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## Doubt and Divinity: Cicero's Influence on Hume's Religious Skepticism

PETER S. FOSL

It is standardly acknowledged that Hume was, to no small extent, a Ciceronian. He himself says so, writing for instance in a letter to Francis Hutcheson that "Upon the whole, I desire to take my catalogue of Virtues from *Cicero's Offices*, not from the *Whole Duty of Man*. I had, indeed, the former Book in my Eye in all my Reasonings."<sup>1</sup> In his autobiographical essay, *My Own Life*, while discussing the years of feverish study he pursued during the late 1720s after having just left university, Hume mentions that

My studious Disposition, my Sobriety, and my Industry gave my Family a Notion that the Law was a proper Profession for me: But I found an unsurmountable Aversion to every thing but the pursuits of Philosophy and general Learning; and while they fancied I was pouring over Voet and Vinnius, Cicero and Virgil were the Authors which I was secretly devouring.<sup>2</sup>

Analyses of Hume's biography and of the culture in which his thought developed give us every indication to regard these remarks as sincere.<sup>3</sup> Current textual studies of Hume's *œuvre* are, on this point, in accord.

However, the standard acknowledgement is incomplete and, in places, even erroneous. Whether by focusing their interpretive lenses too narrowly or by noticing only superficial aspects of comparison, commentators have significantly underestimated the depth of Cicero's influence upon Hume.

John Valdimir Price's account of the similarities between the *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* and Cicero's *De Natura Deorum* is suggestive, as are the assessments of editors such as Norman Kemp Smith and Martin Bell. But Price's arguments are often weak, and his claims are in many cases mistaken, most notably in his characterization of Philo's contentions about God as "ironic."<sup>4</sup> Price also fails to see how other dimensions of Hume's philosophical system—dimensions concerned with Hume's philosophy of mind, experience, and science—can be deployed to shed light upon his effort in the *Dialogues*. Peter Jones's work on Hume and Cicero is seminal, but in centering upon Hume's moral philosophy Jones's assessment of the extent and significance of Cicero's influence on Hume's skepticism and philosophy of religion remains rather limited.<sup>5</sup>

Christine Battersby's work addresses religious topics directly. Situating Hume's work within the tradition of "original imitations," her admirable interpretation enlists rhetorical features of the *Dialogues* in order to articulate the work's philosophical thrust. Battersby's central thesis is that both the rhetorical form of the *Dialogues* and the manner in which it deviates from Cicero's *Deorum* indicate that while Hume objected to the possibility of assuming the Pyrrhonian stance of a total suspension of belief (Battersby, 251), he also maintained that there remains an intrinsic indeterminacy to both theism and atheism: "Hume sees hypocrisy as the occupational disease of clergymen. But just as consistent belief is not possible on such subjects, so is a consistent disbelief" (249). However, in principally addressing the rhetoric of the two works, Battersby neglects features of Hume's Academical skepticism articulated in the *Treatise* and *Enquiries*, which, I maintain, suggest a different, more determinate position, if not on the nature of theological speculation, then at least on the issue of belief in God *per se*.

What follows, then, will complete and correct preceding scholarship by showing how Hume drew upon the *Academica* and *De Natura Deorum* in developing his own "Academical" philosophy and religious skepticism, and it will do so by relating Hume's work in the *Dialogues* to the Academicism of his general philosophical system.<sup>6</sup> To begin, therefore, I will first describe the principal features of Hume's Academicism and the distinction he draws between it and Pyrrhonian skepticism. Insofar as Hume's skepticism is a familiar topic, my presentation will be swift. I will then make use of this rendering in pursuing an assessment of the nature and extent of Cicero's impact on Hume's philosophy of religion.

### Hume's Academical Philosophy

As it was upon many of his contemporaries and immediate predecessors, the influence of the *Academica* upon Hume was profound. However, while many of his contemporaries undertook to eliminate the type of skepticism

presented by this text, Hume embraced it. While scrutinizing the very meaning of the term, "sceptic," in the *Enquiries*, Hume acknowledges his advocacy of a "mitigated" or "Academical" form of skeptical thought (EHU §XXII, 149ff.; especially 161). This he opposes to the thought of skeptics who, both "antecedent" (EHU 149) and "consequent" (EHU 150) to philosophical investigation, call for the assumption of a "universal doubt" (EHU 149) or claim to have

discovered, either the absolute fallaciousness of their mental faculties, or their unfitness to reach any fixed determination in all those curious subjects of speculation, about which they are commonly employed. (EHU 150)

These illicit, "Pyrrhonian" (EHU 158, 160, 161) skepticisms are "excessive" (EHU 158, 159, 161), are probably impossible (EHU 150), and "admit of no answer and produce no conviction" (EHU 155n1).

Their only effect is to cause...momentary amazement and irresolution and confusion. (EHU 155, note 1)<sup>7</sup>

This characterization is in complete agreement with Cicero's, as well as with Cicero's contention that Pyrrhonism places its followers' physical well-being in jeopardy.<sup>8</sup>

While Pyrrhonian skepticism is then of dubious value, "Academical" skepticism is, on the other hand, "durable and useful" (EHU 161), for it restricts the application of *epoche*, or the suspension of judgment, to those speculative ventures which would stray beyond the limits of "daily practice and experience" (EHU 162), "custom or a certain instinct of our nature" (EHU 159)—in short, the realm Hume collects under the rubric of "common life" (e.g., EHU 162). Understood and employed correctly within the realm of common life, thinkers may appeal to the senses and reason to serve as the "proper criteria of truth and falsehood" (EHU 151), restraining themselves to "probabilities" and "proofs" as well as to a special species of "certainty" (EHU 56n)—one which essentially differs from that type characteristic of (at least the rules of) "demonstration" (EHU 163; T 31,180–81) and "intuition" (EHU 23–24; T 69–71)].<sup>9</sup> Philosophical "reflection," likewise, finds in common life the natural medium in which it may assert itself:

Those who have a propensity to philosophy, will still continue their researches;...philosophical decisions are nothing but the reflections of common life, methodized and corrected. (EHU 162)

Indeed, philosophical activity so characterized is found to be an innocent and unobjectionable "pleasure."<sup>10</sup>

Hume's position in the *Enquiries* is not significantly different from the one he articulates in *A Treatise of Human Nature*. Although the skeptical arguments of his earlier text seem more thoroughgoing, by the end of Book I, Part iv, Hume is unequivocal in maintaining the ascendancy of common life (T 268, 213, 181) over "total" (T 268, 183), "fantastic" (T 183), and "extravagant" (T 214) skepticism—that is, skepticism which would subvert all belief and evidence (T 183). This conclusion should come as no surprise, for it is prefigured in the Introduction when he writes that

We must therefore glean up our experiments in this science from a cautious observation of human life, and take them as they appear in the common course of the world. (T xix)

Subsequently, Hume not only clears a place within common life for what others may find to be "natural," "agreeable," and pleasant philosophical endeavors (T 270–73); he also pursues his own philosophical investigations into the passions (Book II) and morals (Book III) within that realm.

These are the general features of Hume's Academicism, a philosophical system significantly affected by Cicero. Let us now examine Hume's philosophy of religion as it specifically manifests itself in the *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, for it is there that Cicero's influence is most profound and most extensive.

### The Academic and the Divine

Towards the end of the "Lucullus" of the *Academica*, Cicero advocates a kind of *epoche* in regard to the problems of theodicy and the question of the origin of the universe (*Acad* II, xxxix, 121–23 [623–27]).<sup>11</sup> However, it is in *De Natura Deorum* that he addresses the issues of theology directly. Hume calls Cicero "a great sceptic in matters of religion," and many of the arguments against natural religion he deploys in the *Dialogues* were culled from *Deorum*.<sup>12</sup> However, not only do the arguments Hume employs bear Cicero's mark; the very form of the *Dialogues'* rhetoric and the characters of the various disputants participating in the discussion depicted there are closely modeled on his predecessor's text.<sup>13</sup>

Price points out that specific remarks advanced by Hume in the *Dialogues* find their root in Cicero's suggestion, following Simonides (556–468 BCE), that since the issue of God's nature is so complex we ought not to expect human beings to settle it (*Deo* I, xxii, 60 [59]; *D* II: 184, 87; Price, 91). This argument, however, inhibits neither Cotta (Cicero's skeptic) nor Philo (Hume's) from proclaiming his faith in the existence of the deity (*D* II: 186–87; *Deo* I, xxii, 62 [61]). Price is correct in highlighting the derivation here, but he fails to notice just how Hume's use of this argument meshes with his larger program of exploring the nature and limits of skeptical *epoche*. The context in

which Hume positions the argument is an investigation into whether or not it is possible to discern a specific set of beliefs over which skeptical suspension fails to operate (at least with any appreciable duration). Hume's assessment of natural theology is, accordingly, an investigation into whether or not the belief in God is a member of that set. Grasping Hume's answer to this question may at first appear straightforward since when approaching the topic Hume seems to regard theological issues, perhaps above all other candidates, as not only subject to *epoche* but also desirably so. His position, accurately described however, is by no means this simple.

Over and over again Hume emphasizes the special character of the theological topics with which the *Dialogues* is concerned—something to which Battersby is clearly attuned. Pamphilus remarks to Hermippus in the prologue that the subject matter of natural religion ideally suits the rhetorical form of a dialogue because it involves things “obscure” and “uncertain” (viz., the nature of God), although it also concerns things “obvious” and “important” (viz., the being, or existence, of God). Later on Philo unambiguously describes the nature of theological discussions as being cut free from the guiding and limiting character of common life and therefore open to a multiplicity of conclusions.<sup>14</sup> It is important to see, however, that Philo's remark does *not* imply that the entire class of beliefs addressed or produced through theological discussion lacks the necessary grounding in the ordinary required for restraining such wild excess.

Early on in the *Dialogues*, natural science (D I:170), “trade,” “morals,” “politics,” and “criticism” (D I:166) are classified among investigations performed within the realm of “common life.” And significantly enough, belief in the existence of God is tagged as a member of that realm as well. Following Demea (the devout, non-theological believer), Philo declares,

But surely wherever reasonable men treat these subjects, the question can never be concerning the being but only the nature of the deity.  
(D I:175)

As elements of common life, certain beliefs, and certain investigations whose results support them, enjoy a kind of legitimacy and a kind of credence not available to investigations which depart too far from it. Well-grounded inquiries (i.e., inquiries grounded in the beliefs and practices of common life) possess the virtue of being able to “strengthen our philosophical conclusions, and remove (at least in part) the suspicion which we so justly entertain with regard to every reasoning, that is very subtle and refined” (D I: 166); and the highly circumscribed notion of divinity upon which Philo elaborates is not excluded—at least not entirely—from the domain of well-grounded inquiry. Accordingly, Battersby is wrong to distribute the predicate of indeterminacy universally and uniformly among religious beliefs. While belief in the

existence of God may not be as stable as belief in an external and independent world, it remains profoundly more natural and common than the minutia of theological speculation. Not all conversations concerned with the notion of divinity remain essentially indeterminate for Hume, and it is not the case that all of those which remain indeterminate are indeterminate to the same extent.

Hume does class most kinds of theological speculation among those activities that take place at a distance from the common. As such their methods remain untrustworthy and their conclusions suspect and unconvincing. When taking up such practices

We are like foreigners in a strange country, to whom everything must seem suspicious, and who are in danger every moment of transgressing against the laws and customs of the people, with whom they live. (D I: 166)

If it is true that Hume regarded belief in the existence of God as an exception to this rule, then much of the remainder of the *Dialogues* may be understood as a meditation on how and whether one may distinguish belief in God as common while regarding speculation about God's nature as not so. For Hume, the ordinary shades off into the extraordinary, and the kind of reflection the closing sections of the *Dialogues* exemplify is required to distinguish the two. Terence Penelhum is therefore right in maintaining that "it is...not natural theology, that proceeds by methodizing and correcting the reflections of common life," but he is wrong both in holding that "only scientific enquiry" proceeds along such lines and in suggesting that ruling out natural theology entails ruling out all philosophical reflection concerning religious topics.<sup>15</sup>

Price also points to the inspiration Hume drew from Vellius's ridicule of Platonic and Stoic cosmologies (D I:204–05; *Deo* I, viii–ix, 19ff. [23ff.]). (Vellius is Cicero's Epicurean character.) Once again Price is correct to point out the apparent derivation, but as in the case of belief in God his analysis goes no further. What Price fails to recognize this time is not the way in which Hume's imitation makes use of *epoche* but, rather, the manner in which Hume's adoption of Cicero's ridicule complements his account of causation. The argument Hume presents runs basically as follows.

- 1) Causation is only inferred through the *experience* of effects regularly following causes: "Experience alone can point out the true cause of any phenomenon."<sup>16</sup>
- 2) Humans have never experienced the creation of whole worlds by anything, let alone by God.

By *modus tollens*, therefore, calling God the creator of the world cannot be

rationally justified. The upshot of this failure as it appears in the context of the *Dialogues* is, then, not simply a logical one; for in it we see not just an expansion of Cicero's argument but also an important instance of Hume making use of his own philosophical accomplishment (his theory of causation) to deepen one of Cicero's skeptical arguments (his attack upon natural religion).<sup>17</sup>

Hume's so-called empirical principle, that ideas must be rooted in experience, is implicated here in the argument that we have no idea of God since we have no experience of God, creative or otherwise. The principle, as well as the argument, finds its precedent not only in earlier British thought but also in *Deorum*:

Your assertion was that the form of god is perceived by thought and not by the senses, that it has no solidity nor numerical persistence, and that our perception of it is such that it is seen owing to similarity and succession.... Now in the name of the very gods about whom we are talking, what can possibly be the meaning of this? If the gods only appeal to the faculty of thought and have no solidity or definite outline what difference does it make whether we think of a god or of a hippocentaur? (*Deo* I, xxxvii-xxxviii, 105 [103])

Hume also drew significantly from Cicero in developing the arguments he marshals against ascribing human attributes to the divine. Cotta expends substantial effort attacking anthropomorphism (*Deo* I xxvii-xxix, 75-82 [73-81]), and Hume repeatedly discusses the issue in the *Dialogues*. In Part II, Hume calls into question the argument from design by characterizing any analogy that might be drawn between the human and the divine as a "weak analogy" (D II: 178). Part III continues this line of scrutiny by comparing the very ideas of human thought and divine thought. Demea, drawing on the empirical principle, speculates upon what the content of divine thought might be, and goes so far as to claim that we ought not attribute any of the material characteristics of the human mind to divine entities (D III: 193-94).

Addressing the form of human thought, Hume employs an argument which, because it is so similar to another advanced by Cicero, appears to have been lifted directly from *Deorum*. Berating the concept of a non-sensory (i.e., utterly non-human) divine mind, Vellius declares:

mind, naked and simple, without any material adjunct to serve as an organ of sensation, seems to elude the capacity of our understanding. (*Deo* I, xi, 27 [31])

Demea reiterates:

Our thought is fluctuating, uncertain, fleeting, successive, and compounded; and were we to remove these circumstances, we absolutely

annihilate its essence, and it would, in such a case, be an abuse of terms to apply to it the name of thought or reason. (D III: 194)<sup>18</sup>

Later, in Part V, Hume ridicules anthropomorphism by suggesting that it stands upon a slippery slope, leading to a host of undesirable consequences for the orthodox theist. Hume explicitly credits Cicero:

And why not become a perfect anthropomorphite? Why not assert the Deity or Deities to be corporeal, and to have eyes, a nose, mouth, ears, &c. EPICURUS maintained, that no man had ever seen reason but in a human figure; therefore the gods must have a human figure. And this argument, which is deservedly so much ridiculed by Cicero, becomes, according to you, solid and philosophical. (D V: 208–09)

These passages illustrate the nature and extent of Hume's borrowing from the logical dimensions of Cicero's text. We must also address, however, the rhetorical. The framed, ironic, and dialogical rhetoric of the *Dialogues* renders it exceedingly difficult to draw conclusions about the religious convictions of Philo, let alone those of Hume himself. As we have seen, Battersby argues—albeit imprecisely—that this characteristic reflects Hume's acknowledgment of the special quality of the subject matter, a subject matter which defies conclusion (Battersby, 242).<sup>19</sup> She also maintains that in presenting a more indeterminate picture of theological discourse Hume's skepticism surpasses that of Cicero:

Hume seems to be more consistently skeptical than Cicero of man's ability to reach reasonable conclusions on matters such as the argument from design. (242)

Strictly speaking, in this claim she is correct. However, she neglects to observe that "Hume's concern with balance" (243) may be understood to have ancient, although non-Ciceronian, roots; for the dialogical indeterminacy exhibited in the *Dialogues* is consistent with the equipollent, inquiring openness that Sextus Empiricus praises.<sup>20</sup> The *Dialogues* may, in this way, show more Pyrrhonism than Academicism. In addition, Battersby ought also to see that the rhetorical features of the *Dialogues* exhibit the Addisonian project, with which Hume was sympathetic, of reforming the manners and, indeed, the very selves of his society through the process of ongoing, sociable, and reflective conversation.<sup>21</sup>

Difficult though they are, then, Philo's remarks about a "philosophical and rational" religion in Part XII are best read as not disingenuous—though neither are they to be read as identical with the professions of faith of the other characters in the dialogue. The *Dialogues* depict different modalities of religious belief, and coming to understand Philo's position (as well as Hume's

own) requires seeing how Hume's broader skeptical program reveals the categories of atheism, dogmatic faith, and even agnosticism to be an incomplete set of alternatives.<sup>22</sup>

Echoing Hume's criticisms of Pyrrhonism, Cleanthes testifies to the inability of people to suspend judgment on questions of the existence of God (D I:163). Later Philo reinforces this assessment:

So little...do I esteem this suspense of judgement in the present case to be possible, that I am apt to suspect there enters somewhat of a dispute of words into this controversy, more than is usually imagined. (D XII: 267)

If, however, both Philo and Cleanthes maintain that suspension or *epoche* fails to operate with any lasting effect upon a certain range of human belief, one should not conclude on the basis of this that the reference of each voice has an identical extension. In between the pronouncements of these two characters lie eleven chapters of the *Dialogues*, and in that distance Philo makes it clear that, unlike Cleanthes, he maintains (1) that the engagement of *epoche* is possible (indeed desirable) with regard to most if not all of the members of the set of beliefs constitutive of religious dogma and (2) that the argument from design is unsound, if not entirely unpersuasive. Demea, like Philo, is skeptical about reason's power to establish the religious hypothesis, but he differs with his interlocutor in not only accepting God's existence but also the whole of church dogma and instruction.

On this score, the *Dialogues* exhibit a process analogous to that presented by Hume's other texts. The skeptical, dialogical openness of the *Dialogues* marks not only Hume's awareness of the special properties of religious topics: it also registers his contention that only by working one's way into and through the skeptical moment can a proper engagement with the subject at hand be achieved—this, not least of all, because of the role skepticism plays in Hume's acknowledgment of common life.

In Hume's hands skeptical arguments act like a pedagogical sieve, at once undermining rationalistic explanations and simultaneously disclosing certain features of human life to be ordinary, natural, and legitimate. Causation cannot be rendered immune to the skeptical corrosive, nor can substance ontology, nor abiding personal identity, nor the veracity of perception, nor theological arguments (natural or ontological). However, through the peculiar form of education afforded by skepticism, a certain set of beliefs and practices is discovered to be un-suspendable, immune to the *epoche*. This is the set of beliefs constitutive of common life, and despite the rigor of the acid test to which they are subjected they remain ascendant. One commonly believes in, but cannot justify, the causal connection, the trans-temporal uniformity of the course of nature, the force of gravity (EHU 30), the continued and

independent existence of objects—and, properly understood, the existence of God.<sup>23</sup>

This is not to say that such common beliefs ought to be read, as other scholars have, as natural determinations, mechanistically or physiologically conceived. Hume's skepticism runs deeper than that. Foundational explanatory options such as these are ruled out by skepticism's subversive activity. But paradoxically enough it is the action of just this subversion that makes possible the disclosure of the depth, if not the necessity, of these categories of belief and practice. That is, these beliefs, including the theistic hypothesis, are natural in the sense of being natal, what humans are born to, what in some sense they are fated to endure, not simply as the results of a mechanistic system (though some beliefs might be) but as dimensions of the "common life" of human beings.<sup>24</sup> Tersely put, then, it is as a constituent of common life rather than as a determination of mechanical nature that Hume understands human belief in God, and it is along these lines that Hume advances beyond Cicero.

The impact of *Academica* and *De Natura Deorum* on Hume's thought was enormous. Cicero's texts offered Hume literary models to imitate and intellectual ladders from which to select ingredients for his theories of probability, mind, and his religious skepticism. However, the use to which Hume put Cicero's work was guided by the larger philosophical program in which he was engaged, a program itself influenced by but also distinct from that of Cicero. An adequate appraisal of Cicero's influence upon Hume can, therefore, only be had by situating Hume's philosophy of religion within the context of his own specific form of skepticism, comprehensively understood. Doing so not only enables us to interpret the logical and rhetorical features of the *Dialogues* properly; it also makes it possible to understand more fully the place of divinity in Hume's philosophical system as well as the special validation it receives there.

## REFERENCES

Thanks to Donald W. Livingston, Thomas R. Flynn, and Lawrence Becker for comments on earlier drafts of this article.

1 David Hume, Letter #13, *The Letters of David Hume*, edited by J. Y. T. Greig, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1932), I: 34. A passage in his essay, "Of Eloquence," shows that Hume regarded Cicero (106–43 BCE) as one of the ancient world's two greatest orators (Demosthenes being the other):

It is observable, that the ancient critics could scarcely find two orators in any age, who deserved to be placed precisely in the same rank, and possessed the same degree of merit. CALBUS, CÆLIUS, CURIO, HORTENSIUS, CÆSAR rose one above another: But the greatest of that age was inferior to CICERO, the most eloquent speaker, that had ever appeared in Rome. (David Hume, *Essays: Moral, Political, and Literary* [with an apparatus of variant readings from the 1889 edition by T. H. Green and T. H. Grose], edited by Eugene F. Miller [Indianapolis: Liberty Classics, 1985], 98).

2 David Hume, *My Own Life*, quoted in Ernest Campbell Mossner, *The Life of David Hume* (Edinburgh: Thomas Nelson and Sons, Ltd., 1954), 52.

3 Writing in *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, Hume remarks that "The fame of Cicero flourishes at present; but that of Aristotle is utterly decayed" (David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, in *David Hume's Enquiries Concerning Human Understanding and Concerning the Principles of Morals*, edited by L. A. Selby-Bigge, 3rd ed. revised by P. H. Nidditch [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975], §I, 7; hereafter cited as [EHU] and [EPM]). It is worth noting that the sense of this remark (EHU 7 [6]) is qualified somewhat in the *Essays* when Hume writes in "Of the Standard of Taste" that:

The abstract philosophy of Cicero has lost its credit: The vehemence of his oratory is still the object of our admiration. (*Essays* 243)

Indeed, much of the interest in Cicero among thinkers and writers in early modernity and the Renaissance focused more upon his eloquence than his wisdom. Christine Battersby cites important manifestations of Cicero's influence in "The Dialogues as Original Imitation: Cicero and the Nature of Hume's Skepticism," in *McGill Hume Studies*, edited by David Fate Norton, Nicholas Capaldi, and Wade Robison (San Diego: Austin Hill Press, 1979), 239–53. Battersby's essay takes its point of departure from the practice of composing "original imitations," a practice analyzed by Howard J. Weinbrod ("Augustinian Imitation: The Role of the Original," in *Proceedings of the Modern Language Association Neoclassicism Conferences 1967–68*, edited by Paul J. Korshin [New York: A. M. S. Press, 1970], 53–70). Battersby's aim is to explore the extent to which Hume's *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* are an "original imitation" of Cicero's *De Natura Deorum*. My essay completes hers, not only by correcting what I take to be a number of her errors, but also by

relating the *Dialogues* in a more thorough and systematic fashion to both the *Academica* and to Hume's Academicism.

4 John Valdimir Price, "Sceptics in Cicero and Hume," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 2 (5), 9.

5 Peter Jones, *Hume's Sentiments: Their Ciceronian and French Context* (Edinburgh: The University of Edinburgh Press, 1982).

6 Cicero, *De Natura Deorum* and *Academica*, translated by H. Hackman, The Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1933), hereafter cited as *Deo* and *Acd.* See also Charles Bernard Schmitt, "The Rediscovery of Ancient Skepticism in Modern Times," in *The Skeptical Tradition*, edited by Myles Burnyeat (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), 227. An earlier version of Schmitt's article appeared in *Rivista critica di storia della filosofia* 27 (1972): 363–384. See also Richard H. Popkin, *The History of Scepticism from Erasmus to Spinoza* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979).

7 Consider also this passage from the *Dialogues* (David Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, edited by Norman Kemp Smith [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1935; 2nd. ed New York: Library of Liberal Arts, Bobbs-Merrill, 1962]; hereafter cited within the text as [D]):

In reality, Philo, continued he, it seems certain that though a man in a flush of humour, after intense reflection on the many contradictions and imperfections of human reason, may entirely renounce all belief and opinion; it is impossible for him to persevere in this total scepticism, or make it appear in his conduct for a few hours. External objects press in upon him: Passions solicit him: His philosophical melancholy dissipates; and even the utmost violence upon his own temper will not be able during any time, to preserve the poor appearance of scepticism. (D I: 132)

Compare Cleanthes's remark with Hume's at *Treatise* 269 (David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, edited by L. A. Selby-Bigge, 2nd ed. revised by P. H. Nidditch [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978]; hereafter cited within the text):

Most fortunately it happens, that since reason is incapable of dispelling these clouds, nature herself suffices to that purpose, and cures me of this philosophical melancholy and delirium, either by relaxing this bent of mind, or by some avocation, and lively impression of my senses, which obliterate all these chimeras.... Here then I find myself absolutely and necessarily determin'd to live....

8 In the *Academica* Cicero writes:

Therefore those who assert that nothing can be grasped deprive us of these things that are the very tools or equipment of life, or rather actually overthrow the whole of life from its foundations and deprive the animate creature itself of the mind that animates it... (*Acd* II, x, 31 [508–09]; see also *Acd* II, xxxi, 99 [595]).

Hume, as we have seen, regards such "total" skepticism impossible, but he also suspects it of being downright dangerous:

this resolution [to reject all the trivial suggestions of the fancy], if steadily executed, wou'd be dangerous, and attended with the most fatal consequences. (T 267)

Two important articles assessing the ancient skeptics' understanding of the range of *epoche* are Myles F. Burnyeat's "Can the Skeptic Live His Skepticism?" and Jonathan Barnes's "Ancient Skepticism and Causation," both in *The Skeptical Tradition*, edited by Myles F. Burnyeat (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983). Another influential article which answers these is Michael Frede's "The Sceptic's Two Kinds of Assent and the Question of the Possibility of Knowledge," *Philosophy and History*, edited by R. Rorty, J. Schneewind, and Q. Skinner (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984). 25–78. See also Frede's *Essays in Ancient Philosophy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

9 On certainty, also consider Hume's illuminating remark to John Stewart in 1754:

I never asserted so absurd a Proposition *as that any thing might arise without a Cause*: I only maintain'd, that our Certainty of the Falshood of that Proposition proceeded neither from Intuition or Demonstration; but from another Source. *That Caesar existed, that there is such an Island as Sicily*; for these propositions, I affirm, we have no demonstrative nor intuitive Proof. Woud you infer that I deny their Truth, or even their Certainty? There are many different kinds of Certainty; and some of them as satisfactory to the Mind, tho perhaps not so regular, as the demonstrative kind. (*Letters I*: 187; #91)

See also T 124.

10 A point recently made by Greg Moses, "Hume's Playful Metaphysics," *Hume Studies* 18 (1): 63–80.

11 Peter Jones also mentions that at this point Cicero refers to the Empiric doctors approvingly in their contention that investigations into the inner workings of the human body may change its character: "it is possibly the case that when exposed and uncovered they [the organs of the body] change their character" (Jones, 27). He reminds the reader of the similarity of this thought with Hume's proscription concerning introspective investigations into the mind:

When I am at a loss to know the effects of one body upon another in any situation, I need only put them in that situation, and observe what results from it. But should I endeavor to clear up after the same manner any doubt in moral philosophy, by placing myself in the same case with that which I consider, 'tis evident this reflection and premeditation would so disturb the operation

of my natural principles, as must render it impossible to form any just conclusion from the phaenomenon. (T xix)

12 “Of the Rise and Progress of the Arts and Sciences.” The passage in which this quotation is embedded has had a rather odd career. It was not included in the first and second editions of Hume’s *Essays: Moral and Political* (Edinburgh, 1741; corrected second edition, 1742). It was, however, subsequently included in the editions appearing from 1742 through 1768. It was thereafter excluded, though, from the 1770 and 1777 editions. It appears in the Green and Grose publications (*The Philosophical Works of David Hume*, in 4 vols. [London, 1886; Aalen: Scientia Verlag, 1964], III: 189n), but was deleted from most later editions. Finally, it appears in the “Variant Readings” of the Liberty Classics edition (*Essays* 623, note h). Among scholars its reception has been less than uniform as well. Battersby and Price have interpreted the passage in contradictory ways. Battersby writes:

Here, in addition to describing Cicero as ‘a great sceptic in matters of religion,’ Hume does not even acknowledge the existence of Cicero’s final authorial judgment [that the Stoic has won]. He seems to take the presumed insincerity of Cicero’s ending as an indication that Cicero did *not* himself say ‘something decisive on the subject’. (240 n6, emphasis mine)

Price, by contrast, maintains:

In Hume’s published writings, definite references to *De Natura Deorum* are unmistakable, as in his essay, ‘Of the Rise and Progress of the Arts and Sciences’ where Cicero is mentioned as a great genius and a religious sceptic who introduces some of his friends disputing the nature of the gods and, as always, writes Hume, ‘has something decisive to say on the subject’” (Price, 98, emphasis mine).

Price, however, not only misquotes Hume, but he also misrepresents Hume’s position. Battersby’s rendering is fundamentally correct. See references to *Deorum* in other among Hume’s texts: *The Natural History of Religion* (*Works* IV: 352) (Battersby, 240 n6); E. C. Mossner, “Hume’s Early Memoranda, 1729–1740: The Complete Text,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 9 (4), Memorandum II: 11) 501 (Price, 97 n7).

13 The opening and closing passages of the two works are almost identical. Both are presented in dialogical format. The account of the conversation in both is delivered by a third party and is delivered *post factum*. J. M. Ross, in his introduction to *Deorum*, points out the similarity between the characters of the *Dialogues* and those of *Deorum* (Cicero, *Nature of the Gods* [Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972], 27). Battersby, quoting Ross and following his lead, mentions the similarity as well:

Vellius, the “dogmatic convert,” corresponds to Demea with his “rigid inflexible orthodoxy.” Philo’s careless skepticism is an echo of Cotta, “the urbane man of the world”; and Cleanthes’ accurate philosophical turn corresponds to Balbus, “the warm-hearted

preacher aflame with admiration for the harmony of the universe," who is also a "logical thinker who has worked out for himself a rational explanation of his beliefs." To underline Hume's extensive use of the Ciceronian model, I [Battersby] would point out that there are nominal links between Philo, Cleanthes, Pamphilus and Cicero's characters. Cotta and Cicero (the skeptics) were taught by Philo; Balbus (the Stoic) refers to "our own Cleanthes" [Cleanthes, as we have seen, was one of the principal ancient Stoics]; Pamphilus is a student of Plato, and the Platonists are attacked as friends of the Stoics. Thus the very choice of the name "Pamphilus" indicates an alliance with Cleanthes. (244 n15; see *Deo* I, 17; I, 19; I, 72; II, 13)

These similarities would have been obvious to much of the educated reading public of Hume's day. It is also worth mentioning that Hume's mention of Cicero in "The Rise and Progress of the Arts and Sciences" shows his awareness of the presence and importance of the "spirit of dialogue," a concept through which for him rhetoric and philosophy intersect.

14 In the *Dialogues* Hume writes:

What you ascribe to the fertility of my invention, replied PHILO, is entirely owing to the nature of the subject. In subjects, adapted to the narrow compass of human reason, there is commonly but one determination, which carries probability or conviction with it; and to a man of sound judgment, all other suppositions, but that one appear entirely absurd and chimerical. But in such questions as the present, a hundred contradictory views may preserve a kind of imperfect analogy; and invention has here full scope to exert itself. Without any great effort of thought, I believe that I could, in an instant, propose other systems of cosmogony, which would have some faint appearance of truth; though it is a thousand, a million to one, if either yours or any one of mine be the true system. (D VIII: 224)

Battersby writes: "Inconsistency on such subjects is a consistent part of Hume's philosophy" (251).

15 Terence Penelhum, "Hume's Skepticism and the Dialogues" in *McGill Hume Studies*, 271.

16 Bell's edition of the *Dialogues* refers on this matter to the *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, 25–32; §IV, Part I "Sceptical Doubts concerning the Operations of the Understanding" (Martin Bell, ed., *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* [London: Penguin, 1950], 142 n24). For example consider the following remark:

This proposition, That causes and effects are discoverable, not by reason but by experience, will readily be admitted with regard to such objects, as we remember to have once been altogether unknown to us; since we must be conscious of the utter inability,

which we then lay under, of foretelling what would arise from them. (EHU 28 [24])

17 Hume's theory of causation, however, may itself have found its rooting in ancient Pyrrhonian criticisms of aiology presented in Sextus Empiricus's *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* (Bk. I, Chpt. XVII; Bk. III, Chpt. V). *Sextus Empiricus, Sextus Empiricus I*, 4 vols., translated by R. G. Bury (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976).

18 See Jones, 35. And notice how just a few pages further on Hume deploys his bundle theory of the self (T 252, 634) to deepen this point:

Demea: What is the soul of man? A composition of various faculties, passions, sentiments, ideas; united, indeed, into one self or person, but still distinct from each other. When it reasons, the ideas, which are the parts of its discourse, arrange themselves in a certain form or order; which is not preserved entire for a moment, but immediately gives place to another arrangement. New opinions, new passions, new affections, new feelings arise, which continually diversify the mental scene, and produce in it the greatest variety, and most rapid succession imaginable. How is this compatible, with that perfect immutability and simplicity, which all true theists ascribe to the deity? (D IV: 196)

19 One might also suspect that Hume means to cloak his own atheism, an interpretation with which I am not sympathetic. Paul Russell, for example, reads the *Treatise* this way in "Skepticism and Natural Religion in Hume's *Treatise*," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 49 (2): 247–65 and in "'Atheism' and the Title-Page of Hume's *Treatise*," *Hume Studies* 14 (2): 408–23.

20 On skepticism being characterized by *isosthenia* (balance or equipollence) see Chapter IV of Book I of *The Outlines of Pyrrhonism* (I: 10 [7]). On the skeptic being "zetetic" (inquiring) see Book I, Chapter III, (I: 7 [5]). That Hume was a reader of Sextus is supported by his referring to *Adversus Mathematicos* "lib. viii." at EPM 180 and to "lib. iii, cap, 20" at EPM 207. There are, in addition, textual and thematic similarities between Hume's and Sextus's work, the examination of which would be out of place in this essay. I address the issue in "Hume's Pyrrhonism and the Legacy of Sextus Empiricus," to be presented at the Twenty-First International Hume Conference, June 1994, Università di Roma, "La Sapienza."

21 *Essays* 90, 191, 231, 537; EHU 7. See also Nicholas Phillipson, "The Scottish Enlightenment," in *The Enlightenment in Context*, edited by Roy Porter and Mikulás Teich (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 32, 59.

22 Hume, of course, is famous for Boswell's maintaining that Hume had told him on his deathbed that "when he [Hume] heard a man was religious, he concluded he was a rascal, though he had known some instances of very good men being religious" (D Appendix A, 98). See also "An account of My Last Interview with David Hume, Esq.: Partly recorded in my Journal, partly enlarged from my memory, 3 March 1777," in *The Private Letters of James Boswell*, edited by Geoffrey Scott and Fredrick A. Pottle (London, 1931), XII: 227–32. Price writes that both Cotta and Philo feel impelled to present

themselves as being "just as religious as anyone" (106). But this is simply wrong. Philo's professed religious conviction is very different from that of the typical Scottish Presbyterian or Anglican of the day, progressive or "Highflyer." Consider, as an example of conservatism, Rev. John Witherspoon's enormously popular satire, *Ecclesiastical Characteristics: Or, The Arcana of Church Policy: Being an Humble Attempt to open up the Mystery of Moderation. Wherein is shewn a plain and easy way of attaining to the Character of a Moderate Man, as at present reputed in the Church of Scotland* (Mossner, 336–37). For an example of the progressive religious viewpoint consult *Sermons*, vol. 1, by Hume's close friend, Rev. Hugh Blair. Noteworthy examples of natural theology in Britain at the time include: Charles Blount, *The Oracles of Reason* (London, 1693); Matthew Tindal, *Christianity as Old as the Creation, or the Gospel a Republication of the Religion of Nature* (London, 1730). See also Mossner, Chapters 25–27, for an overview of the situation and of Hume's role in defending the natural theologians. Mossner (540, 584) discusses some of the ways in which Hume helped them while serving, and about to serve, as Under Secretary of State. More rationalistic, though similarly "Newtonian," predecessors to this class of progressive natural theologians were the Latitudinarians and also the Cambridge Platonists like Henry More (*Antidote Against Atheism*, 1653) and Ralph Cudworth (*The True Intellectual System of the Universe*, 1678). One should also consider John Locke (*An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, 1690), Samuel Clarke, and those who participated in the Boyle Lectures—instituted in the 1690s for the purpose of "proving the Christian Religion, against notorious Infidels, viz. Atheists, Theists, Pagans." Clarke delivered Boyle Lectures in 1704 ("A Demonstration of the Being and Attributes of God") and 1705 ("A Discourse Concerning the Unchangeable Obligations of Natural Religion"). Philo's position is represented by none of these alternatives.

23 Although, therefore, Penelhum is basically correct in his assessment of Hume's criticisms of institutionalized religion, he neglects the importance of Hume's acknowledgement of the ordinary status of theistic belief in suggesting that for Philo accepting or rejecting the religious hypothesis "does not seem to him to matter" (273). My position is in general agreement with R. J. Butler's assessment of the role skeptical arguments play in the *Dialogues* ("Natural Belief and the Enigma of Hume," *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie* 42 (1960): 87 [reprint, 1974: 55]). See also William B. Capitan, "Part X of Hume's *Dialogues*," in *Hume*, edited by Vere Clairborne Chappell, (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1966), 384–95. Others defending the notion that Hume does not subvert theistic belief include Kemp Smith (D 11–72), and Frederick Copleston (*A History of Philosophy*, 7 vols. [London, 1946–62], V: 307–09). While his argument is unsound, George J. Nathan's conclusion, that Hume does not strictly rule out an immanent deity, is correct ("Hume's Immanent God," in Chappell, 396–423). Gilles Deleuze maintains that, for Hume, inferring the existence of a deity is "valid" although fictitious (*Empiricism and Subjectivity* [New York: Columbia University Press, 1991], 77). Butler, Copleston, Huxley, and Pike are cited by Capitan (384). Among those arguing that Hume attempts to subvert theistic belief entirely are Thomas J. Huxley,

*Hume* (London, 1879), 146–52, and Nelson Pike, "Hume on Evil," *Philosophical Review* 72 [1963], 180–97; see also Pike's *God and Evil* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1964).

24 This reading of Hume's naturalism, then, is contrary to that advanced by Norman Kemp Smith and those who follow him (*The Philosophy of David Hume: A Critical Study of its Origins and Central Doctrines* [London: Macmillan, 1941]; "The Naturalism of Hume," *Mind* N.S. 14 (1905). It takes inspiration from Donald W. Livingston's *Hume's Philosophy of Common Life* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1984), 15–33, 177–78.

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