Elliot that he had made Cleanthes the "Hero" of that work.⁸

Her arguments against Philo being the exponent of the author's philosophical convictions I do not find compelling enough; but I shall offer here just a bare outline of the doubts the principal ones have provoked in me:

1. Franco-Ferraz adduces as support for her claim that both Demea and Cleanthes at times expound Hume's obvious philosophical opinions and also assume the role of critic, putting on the "mask" of the sceptic (Franco-Ferraz, 226-27). But this may be explained in an equally plausible manner as a reasonably expected result of Hume's express policy according to which one should avoid in composing a dialogue "the vulgar Error of putting nothing but Nonsense into the mouth of the Adversary."⁹ And that Demea and Cleanthes should also assume the role of critic against each other is but a natural outcome of the matter discussed: religious systems or theological hypotheses vehemently defended by people who are all-too-eager to denounce the absurdities of other systems, yet not quite willing to confront those implied by their own.¹⁰

2. Philo is not Hume's mouthpiece; he only gives that impression, which is almost inevitable and due to the psychological advantage the sceptic or negative thinker enjoys in any controversy (Franco-Ferraz, 223-24). She quotes "Of the Immortality of the Soul" to strengthen her case. Yet she leaves out the following sentence of that passage which appears, if straightforwardly interpreted, to make in this case the victory of the sceptic almost inevitable: "If the question be out of the common experienced course of nature, this circumstance is almost, if not altogether, decisive."¹¹ The advantage enjoyed by the sceptic is not so much psychological, but logical or epistemological, since it is due to the nature of what is argued about: theological subjects that lie beyond common experience.

3. The final verdict of the *Dialogues*, delivered by Pamphilus and done in imitation and as a parody of the ending of the *De natura deorum*, is a clever device to attenuate the importance of Philo and cancel his apparent victory (Franco-Ferraz, 224-25). This is by far the strongest of her contentions, and I have nothing to oppose to it, except

for an admittedly extraneous consideration which makes me wonder. Other commentators of the *Dialogues*, such as Peter Gay¹² and Ernest Mossner (who on this issue follows Gay),¹³ have given a very similar assessment of Pamphilus' verdict in order to support the conclusion opposite to hers; that is, that Philo is "always Hume's authentic voice"¹⁴ or that "Hume is Philo."¹⁵

4. Since in Part XII Philo takes off the "mask" of the sceptic and comes to an agreement with Cleanthes, his scepticism being no more than a tactical manoeuvre to draw Cleanthes and Demea out of their respective dogmatical positions, and since Part XII offers no solution to the problems dealt with, then "it is impossible to think of Philo as a complete spokesman for Hume's ideas" (Franco-Ferraz, 226). I have no queries with the antecedent of this reasoning and even the consequent may be true after all. What I do find questionable is that such assertion about the lack of a definitive conclusion to Part XII is exceedingly vague and totally unsupported by any analysis of the different theoretical positions which the text of Part XII contains. Besides, without a detailed comparison of Philo's "careless" scepticism with Hume's "mitigated" scepticism the question whether or not Philo represents Hume is left undecided.¹⁶

On the whole, though, I agree with Franco-Ferraz that it would be a mistake, and also an unprofitable philosophical exercise, to approach the *Dialogues* looking for clues as to who Hume's authentic voice is. This can be at best a secondary issue. However, even allowing for her justified criticism of those who are obsessed with finding Hume's complete spokesman and also for the interplay of the many voices which in the course of the debate criticize, influence and modify each others' opinions, I still believe that it does not thence follow that the text of the *Dialogues* as a whole does not offer a definitive position on behalf of its author about the substantive issue under discussion as his main theoretical intention.

Franco-Ferraz is also right in pointing out that the real victory in the *Dialogues* is not of any particular character "but rather of 'true philosophy' or reason" (Franco-Ferraz, 227). This is what Páll Ardal has called the "virtue of reasonableness"¹⁷ or that calm passion responsible for the tendency to form natural beliefs which allow us to correct our personal biases, to take up impartial points of view, and to form general rules of reasoning and conduct. It was precisely this "Spirit of Impartiality" which Hume believed his own philosophy to foment and which also seems to have guided him in the composition of the *History of England*.¹⁸

Still, one conclusion Franco-Ferraz draws at the end of her paper, that is, that it is left to the reader to assent not to the hypothesis presented as the only accurate one but to that "which will 'strike' him

with enough 'vividness' for total belief" (Franco-Ferraz, 233), appears not quite consonant with her preceding statement about the triumph of true philosophy. But again, the latter may be a wrong supposition, due to the vagueness of an assertion which allows for different readings.

On the whole, these misgivings should not be attributed to any lack of sympathy on my part with Maria Franco-Ferraz's more than reasonably successful effort to establish an intelligible relation between the literary form and the theoretical substance of the *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* and some of the main tenets of Hume's philosophy.

University of Puerto Rico, Rio Piedras

1. Maria Franco-Ferraz, "Theatre and Religious Hypothesis," *Hume Studies* 15.1 (April 1989): 220-35. Further references are given in parentheses within the text and notes.
2. References to Hume's works in this paper will be to the following editions: *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge, 2d ed., rev., ed. P. H. Nidditch (Oxford, 1978); "An Abstract of A Treatise of Human Nature," in *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge, 2d ed., rev., ed. P. H. Nidditch (Oxford, 1978); *Enquiries Concerning the Human Understanding and Concerning the Principles of Morals*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge, 3d ed., rev., ed. P. H. Nidditch (Oxford, 1975); *David Hume: Essays, Moral, Political and Literary*, rev. ed., ed. Eugene F. Miller (Indianapolis, 1987); *The Natural History of Religion*, ed. H. E. Root (California, 1956); *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, 2d ed., ed. Norman Kemp Smith (New York, 1947); *The Letters of David Hume*, ed. J. Y. T. Greig, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1969). Further references to these texts are given in parentheses within the text and notes.
3. Some recent authors have taken notice of the connection between the dramatic form and the philosophical argument: "In the *Dialogues* Hume's dialectical intelligence finds its true literary form, a form the analogues of which are discerned from the *Treatise* on." Thus argues Donald Livingston in *Hume's Philosophy of Common Life* (Chicago and London, 1984), 39. Peter Jones, in *Hume's Sentiments, Their Ciceronian and French Context* (Edinburgh, 1982), 69, asserts that "Hume valued the dialogue form because it allowed the full expression of rival views." And according to Peter Gay, in *The Enlightenment: An Interpretation*, 2 vols. (New York, 1975), 1:414-15, the *Dialogues* is a book "almost unique in the literature of theological disputation in its felicitous

- marriage of form and substance—a drama, cerebral but exciting [which is] a genuine confrontation of ideas.”
4. Gay (above, n. 3), 1:415.
 5. Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 1090b 19-20: “Observation shows that nature is not episodic, like a bad tragedy.”
 6. See also E 23, 67-68.
 7. *Letters*, 1:173.
 8. *Letters*, 1:153
 9. *Letters*, 1:154.
 10. NHR 57: “Every by-stander will easily judge (but unfortunately the by-standers are few) that, if nothing were requisite to establish any popular system, but exposing the absurdities of other systems, every votary of every superstition could give a sufficient reason for his blind and bigotted attachment to the principles, in which he has been educated.”
 11. *Essays*, 598.
 12. Gay (above, n. 3), 1:415, n. 8: “But this is not to be taken as a statement of Hume’s own views; it is an imitation of the the last sentence of Cicero’s *De natura deorum* and, I think, a delicious bit of irony behind which the elusive David Hume escapes once again.”
 13. E. C. Mossner, *The Life of David Hume*, 2d ed. (Oxford, 1980), 634.
 14. Mossner (above, n. 13), 635.
 15. Gay (above, n. 3), 1:414.
 16. A very convincing case in favour of the validity of such identification has been presented by Stanley Tweyman in *Scepticism and Belief in Hume’s Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* (Dordrecht, 1986).
 17. Páll Ardal, “Some Implications of the Virtue of Reasonableness in Hume’s Treatise,” in *Hume, A Re-Evaluation*, ed. Donald Livingston and James King (New York, 1976), 91-106.
 18. “The Prejudices of all factions have not so far subsided that a History wrote with a Spirit of Impartiality could withstand the Rage and Clamor.” Letter to Andrew Millar of 26 August 1765, quoted by Mossner (above, n. 13), 637.