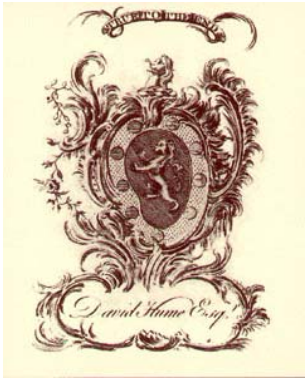

A Dialogic Interpretation of Hume's *Dialogues*
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For all of its prominence in contemporary Anglo-American philosophy of religion, Hume's *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* continues to provoke divergent readings, especially as regards its author's intentions and beliefs. Most writers today, following Norman Kemp Smith's masterful analysis, accept some version of what I will call "the standard interpretation": Hume aimed to discredit religion—natural and revealed religion alike, but especially the "experimental theism" represented by Cleanthes' so-called "design argument." Hence, the sceptic "Philo represents Hume's views on religious belief," even though Cleanthes (occasionally) and Demea (rarely) also speak for Hume.[1] But a significant minority have given divergent interpretations: some have held that Pamphilus, the narrator of the *Dialogues*, is Hume;[2] some have given credence to Hume's remark in a letter that "I make Cleanthes the Hero of the Dialogue";[3] others think that none of the characters represent Hume, at least not consistently, either because the characters represent types, not individuals,[4] or because none are "wholly consistent, completely clear-headed, and unmuddled throughout,"[5] or because "it is the whole of the dialogue which represents Hume."[6] One interpreter has even gone so far as to declare that "I shall take it that Hume in the *Dialogues* is any speaker who appears to be making a good philosophical point,"[7] which is tantamount to identifying Hume with any self-assured philosophical reader of the *Dialogues*!

My chief purpose in this essay is not to take issue with these interpretations, nor to propose a novel interpretation of the text—though I will do both—but rather to promote a different *kind* of interpretation altogether: what I will call a *"dialogic"* interpretation, since it views the literary form as contributory and indeed essential to the philosophical message.[8]

Still, the particular dialogic interpretation I propose may be of interest. On it, the *Dialogues* are *not* chiefly a diatribe against theism, much less a polemic against all (theistic or Christian) religion. Rather, the book at its most searching level is a careful rational examination of "true" vs. "false" religion, with the virtues of the former commended even as the vices of the latter are condemned. In short, Hume gives us an eighteenth century discussion of *religious faith in relation to human*

reason, a discussion wherein reason is not automatically the enemy of faith (in *all* its guises).

More specifically, Philo's and Cleanthes' apparent disagreements on the results and utility of *natural theology* mask a more fundamental and considerably more important harmony in their views concerning "the proper office of religion."[9] Contrary to the standard interpretation, they fundamentally agree on the nature and value of *natural piety*, which is the other component of natural religion besides natural theology.[10] In the end, then, Pamphilus is not wrong to judge that Cleanthes' principles "approach still nearer to the truth" than Philo's, and not merely for reasons of filial piety (he is, after all, Cleanthes' house-guest, his loyal student, and his "adopted son"). No doubt Philo does tend to "win" his skirmishes in natural theology with Cleanthes (not to mention those with Demea!), but though Philo triumphs tactically, Cleanthes is the victor in the wider war for Pamphilus' heart and mind: critical scepticism may be a useful safeguard for careful thinkers against the "superstition" endemic to "false" and harmful piety, but its utility is limited; Philo's prophylaxis is much less effective than Cleanthes' empirical theism at the vitally important task of inculcating and nurturing "true" natural piety in a young person such as Pamphilus.

However, before supporting this controversial view of the *Dialogues*, I need to make clearer the nature, limits and value of a dialogic interpretation, by way of contrast with the more common approaches.

I. Standard Hermeneutics

Most philosophical interpretations of the *Dialogues* share several assumptions—or perhaps one should say "presumptions."

First, they all focus on the *propositions, beliefs, and arguments* expressed by characters in the *Dialogues*—their claims, assertions, speculations, suggestions, rejections, replies, reasons, rebuttals, and the like—and they seek to extract from the discussion those expressed or implied beliefs and arguments which current interpreters believe most worthy of continuing philosophical adherence, development, demolition, or at least discussion. Literary devices, such as character, scene, language, and action, are relegated to the deep background. The assumption, usually unspoken, is that "Hume is a philosopher first and a literary stylist second"[11]—as if the latter could only be incidental and inferior to the former.

Second, they all seek to shed light on *Hume's own beliefs* in the *Dialogues* by appealing to some *external hermeneutical context*; this means that the tools of interpretation are brought to the *Dialogues*, not discovered therein. The most popular version of this method involves

exploiting Hume's presumably unproblematic views set forth in his other, non-dialogic writings, whether on religion (for example, *The Natural History of Religion*, chaps. 10 and 11 of *An Inquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, and some essays), on other philosophical topics (for example, *A Treatise of Human Nature*), or in his correspondence. Humean rhetorical devices, distinctions, claims, and arguments found in these texts are then imported into the *Dialogues* for purposes of analysis. But other interpreters venture beyond other Humean writings to consider even wider contexts, such as Hume's life and times[12] or ancient antecedents for Hume's characters and their views.[13]

Third, the subject-matter of the *Dialogues* is taken, almost unquestioningly, to be *theism*, or at any rate *deism*, and related *theological beliefs*—as if the title of the book were "Dialogues Concerning Natural *Theology*."[14] The heart of the book is seen to be the progressive dismemberment of natural theological claims and arguments: Cleanthes' a posteriori arguments in parts 2-8, Demea's a priori argument in part 9, and various "moral" arguments in parts 10-11.[15] Of course the tendency of these lengthy theological discussions has been variously construed. A few commentators have accepted at face value Philo's closing words: "To be a philosophical Sceptic is, in a man of letters, the first and most essential step towards being a sound, believing Christian" (D 228, pt. 12). Others have embraced the naturalism occasionally explored or even advanced by Philo; but most have converted Philo's scepticism about natural theology into Hume's support for agnosticism or even atheism.[16] However, nearly everyone seems to assume that natural *theology* is the proper, if not the entire, object of philosophical scrutiny of "natural religion," and that this must therefore be what the *Dialogues* are about.

II. Dialogic Hermeneutics

Doubtless interpretations sharing these three assumptions are useful, since they are so plentiful; but the assumptions need not be made, and, in fact, they may be displaced as follows:

To begin with, a dialogic interpretation takes seriously the *literary form* of the *Dialogues*—neither as a substitute for, nor as something incidental to, much less as an enemy of, philosophical thought, but rather as its essential vehicle.[17] In a carefully contrived or "artful" dialogue, the setting, language, action, characters—how, when, and where something is said, as well as by whom and to whom—all contribute to the content of the discourse, and none are lacking in philosophical interest. Propositions expressed need to be understood in the *internal* context of the conversation, in the context of what is being done and left undone, being said and kept unsaid, to what ends and by whom, and at what point in a developing discussion. Comments, claims

and arguments may be taken at face value only when one can be sure that the character's speech is intended to be straightforwardly assertive and when the character himself is both trustworthy in general and candid on this occasion. In short, the "views" expressed *by* characters in the *Dialogues* cannot be extracted as naked atomic assertions; rather, they must be interpreted in the rich context of the book as a whole. A dialogic interpretation must attempt to make sense of *all* aspects of the work, not just of apparent or merely verbal expressions of isolated propositions.

Next, since a dialogic interpretation seeks to understand the *Dialogues* primarily by means of *internal*, not external context, this means making maximum interpretive use of distinctions and positions developed within the text, instead of importing hermeneutical aids from other texts and contexts. But it also means resisting, for a time at least, the enormous pressure felt by most interpreters to say exactly *what Hume believes*; in bracketing this biographical concern, one may be freed to explore *what the text itself says and shows*, on its own merits. Of course, no text is completely self-interpreting, but the distortion introduced by external, and possibly alien, hermeneutical principles may well be more damaging than the incompletion and ambiguity of self-reflexivity.

Finally, a dialogic interpretation takes seriously the *subject-matter* staked out by the book's title: "Dialogues Concerning Natural *Religion*." Theology or theism, all characters in the book agree, is not all of religion—it is not even religion's most significant or important part—just as natural religion is not all of religion, and religion not all of life. In addition to *theology*, religion also includes *piety*, and in addition to *natural* religion, there is also *revealed* religion.[18] That is why these themes recur in the characters' discussion of natural religion: (i) the relation (and relative value) of natural theology to natural piety, and the relations of both of them to revealed theology and piety, as well as the relation of religion as a whole (both natural and revealed) to the remainder of human life; (ii) the proper use of *human reason* in and for religious life as a whole (and not just in theology); and (iii) the vital importance of proper *education* in religious piety and theology. Not only do these themes recur; they also intertwine, as Demea, Cleanthes, and Philo, in their differing ways, all seek to design and promote a proper education in and about theology for the benefit of their pious young auditor, Pamphilus.

III. Dialogic Rationale

Why develop a dialogic interpretation of the *Dialogues*? Aside from the inherent attractiveness of trying to make sense of an important

philosophical text as much as possible on its own terms, there are two major reasons.

One is that Hume's superb literary craftsmanship should not be ignored or undervalued.[19] Hume confessed that "a passion for literature ... has been the ruling passion of my life, and the great source of my enjoyments,"[20] and he was perfectly capable of penning not only felicitous phrases and cogent arguments but also entire graceful conversations. Nor were the *Dialogues* hastily composed; Hume spent portions of the last twenty-five years of his life writing and revising the work.[21] Indeed, Hume's biographer thinks Hume prized the work as "the best thing he had ever written."[22] It is therefore somewhat surprising that Hume is usually treated as if he had written, in the *Dialogues*, a mostly straightforward, albeit occasionally cryptic, piece of prose—a circuitous expository essay. He has seldom been given the courtesy, normally extended to Plato, of taking seriously the evidently "artful" dramatic context he so carefully contrived.

Another reason is that a dialogic interpretation may be able to evade the notorious difficulties, faced by the usual interpretations, of making sense of *all* that is said and done in the *Dialogues*. The major recognized problem for the standard interpretation is that if Philo, representing Hume, seeks to promote agnosticism or even sceptical atheism, then his behaviour in part 12 is at the very least odd, for he apparently "reverses" or even "recants" his opposition to Cleanthes' design argument and, even worse, expresses a longing to "fly to revealed truth with the greatest avidity" (D 227, pt. 12, Philo). But there are other difficulties as well: Philo's "embarrassment" in part 3; Philo's proclamation of the sceptic's "complete triumph" in parts 8 and 10 being subsequently undermined by his apparent embrace of the design argument in part 12; Philo's unexpectedly weak echo of Cleanthes' refutation of Demea's a priori argument in part 9; the reasons why Demea leaves at the end of part 11; the vastly changed "manner" of conversation between Cleanthes and Philo in part 12 following Demea's departure; and Pamphilus' closing judgement that while "PHILO's principles are more probable than DEMEA's ... those of CLEANTHES approach still nearer to the truth" (D 228, pt. 12).[23]

Now, of course, traditional interpretations have various ways of dealing with such difficulties—the usual device is to interpret comments adverse to one's thesis as plain or exquisite *irony*[24]—but there is no need to deal with them here. The mere fact that such defenses have failed to foreclose continuing minority interpretations of the *Dialogues* suffices to show that they are not entirely convincing.

So there is some reason for thinking that a dialogic approach may prove helpful in understanding Hume's *Dialogues*. Let us therefore

begin with some distinctions internal to the text, and see how they work towards the text's interpretation.

IV. Agreement, Disagreement, and Importance

The dialogue form, Pamphilus tells his friend Hermippus in the prologue (D 127-28), is "peculiarly adapted" to certain subjects: those on which there is universal (or at least widespread) *agreement* because they are so *"obvious"* and *"important,"* and those on which there is irresolvable *disagreement* not only because (by implication) they are so obscure that a number of contrary views seem equally (im)plausible but also because they are finally *un*important.[25]

Important agreement "cannot be too often inculcated" by being shown in a "variety of lights, presented by various personages and characters" (D 127, Pamphilus).[26] Just so can a dialogue reveal such agreement through character and action as well as through discourse, through being and doing as well as through saying. Consider, for example, the most dramatic moment of the *Dialogues*—Demea's departure at the end of part 11. After he leaves, the "manner" of the conversation greatly alters. In the first eleven parts there is a mixed audience for every speech—"mixed" in the ways in which the other two characters agree or disagree with the speaker and respond to him. As a result, every speaker naturally plays to his audience, and it should be no surprise to find, as we do find, all three speakers occasionally making claims they don't believe, attacking principles they secretly hold, and indulging in gratuitous name-calling.[27]

But what is the situation in part 12, after Demea leaves, when at long last Philo and Cleanthes are left alone together?[28] These are fast friends who have long known each other's true views; they "live in *unreserved* intimacy" with each other (D 214, pt. 12, Philo; emphasis added). Hence we may assume that they no longer need to play the roles of dogmatic or sceptical philosophers; they can finally state their true convictions candidly and straightforwardly, without rhetorical exaggeration for (another's) effect. So, if Philo now says that he subscribes to a (very weak) version of the design argument, we should not worry about a "conversion" or change of position from something affirmed previously in the presence of Demea, nor should we think that heavy irony now veils Philo's true views from Cleanthes. On the contrary, we should now take Philo at his word, for now we have the public sceptic privately unburdening himself to his intimate friend. This *is* what Philo truly believes, and his agreement with Cleanthes in part 12 is genuine.

Ah, but is it *important* agreement? Most commentators hold that, even if part 12 did express what Philo genuinely believes (which they doubt), its importance could only be minimal; in particular, it could not

matter much whether anyone assents or dissents to Philo's vague (and "somewhat ambiguous, at least undefined" proposition: *"[t]hat the cause or causes of order in the universe probably bear some remote analogy to human intelligence"* (D 227, pt. 12).

We may agree that such a proposition doesn't matter much in itself, nor as an inductive hypothesis of empirical science; but when this agreement is wedded, as it is, to other agreements of Philo and Cleanthes that emerge in part 12, it grows in significance. These other agreements include: the priority of piety to theology (theology is the handmaid of piety); the nature and limits of human reason (disputes among theological hypotheses are, like those between "agreement" and "dogmatists," "entirely verbal" [D 219n, pt. 12][29]); and, most importantly, the nature of natural piety: "[t]he proper office of religion is to regulate the heart of men, humanize their conduct, infuse the spirit of temperance, order, and obedience" (D 220, pt. 12, Cleanthes). Philo and Cleanthes agree, I think, that the vague "design hypothesis" is the minimal theological proposition both consistent with and needed to accomplish this important "proper office" of religious piety.

In this context, Philo's wordy disagreements with Cleanthes in parts 2-11 about the *degrees* of analogy (between "the cause or causes of order" in the universe and "human intelligence") are as unimportant as they are irresolvable. Recall that the dialogue form is said (by Pamphilus) to be particularly appropriate here. It is precisely such "question[s] of philosophy," which are so *"obscure"* and *"uncertain"* that no fixed conclusion can be reached and "no one can reasonably be positive" concerning them (D 127-28, Pamphilus), that are best displayed in dialogue form.

But, however good at displaying obvious and important agreement and obscure and unimportant disagreement, dialogues are not so adept at voicing clear and important *dis*agreement.[30] Hence the deeply significant dispute between Demea and the other two characters over the proper kind of religious piety is not directly stated in the *Dialogues* but is only suggested or implied, most clearly by the action of Demea in leaving the conversation when the more dangerous differences in piety come close to being broached.[31]

Another facet of obscure and unimportant disagreement should not be overlooked:

> Opposite sentiments, even without any decision, afford an agreeable amusement: and 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, Pamphilus)

On one level, of course, the *Dialogues* show us how Philo and Cleanthes are indeed carried into the company of one another (while Demea removes himself from this company), due to their mutual interest in exploring—and expressing "opposite sentiments" about—natural theology. But the intended "company" of the book is, I think, considerably larger. The *Dialogues* are an invitation to other persons—to Pamphilus and Hermippus, of course, but also to the reader—to continue the dialogues: to participate in the twin pleasures of "study" (of natural theology) and "society" (the company not only of Philo and Cleanthes, but also of one another). The ultimate aim is thus to live in "unreserved intimacy" with those with whom one disagrees.

V. "The Real Point of Controversy" is Piety, not Theology[32]

In part 2, Demea seeks to apply the distinction between obvious/important agreement and obscure/unimportant disagreement. According to him, the "Being" of God is obvious ("so certain and self-evident") and important ("that fundamental principle of all religion"), while the "NATURE of GOD" is so obscure and uncertain that it is "altogether incomprehensible and unknown to us" (D 141, pt. 2).[33] Most interpreters have taken either or both of these theological topics to be the central ones of the *Dialogues*: are they, and Demea, right?

A careful reader of the *Dialogues* will always view with suspicion anything Demea affirms. Moreover, his application of this distinction is undercut in a number of ways: first, Cleanthes dissents (proposing to prove in a single a posteriori argument both the being and the nature of God [D 143, pt. 2]). Second, Demea discards his own distinction scarcely two pages later, where in response to Cleanthes' a posteriori argument he expostulates: "What! No *demonstration* of the Being of a God!" (D 143, pt. 2; emphasis added)—thereby seeking to prove what is allegedly "so certain and self-evident." Third, Philo's apparent agreement with Demea seems ironic, since Philo supports *with an argument* the view that the "*Being*" of "the Deity" is "unquestionable and self-evident" (D 142, pt. 2)—and not just *any* argument but precisely that kind of a priori argument to a first cause of the universe which Philo and Cleanthes later (in part 9) criticize Demea for using. Fourth, Philo playfully proposes as appropriate philosophical "punishment" for anyone disagreeing with Demea's view not the civil and ecclesiastical penalties Demea would support, nor even a rational critique or argument, but only "ridicule, contempt, and disapprobation" (D 142, pt. 2). Finally, and quite apart from the *Dialogues*, the agreement/disagreement distinction would seem oddly applied in this case: how could everyone agree on the existence of something

concerning whose nature there was complete disagreement? About what would they be agreeing?[34]

These are all indications, I believe, that one must be very careful in registering the *importance* and *clarity* of agreements and disagreements in the *Dialogues*; not all agreements are equally important or obvious to everyone, and not all disagreements are equally obscure or unimportant. Consider, for example, Demea's dawning realization that Philo's initial verbal agreement in theology with him and against Cleanthes is shallow and misleading; with increasing dismay Demea comes to see that this agreement masks a much more fundamental disagreement in piety between himself, on the one hand, and both Philo and Cleanthes on the other. So we readers, too, in order truly to come "into company" with the characters of the *Dialogues*, must learn to discern what is important among their agreements and disagreements—that is, we must take to heart Philo's advice: "Consider, then, where *the real point of controversy* lies" (D 218-19, pt. 12; emphasis added).

In order to locate this "real point" more precisely, we must first clarify another important distinction made in the text—that between *theology* and *piety*. This distinction gets blurred for many readers because of the ambiguity of the terms "belief" and "principle": such terms may refer either to the act or the content of intellectual assent to religious propositions, on the one hand, or to a kind of embodiment of those propositions in feeling-response, habitual practice, or way of life, on the other. The former is theology, religious theory, and the latter is piety, religious practice; they use and express religious beliefs and principles in quite different ways.

To illustrate the distinction between theology and piety, consider Demea's typically confused initial speeches in part 1. In endorsing religious education, he seems at first to be thinking of the "science of natural theology"—the intellectual activity of clarifying concepts, understanding arguments, and believing propositions—a study which naturally comes late in life; but when Philo chides him on being "so late ... in teaching your children the principles of religion" (D 130, pt. 1), Demea quickly responds as follows:

> It is only as a *science* ... subjected to human reasoning and disputation, that I postpone the study of Natural Theology. To season [children's] minds with early *piety* is my chief care; and by continual precept and instruction, and I hope too, by example, I imprint deeply on their tender minds an habitual reverence for all the principles of religion. (D 130, pt. 1; emphasis added)

In short, theology can wait, but not piety.[35]

To return, then, to "the real point of controversy" in the *Dialogues*. It is clear, I believe, that the initial agreements and disagreements among Demea, Philo, and Cleanthes concerning the being vs. nature distinction in God turn out to be unimportant for all concerned. What, then, by way of contrast, is important?

For a clue, note some other agreements and disagreements: all agree that early education in religious piety is important and "reasonable,"[36] and all disagree on the kind of value which natural theology has for such piety. These agreements and disagreements are themselves relatively unimportant,[37] but they do point to something deeper: *agreement and disagreement about piety*, about the kind of piety one should practice, inculcate, and theologize about. Here, I believe, Demea really and importantly does disagree with Philo and Cleanthes, who truly and fundamentally are friends on this matter.

Demea supports a kind of revealed religious piety, rooted in fear of the unknown, that gives rise to a detailed dogmatic theology that Philo and Cleanthes consider "superstitious," as well as to various repressive practices. Philo and Cleanthes, on the other hand, uphold a kind of natural religious piety, resting on the experienced joys of ordinary "common life," which generates at best a fuzzy philosophical theology and which gives aid and comfort to a tolerant morality and to a kinder, gentler communal life. Agreement in piety is the cornerstone of community, while disagreement in piety makes enemies, starts wars, and invites persecutions.

In short, the "real point of controversy" in the *Dialogues*, on my dialogic reading of them, is not theology but piety. In order to give further support for this claim, we shall explore more carefully how Demea's piety is portrayed, contrasting it with the piety of Philo and Cleanthes.

VI. Demea's Piety

We first see Demea in part 1 complimenting Cleanthes on his education of Pamphilus, while urging "a maxim which I have observed with regard to my own children," namely, to follow an ancient authority (Crysippus) by first teaching "*Logics, then Ethics, next Physics, last of all, the Nature of the Gods*" (D 130, pt. 1). On being challenged by Philo, Demea makes clear that it is only the "science" of natural theology which comes last; "[t]o season their minds with early piety is my chief care," for one must "imprint deeply on their tender minds an habitual reverence for all the principles of religion" which is much stronger than their regard for "the principles of mere human reason." Only after he has "tamed their mind to a proper submission and self-diffidence" will he allow them to partake of philosophy (D 130-31, pt. 1, Demea).

Already we can see that a chief feature of Demea's piety is its non-rational submissiveness to authority.

Indeed, an appeal to authority is precisely how Demea piously begins to argue for his views, when he claims that the being of God is "certain and self-evident" while the nature of God is "altogether incomprehensible and unknown to us."[38] So far beyond the discernment of human natural capacity is God's nature that it is "profaneness" and "temerity" even to inquire about God—a religious error second only to "the impiety of denying his existence" (D 141, pt. 2, Demea). "But," continues Demea, "lest you should think that my *piety* has here got the better of my *philosophy* [which of course it has!], I shall support my opinion, if it needs any support [which it does], by a very great authority" (D 141, pt. 2; he then cites Malebranche). Even in what is supposed to be "philosophy," Demea's reflex is to appeal to authority!

But such an appeal is very weak philosophically, and so Demea quickly embraces Philo's scepticism as a more seemly philosophical prop for his orthodoxy. It seems to Demea, a conversational opportunist, that placing severe limits on human reason is a marvellous way to prove "the adorable mysteriousness of the Divine Nature" (D 145, pt. 2). If God's existence is certain and nothing can be known of God via our native capacities—since "the infirmities of our nature do not permit us to reach any ideas, which in the least correspond to the ineffable sublimity of the divine attributes" (D 157, pt. 3, Demea)—then our only hope for salvation is to throw ourselves completely on divine mercy and to believe whatever God tells us.[39]

But philosophical scepticism can be extended even to the alleged certainty of God's existence, and so Demea next embraces an a priori proof, which he mentions with favour as early as part 2 (D 143, 145), but doesn't develop until part 9, after Cleanthes' a posteriori design argument has been exhaustively explored. But why an *a priori* proof, when Demea so disdains *a posteriori* natural theological arguments? Because, thinks Demea, a posteriori arguments at best can yield only a probability of Deity or deities, and then "what trust or confidence can we repose in them? What devotion or worship address to them? What veneration or obedience pay them? To all [N.B.!] the purposes of life the theory of religion becomes altogether useless" (D 170, pt. 6, Demea). In other words, merely probable arguments won't support the total devotion and absolute submission required by Demea's orthodox piety; indeed, the habit of mind they express and satisfy cannot submit totally to anything or anyone. In short, an a posteriori argument cannot possibly yield the kind of "perfect evidence" (D 145, pt. 2, Demea) or "infallible demonstration, [which] cuts off at once all doubt and difficulty" and yields the "certainty" orthodox piety requires (D 188, pt. 9, Demea).

But a priori demonstration also fails, as Demea implicitly concedes in not responding to Cleanthes' and Philo's influential criticisms of his argument in part 9,[40] and so in part 10 Demea at length retreats to an *a posteriori* argument, an argument from experience, as the final philosophical support for his piety, thereby revealing at last his true colours: "It is my opinion, I own, ... that each man feels, in a manner, the truth of religion within his own breast" (D 193, pt. 10). What is this feeling? It is "a consciousness of his imbecility and misery," a sense of "unknown powers, whom we find, by experience, so able to afflict and oppress us. Wretched creatures that we are!" Life, "all men declare from their own immediate feeling and experience," is *miserable*, and one must look to religion for means to "appease" the misery-making powers (D 193, pt. 10, Demea). Such piety is laid bare in a remarkable paragraph a page later:

> The whole earth, believe me, PHILO, is cursed and polluted. A perpetual war is kindled amongst all living creatures. Necessity, hunger, want, stimulate the strong and courageous: Fear, anxiety, terror, agitate the weak and infirm. The first entrance into life gives anguish to the new-born infant and to its wretched parent: Weakness, impotence, distress, attend each stage of that life: and 'tis at last finished in agony and horror. (D 194, pt. 10, Demea)

This is the piety of a frightened and frightening man, one who seeks peace of mind through certainty at any cost, who will not tolerate any dissent, and who is even prepared to throttle any dissenter. The harvest of this piety is not merely, or necessarily, an unshakable conviction of the truth of an orthodox Creed, but also, and more ominously, an amputated mind, an authoritarian personality, and a repressive society.

VII. The Piety of Philo and Cleanthes

What about Philo and Cleanthes? How does their piety *differ* from Demea's? Do they in fact share the *same* piety? We may approach these questions by considering their reactions to Demea's fearful outburst just cited. Philo at first seems to side with Demea against Cleanthes in embroidering the evils of existence: "I am indeed persuaded, ... that the best and indeed the only method of bringing every one to a due sense of religion, is by just representations of the misery and wickedness of men" (D 193, pt. 10).[41] In so representing human misery, Philo comes close to devising two atheological arguments that mirror (or parody) Cleanthes' and Demea's earlier attempts: (i) an a posteriori argument from "the curious artifices of Nature" in producing such

overwhelming misery (D 194, pt. 10, Philo), and (ii) an a priori argument from the incompatibility of omnicompetent benevolence and evil ("EPICURUS' old questions" [D 198, pt. 10, Philo]). Cleanthes, meanwhile, takes the tack of "deny[ing] absolutely the misery and wickedness of men" (D 200, pt. 10)—that is, of denying that misery and wickedness predominate over happiness and virtue in human life—just for the sake of persisting in his adherence to a thoroughgoing empirical theism which derives *all* the attributes of divinity, including the "moral" ones, from the experienced properties of the world.

But these initially divergent reactions to the "misery" of life are more apparent than genuine or deep. Philo never does draw the atheistic conclusion which would seem so natural; instead he twice admits the soundness of teleological reasoning about the universe (D 202, pt. 10), and he insists that his chief conclusion is that we can never "*infer* the *moral* attributes [of God], or learn that *infinite* benevolence, conjoined with *infinite* power and *infinite* wisdom, which *we must discover by the eyes of faith alone*" (D 202, pt. 10, Philo; emphasis added). And Cleanthes, mindful of the difficulty of reconciling *any* evil (however counterbalanced or outweighed by good) with an omnicompetent good God, turns in the next part to an exploration of a "finitely perfect" deity whose existence, he hopes, may be not only compatible with but also inferable from "just such a [mixed] world as the present" (D 203, pt. 11, Cleanthes).

Philo allows that the morally ambiguous character of the world may be "*consistent* ... with the idea of such a Deity, [but] it can never afford us an *inference* concerning his existence" (D 205, pt. 11; emphasis added). Instead, he finds more probable the hypothesis that "the original source of all things is entirely indifferent" to "the feelings of sensible creatures" (D 212, pt. 11, Philo). Indeed, "[t]he whole presents nothing but the idea of a blind Nature, impregnated by a great vivifying principle, and pouring forth from her lap, without discernment or parental care, her maimed and abortive children" (D 211, pt. 11, Philo). Rather belatedly, Demea perceives the heterodox tendencies of these inquiries, takes offense at them, and exits the conversation. Immediately the "manner" of discourse alters, and both Cleanthes and Philo now feel free to unburden their deeper sentiments.

What happens in parts 10 and 11, then, is this: after Demea blurts out his piety and the darker roots of his theology, neither Philo nor Cleanthes proposes a truly "just representation" of the weal and woe of human existence—at any rate a representation that does justice to their own true sentiments—until part 12. Instead, they both explore various speculative principles of theology which are disconnected from their own personal piety. Demea has given the reader "my opinion, I

own" (D 193, pt. 10), but to discover the true opinions of Philo and Cleanthes we must turn to part 12.

In part 12, the friends agree on three principles enunciated by Philo:[42] (i) "the works of Nature bear a great analogy to the productions of art" (D 216, pt. 12); (ii) "we have reason to infer that the natural attributes of the Deity have a greater resemblance to those of man, than his moral have to human virtues" (D 219, pt. 12); and (iii) although there may be some dispute as to *how* great these analogies are, such a dispute is "merely verbal" or "still more incurably ambiguous" (D 218, pt. 12). Concludes Philo: "These, CLEANTHES, are my *unfeigned* sentiments on this subject; and these sentiments, you know, I have *ever* cherished and maintained" (D 219, pt. 12; emphasis added).[43]

In addition, both friends agree on the nature of reason and its salutary role with respect to religion, although they disagree on reason's effective reach concerning ultimate principles (this is a difference of *degree*). Both are empiricists: reason is not an independent source of truth but is "nothing but a species of experience" (D 150, pt. 2, Cleanthes), and even philosophy is "nothing essentially different from reasoning on common life" (D 134, pt. 1, Philo). Reason's roles are basically two: negatively, to detect the absurdity and impiety of superstitious "bigots" (D 219, pt. 12, Philo); and positively, to assess the evidence for and against theism (cf. D 214, pt. 12, Philo; D 216, pt. 12, Cleanthes). Finally, Philo and Cleanthes agree on the appropriate and reasonable content of natural piety: a common life infused with "the spirit of temperance, order, and obedience" (D 220, pt. 12, Cleanthes) and regulated by "the natural motives of justice and humanity" (D 222, pt. 12, Philo)—in short, a *moral community*.

In the remainder of part 12, Cleanthes and Philo discuss the only lingering disagreement between them: while Philo has a "veneration for true religion" and an "abhorrence of vulgar superstitions" (D 219, pt. 12), Cleanthes holds that "[r]eligion, however corrupted, is still better than no religion at all" (D 219, pt. 12). How important is this disagreement? Note that it is founded on an even deeper agreement in moral piety, since both men hold that "[t]he *proper* office of religion is to regulate the heart of men, humanize their conduct, infuse the spirit of temperance, order and obedience" and thereby promote moral community (D 220, pt. 12, Cleanthes; emphasis added).

Further, the disagreement seems to be a factual, not an evaluative one: Cleanthes thinks that all religion does in fact tend toward this end, while Philo believes that in fact only "the philosophical and rational kind" of religion has this effect and that most religious principles (such as Demea's?) have the opposite tendency. In Philo's view, even if "superstition or enthusiasm" doesn't necessarily detract from morality (though religious zealotry tends in that direction), it nevertheless

diverts attention and "weaken[s] extremely mens attachment to the natural motives of justice and humanity" (D 222, pt. 12). No doubt *both* Cleanthes' blanket acceptance and Philo's total rejection of non-philosophical religion are extreme and untenable positions. But the point to be emphasized is this: their disagreement is a factual, not a philosophical one, a dispute which can be settled by historical or sociological investigation.

It seems, therefore, that "true religion" for *both* Cleanthes and Philo consists largely of a natural moral piety, with a smidgen of support from a thin and tepid natural theology[44]—the theology expressed in Philo's "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*" (D 227, pt. 12)—coupled perhaps with "a longing [but inevitably unfulfilled] desire and expectation" for "some more particular revelation" about the "nature, attributes, and operations of the divine object of our faith" (D 227, pt. 12, Philo). The various speculative theological and factual differences of opinion between the two friends are unimportant in comparison with their fundamental agreement in moral piety. Even the difference between Cleanthes' empirical theism and Philo's agnosticism is somewhat superficial. Both men trust in reason and rational theology to aid and support the piety they share, while Demea's kind of piety stands, if it can stand at all, only on revealed grounds. This is because Demea's piety involves the submission, effacement, or even annihilation of that human capacity which Cleanthes and Philo agree is the best support of a morally decent common life: the rational capacity to propose and evaluate arguments and evidence.[45]

VIII. Conclusion

For someone who has grown up with the standard interpretation, pursuing a dialogic reading of Hume's *Dialogues* may well produce an unsettling Gestalt-shift. Ordinarily, when reading with the usual philosophical blinders, the natural theological arguments contained in parts 2-11 bulk so large as to obscure all else; issues such as the place and value of natural vs. revealed theology, or theology vs. piety, or religion vs. human life as a whole, disappear or are relegated to a merely "literary" background. But when one puts on dialogical spectacles, background becomes foreground, and a myriad of previously unnoticed details becomes significant. No doubt it may seem incongruous that so much of the *Dialogues* should be devoted to what are, on its own terms, not only "obscure and uncertain" issues but also, finally, unimportant ones. But this sense of incongruity fades on the realization that, in Pamphilus' introductory words, "dialogue-writing

is peculiarly adapted" to *showing* such obscurity, uncertainty, and unimportance through the inconclusiveness of its debates. Conversely, one should realize that dialogues also show forth the importance of what is *not* in dispute because it is so "obvious and important."

Hence it is that a dialogical reading of Hume's *Dialogues* can bring us to see that the natural-theological disputes among Demea, Cleanthes, and Philo—however fascinating they may be to professional philosophers—shrink to insignificance beside the gulf in piety separating Demea from Cleanthes and Philo—the gulf between a fanatical "enthusiasm" (in its eighteenth century sense) that so often has had such "pernicious consequences on public affairs" (D 220, pt. 12, Philo) and "so pure a religion, as represents the Deity to be pleased with nothing but virtue in human behaviour" (D 221, pt. 12, Philo).[46]

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1. Coleman 1989, 179. Kemp Smith's (1947) classic defense of this view is found in his introduction to the *Dialogues*: "I shall contend that Philo, from start to finish, represents Hume; and that Cleanthes can be regarded as Hume's mouthpiece only in those passages in which he is explicitly agreeing with Philo, or in those other passages in which, while refuting Demea, he is also being used to prepare the way for one or other of Philo's independent conclusions" (p. 59). Recent authors who more or less agree with Kemp Smith include Coleman 1989; Flew 1986; Force 1977; Gaskin 1988; Huxley 1894 (with qualifications); Mossner 1936, 1977; Nathan 1966; Parent 1976; Passmore 1980; Penelhum 1979, 1983; Pike 1970 (although he thinks Berkeley is the ultimate winner); Popkin 1980; Price 1965; Williams 1963; and Wood 1971.
2. Cf. Hendel 1963; Metz 1929.
3. Hume to Gilbert Elliot of Minto, 10 March, 1751 (Greig 1932, 1:153, letter *72). This was a popular interpretation prior to the acceptance of Kemp Smith's analysis; cf. Laing 1932, 1937; Leroy 1934; Pringle-Pattison 1917; and Taylor 1921, 1939. Harward (1975) thinks both Cleanthes and Philo speak for Hume, but with a non-standard message concerning "inductive" or "informal" inference.
4. "Philo is a true philosopher, Cleanthes a false philosopher, and Demea a vulgar reasoner" (Pakaluk 1984, 120).
5. Bricke 1975, 15-16; cf. Butler 1960; Livingston 1984, 44; Noxon 1966, 1976; Tweyman 1986; Wollheim 1963. The argument from inconsistency cuts at least two ways; A. E. Taylor (1939) agrees that all the characters are inconsistent but rather than excusing

Hume argues that these "very grave deficiencies" (p. 180) betray Hume's own lack of "high seriousness and logical coherency" (p. 179) in matters religious.

6. Morrisroe 1965, 974; cf. Laird 1939, 206-7; Capaldi 1970, 238; Yandell 1976, 111; Yandell 1990, 37-38.
7. Gaskin 1978, 13.
8. We simply do not know exactly why Hume chose to present the topics of the *Dialogues* in dialogic form. Battersby (1979) has some interesting suggestions, and so does Livingston (1984). Livingston, for example, holds that Hume's "dialectical" philosophy finds "its true literary form" in the *Dialogues* (p. 19) and that Hume considered "literary form and content to be internally connected" (p. 43). The present treatment goes considerably beyond both Battersby and Livingston, however.
9. David Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, ed. N. Kemp Smith (Indianapolis, 1947), 220, pt. 12, Cleanthes (hereafter cited as "D"). Further references in the text will include page number(s), part, and speaker (when needed for clarity).
10. The topic of natural piety is surprisingly neglected by commentators, even though all the characters in the *Dialogues*, and Pamphilus, too, agree that it is more important than natural theology.
11. Coleman 1989, 179.
12. Cf., for example, Kemp Smith (1947) on Hume's "Calvinist Environment," Hurlbutt (1965) on Cleanthes and the Newtonians, and Pike (1970) on Demea as Samuel Clarke and Cleanthes as Joseph Butler. Cf. also Mossner 1936, 1977, 1978.
13. Cf. Battersby 1979; Popkin 1980; and Price 1963, 1964, on Cicero's *De natura deorum*. Mossner (1977) and Price (1965) dubiously identify Cicero's Platonist character Pamphilus with Hume's youthful narrator of the same name.
14. For example: "There is no 'natural religion'; or, in other words, theology lies completely outside the realm of positive enquiry" (Passmore 1980, 69); "Natural religion (for Hume) is, I take it, the set of theistic beliefs which are produced by the passions and propensities he discusses in the *Natural History*" (Yandell 1976, 119). Cf. Capitan 1966, 384. Others take the title ironically; the book is really "an open attack on natural religion and a disguised attack on all 'popular' [that is, revealed] religions, in particular, Christianity" (Mossner 1977, 16; cf. Price 1965, 130-31).
15. How to interpret the prologue ("Pamphilus to Hermippus") and parts 1 and 12 then becomes the major problem of this approach.
16. Popkin (1980) says that "Hume has been a major inspiration to modern agnostics, who accept his criticisms at face value and who

see no reason to adopt or retain any religious belief" (p. xix), while Flew (1986) takes Hume's own position to be that of "Stratonician atheism" (p. 67).

17. Cf. Morrisroe 1965, 1970, 1974; Richetti 1983; Box 1990. However, agreement on the importance of literary vehicle for philosophical thought in the *Dialogues* is not enough to secure agreement on the meaning of the text. For example, the present dialogic interpretation is thoroughly opposed to Morrisroe's (1965) claim that "[t]he whole of the *Dialogues*, including the allegedly anticlimactic final four parts dealing with the problem of evil, is aimed at the overthrow of Cleanthes' design argument" (p. 966).
18. The theology/piety distinction will be discussed below; the natural/revealed distinction is not only implicit in the book's title but also explicit in its text—for example, in Philo's closing remark that "[a] person, seasoned with a just sense of the imperfections of *natural* reason, will fly to *revealed* truth with the greatest avidity" (D 227, pt. 12; emphasis added).
19. T. E. Jessop (1939), for example, finds "little subtlety of artistry" in the *Dialogues* (p. 219).
20. David Hume, "My Own Life," in Kemp Smith 1947, 233.
21. Cf. appendix C of Kemp Smith 1947, 87-96; however, Kemp Smith seems to downplay the extensiveness (and effectiveness?) of Hume's efforts. This contrasts with Hume's words ten days before his death: "I find that nothing can be more cautiously and more artfully written" (Hume to Adam Smith, 15 August, 1776 [Greig 1932, 2:334, letter *538]).
22. Mossner 1977, 3; cf. Hume's letter to William Stahan, 8 June, 1776 (Greig 1932, 2:323, letter *525).
23. Indeed, Pamphilus' entire role in the *Dialogues* is a major puzzlement on the usual interpretations, since his comments, taken at face value, seem to undercut the primacy of Philo (Hume's alleged "mouthpiece," or at least the hero of the *Dialogues* according to the standard interpretation). One promising escape route—that Hume wanted to veil from the vulgar public his personal identification with Philo's unpopular views and hence to avoid the mob's obloquy—is blocked, if Kemp Smith is right in claiming that the *Dialogues* were written to be published only posthumously, when there would be no personal repercussions. Cf. Kemp Smith 1947, appendix C. For a contrary view, cf. Mossner 1977, 1. Another approach is to discount Pamphilus' judgements or undermine his credibility—for example, because of his youth, or allegiance to Cleanthes, or lack of appreciation of the need for an initial scepticism, etc.; cf. Tweyman 1986, 156.

24. For example: it is "a book full of irony," the culmination of "an ironic mode of life" (Price 1965; 127, 152); irony is "the key to its basic teachings" (Mossner 1977, 1).
25. This view of the dialogue form may be disputed. In particular, why should dialogues be particularly suited to displaying important agreement and unimportant disagreement, but not important disagreement and unimportant agreement? (I owe this question to James Keller.) A full defense of Pamphilus' remarks would constitute another paper, but one relevant point may be noted: *important* agreement/disagreement transcends—and may not even involve—*verbal* agreement/disagreement, but even so may be expressed through the kind of action portrayed in a dialogue.
26. Note two things: (i) important agreement is compatible with, encompasses, and may even require, differences in presentation; and (ii) "presented by" is ambiguous; it includes what the characters say, what they do, and who they are.
27. Cf. Cleanthes' remark to Philo, which Philo apparently accepts, that "[y]our spirit of controversy, joined to your abhorrence of vulgar superstition, carries you strange lengths, when engaged in an argument; and there is nothing so sacred and venerable, *even in your own eyes*, which you spare *on that occasion*" (D 214, pt. 12; emphasis added). But Cleanthes is equally guilty of name-calling (cf. his exchange with Demea in part 4) and of defending views he doesn't really hold (for example, either his denial of any evil in part 10, or else his affirmation of a "finitely perfect" "Author of Nature" in part 11 is disingenuous).
28. We should not forget, of course, the recording presence of Pamphilus; the conversation between Philo and Cleanthes, as always, is at least as much for his benefit as for their own; but now it goes forth sincerely and from the heart, not merely from the head.
29. Who is the author of this "footnote"? Many assume that it must be Pamphilus, while others consider it to be Hume speaking now in his own proper (but editorial) voice (cf. Tweyman 1986, xv; Noxon 1966, 379); but it is also entirely possible that this paragraph simply belongs to *Philo*—that it is merely an addition to the speech after which Hume wanted it to be inserted (cf. Battersby 1979, 245 n. 17).
30. Again, this has to do in part with the way in which importance transcends propositions. As for obscure and unimportant agreement, see below.
31. What, exactly, makes Demea leave? The text merely has Pamphilus say: "But I could observe, that DEMEA did not at all relish the latter part of the discourse" (D 213, pt. 11). *Which* part

did he not "relish"? We cannot say for sure. Surely it includes Philo's apparently treacherous musings about "the first causes of the universe" (D 212, pt. 11); but it also contains Cleanthes' comment about the dark consequences for piety of Demea's "vulgar theology": "no views of things are more proper to promote superstition, than such as encourage the blind amazement, the diffidence, and melancholy of mankind" (D 213, pt. 11).

32. I am grateful to Forrest Wood for helping me clarify this section.
33. Notice that Demea does *not* say that the disagreement is unimportant—perhaps it does not seem so unimportant to *him*, though it does to Cleanthes and Philo.
34. If we were to venture outside the *Dialogues*, further support might be forthcoming from Hume himself: "The idea of existence, then, is the very same with the idea of what we conceive to be existent" (David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge, 2d ed., rev., ed. P. H. Nidditch [Oxford, 1978], 66). Cf. Butler 1960, 94f.
35. Philo explicitly concurs with this *order* of instruction, and hence with the distinction between theology and piety, even though he clearly does not agree with the *kind* or *content* of piety Demea wants to inculcate. The latter disagreement is implicit initially but emerges explicitly in part 12.
36. The term is Philo's: "seasoning your childrens minds with early piety, is certainly very reasonable" (D 131, pt. 1), and I do not believe that he speaking ironically, as he must be on the standard interpretation. Philo's agreement with Demea on this matter, just noted, is explicit; but Cleanthes also indicates he has provided such an education for Pamphilus, and all three characters seek implicitly to appeal to Pamphilus' presumed piety in their theological arguments throughout the *Dialogues*.
37. The former is unimportant because it is merely formal, masking profound disagreement about the kind of piety the characters wish to inculcate; the latter is unimportant because no matter how theology serves piety, what finally counts is the kind of piety served.
38. Demea apparently sees no contradiction, nor humour, in these claims, but they are very puzzling. How *could* one be certain about something *completely* mysterious? Clearly Demea thinks that God's nature is mysterious only to natural human reason, but that there is another source of truth and wisdom—God's own revelation as preserved by the orthodox, hierarchical, traditional Christian Church—to which one should bend the knee:

> Finite, weak, and blind creatures, we ought to humble ourselves in his august presence, and, conscious of our frailties, adore in silence his infinite perfections, which eye hath not seen, ear hath not heard, neither hath it entered into the heart of man to conceive. (D 141, pt. 2, Demea)

The liturgical, hieratic language expresses Demea's pious heart as well as his orthodox mind, both of which are totally willing to prostrate themselves before higher authority.

39. Note that what Demea wants to accomplish here is not at all what Philo slyly intends in affirming "the adorably mysterious and incomprehensible nature of the Supreme Being" (D 143, pt. 2).
40. Influential they may be, but they are far from fitting Mossner's judgment of "unimpeachable" (Mossner 1977, 18).
41. Note that Demea wallows only in *misery* and not also in *wickedness*. Why? Perhaps because Demea seeks solace from the manifold miseries of life through submission to a higher power who can remove or recompense the misery but who is not necessarily constrained by the moral laws which measure human wickedness, whereas Philo and Cleanthes seek relief through joining with others in moral amelioration of conditions within our control.
42. I think we may take Cleanthes' silence here, in the context of friendly concord, as tacit consent.
43. This passage disconfirms the standard claims that Philo recants his earlier views, or that he speaks ironically in part 12, or that he even changes his position at all.
44. Contra Mossner (1977), this is not a *complete* "philosophical exorcism of the supernatural from religion" (p. 17), though it does retain only a *minimal* and *morally-constrained* supernaturalism. It conceives of God more as an intelligent ultimate *principle* of order than as a particular *person* (cf. Nathan 1976, 146-48). More importantly, however, does such an attenuated "theism" *support* anything at all, or is it "utterly irrelevant to life and thought" (Yandell 1990, 44; cf. similar claims by Kemp Smith 1947, 24; Williams 1963, 87; Mossner 1977, 16)? I think Philo's slender theism *does* support his and Cleanthes' natural piety, but only weakly; it provides *some* basis for adopting or (more likely) retaining such natural piety, but clearly it is not a complete or sufficient support, either as motive, justification, or explanation, nor is it even necessarily the most *important* support one might have. Still, it is not *utterly* irrelevant.

45. There is more to be said about the conceptions of scepticism and philosophy found in the *Dialogues*, and their various roles in the ongoing conversation, but there is no space to say it here.
46. For helpful comments on earlier drafts, I am indebted to John Elrod, James Keller, and Forrest Wood, Jr.

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