



**The Relation between Literary Form and Philosophical Argument in Hume's
*Dialogues concerning Natural Religion***

Martin Bell

Hume Studies Volume XXVII, Number 2 (November, 2001) 227-246.

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

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

HUME STUDIES' Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the HUME STUDIES archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Each copy of any part of a HUME STUDIES transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

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

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

The Relation between Literary Form and Philosophical Argument in Hume's *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion*

MARTIN BELL

Introduction

Philosophers from Plato onwards have always attached importance to the possibilities that differing literary forms give for the expression of philosophical ideas. No one can read Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, or Wittgenstein, for example, without paying attention to how the literary form helps to constitute the philosophical content. Recently there has been renewed interest in the debates that took place in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries on the significance and appropriateness of literary forms for philosophical argument. In the last few years alone there have been major studies of the styles and genres of writing used by Bayle, Locke, Shaftesbury, Berkeley, and Hume.¹ This paper is concerned with questions about the relation between the philosophical arguments and the literary form that arise from attempts to read David Hume's *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion*.² This debate has been extensive,³ and I cannot attempt here to discuss all the questions it has raised. I hope only to propose certain issues that seem to me important and so to contribute to the continuation of the debate.

I begin with a summary of four types of interpretation of DNR proposed by Jonathan Dancy (op. cit.) (section I). I make some criticisms of his approach

(section II) which center on three points: what is meant by “the design argument”; what Hume poses as the “concern” of DNR; and what is the context of DNR, where “context” is restricted to that provided by Hume’s other writings. I then turn to the wider context of the work (section III) drawing particularly on Prince and Malherbe (op. cit.) to consider the importance of Shaftesbury’s example to the way in which Hume writes. Dancy seems to regard his four types of interpretation of DNR as mutually exclusive. I suspect that Hume’s choice of the form of dialogue served more than one purpose. Prudence, for example, may well have been a part of his motivation, although I agree with Dancy that what he calls the “camouflage” interpretation (see section I) is not the whole story. It is significant that section 11 of the first *Enquiry* is also a dialogue. The recent work on Shaftesbury by these authors and especially by Rivers⁴ has helped to make prominent the extent to which Hume was responding to Shaftesbury’s theories of dialogue and its relation to philosophy, and through that to a tradition of natural religion to which he was opposed. I have tried to build on the proposals of particularly Dancy and Malherbe and, through making some criticisms of them, to arrive at the proposition of this paper. This is, that in addition to other possible motives such as prudence, Hume had a philosophical reason for using the dialogue form in writing about natural religion which is that, for him, there really is no such thing as natural religion. His dialogue, I shall suggest, is about something that is absent, because for Hume, “natural religion” does not really designate anything. The dialogue form serves to show rather than simply state the absence of the supposed subject of debate. I conclude with a tentative suggestion about a connection between DNR and Kant’s investigation of concepts of purpose in the *Critique of Teleological Judgment* in the *Critique of Judgment*.

It is often said that DNR is a work that we find hard to read because we are not sure what Hume is up to. We look for a message, and we want that to be Hume’s message. A recurrent topic in the literature has been locating Hume’s voice in the voices of his characters. But some commentators have warned against that approach:

It seems to me that the only difficulty in recognising Hume’s own position comes from failing to appreciate the *Dialogues* themselves. It is only because we approach them with concepts that they themselves ‘deconstruct’ that we get into difficulties.⁵

The suggestion is that many of our difficulties in interpreting DNR come from not knowing how to read it. “To appreciate the *Dialogues* themselves” means, I think, to read DNR as a whole, as a dialogue. Can we do this? It

requires that we understand what it is that Hume does in writing a dialogue. There are two constraints here, I suggest. One is that we are separated from the cultural context in which eighteenth-century dialogues were produced and interpreted, and the other is that we are separated from the intellectual context in which the philosophical questions were posed. I give some discussion of these points in section III.

Section I

I begin with one of the recent discussions, Jonathan Dancy's. Dancy suggests (31) that there are three questions any interpretation of DNR should answer. First, what conclusions did Hume hope to leave us with? Second, why did Hume adopt the dialogue form? Third, why does Philo recant in part 12, if indeed he does? Dancy canvases three interpretations before favouring a fourth. The first he calls the traditional or "camouflage" reading (32). This says that Hume's aim is to leave us with the conclusion that the design argument is a failure and that there are no other rational arguments for religious belief that are not also failures. But because of social and cultural factors he could not directly avow this aim. He therefore used the form of dialogue in order to camouflage his intentions. Philo's recantation in part 12 is more camouflage. Dancy rejects this interpretation, and I agree that it is by no means the whole story. I will argue that the dialogue form is not merely a cover that modern readers need to remove in order to reveal the true message, even if prudence played some part in Hume's choice of it. Such a view divorces the literary form from the philosophical content. It says that Hume could have perfectly well made his philosophical position clear in a treatise-style monologue, and that he used the dialogue form only because of the force of extra-philosophical social factors. It implies that for us, freed of such constraints, it is possible to strip out the philosophical message from the historically determined literary form.

Dancy's next two interpretations, which he derives from Simpson (op. cit.) without exactly following him, are versions of what he calls "instantiation" interpretations (35). An instantiation interpretation says that the dialogue form is essential to the philosophical message because the message is that there is, in one way or another, a plurality of philosophical views put forward by Hume, and that the dialogue form is therefore "a natural vehicle" (36) for the message because the polyphony of voices in the dialogue instantiates the plurality of philosophical positions Hume allows. The two interpretations Dancy distinguishes as instantiation interpretations differ about what the plurality is and what Hume is saying about it. One is referred to by Dancy as

the “balance” interpretation (36). According to it, Hume gives sceptical arguments against the design argument, but he also acknowledges that there is “a natural tendency to infer a designer” (36) when we contemplate the order of nature. Hume’s aim is to attack a “rationalist” (35) model according to which all reasoned inquiries must end in consensus and convergence. Hume rejects this model, and substitutes one in which reason need not always be able to determine between competing views. They are held in balance to the end of the dialogue and the reader is thus free to make an autonomous choice between them. The message of DNR therefore is the virtue of tolerating differing intellectual conclusions.

The other version of an instantiation interpretation that Dancy identifies as a candidate is what he calls the “oscillation” interpretation (40). According to this, there is indeed a plurality of philosophical positions allowed by Hume in DNR and two persist to the end: the sceptical voice and the natural tendency. But rather than presenting these to the reader as ones between which he or she may freely choose, Hume, on this view, presents them as positions between which he the author and we the readers switch or oscillate. We are all compelled towards both positions, compelled by reason towards one and compelled by our human nature towards the other. Both voices speak for us and for Hume the author, but they cannot speak at once. From each perspective the other looks untenable. The message here is not one of smiling tolerance; our condition is not a happy one. But, on this interpretation, it is Hume’s considered view of the human condition.

These two interpretations say that the dialogue form instantiates a philosophical movement of the mind, either maintaining incompatible perspectives in balance, or oscillating between them. Dancy rejects them both, but he thinks the oscillation interpretation is nearer the mark than the balance interpretation. He argues that both the instantiation interpretations are guided by a comparison between DNR and the *Treatise*, in which there is also to be found a conflict between the sceptical conclusions of reason on the one hand and those beliefs that nature enforces, the so-called natural beliefs, on the other. Accepting this comparison, Dancy rejects the balance interpretation because the analogy with the *Treatise* fails. In that work, he claims, Hume accepts the conclusions of skeptical arguments against the rationality of induction, the belief in an external world, and the unity of the self. These negative conclusions are, for Hume, the truth of the matter, even if we cannot accept them for long. Beliefs that arise from human nature are there presented as unavoidable, but not as philosophically justified and they do not stand to the negative conclusions of reason as simply one of two optional positions. Furthermore, DNR is, he says “an attack on religious belief, not an attempt to

find another countervailing ball to keep in the air along with that belief" (38). Therefore, of the two instantiation interpretations, the oscillation interpretation is closer to the model presented by the *Treatise*. In the *Treatise*, sceptical conclusions appear simply incredible from the perspective of everyday life, and the beliefs of everyday life appear totally unjustified from the perspective of philosophical reflection.

Nevertheless, Dancy rejects the oscillation interpretation also, for a number of reasons. First, the arguments in DNR against the design argument are not expressions of "genuinely philosophical scepticism" (42) but are straightforward rational counter-arguments: the design argument is simply refuted, full stop. Second, the passage in part 12 which says that the dispute between the sceptic and the believer is "merely verbal, or perhaps, if possible, still more incurably ambiguous" (DNR 12.7) does not fit with the oscillation interpretation. Third, the positions identified in the *Treatise*, scepticism and natural belief, are both defined by arguments that Dancy calls "as hard-edged as one could hope," whereas in DNR the different voices "shimmer. They have no determinate shape" (43). In other words, however hard we may try, we cannot finally identify any one voice in DNR with a sharply defined, clear philosophical position. Finally, Dancy rejects the oscillation interpretation because it simply does not fit Hume's "anti-religious purpose" (45). In the *Treatise* natural belief wins out most of the time and only in its most abstract and reflective moments does the mind manage to hang onto philosophical truth. If the *Treatise* model for interpreting DNR were followed, therefore, Hume would be allowing that the natural tendency to infer a designer from the order of nature dominates nearly always the claims of reason. Dancy objects, "this is surely not a very satisfactory conclusion for one who aims to defeat superstition" (45).⁶

Dancy's own interpretation also maintains that the dialogue form is essential to the message of DNR. But it does not identify merely the polyphony of voices as the crucial feature. Dancy argues that what distinguishes Hume's dialogue is precisely the quality he calls "shimmering," the impossibility of reaching a settled determination about what the message of the text actually is. Because of this artfully contrived indeterminacy, it is also impossible to determine the author's own voice. Hume the author cannot be constructed from the text. The activity of trying to interpret the uninterpretable dialogue and trying to reveal the hidden author represents, so to speak, although it does not state, the impossibility of all attempts to interpret the natural world as an expression of the divine author of nature. Dancy's suggestion is that Hume is trying to undermine the natural tendency to suppose a divine designer not by direct argument but by causing in the reader a certain unsettling experience:

That experience is one of instability. What Hume is intending, then, is that this experience should come to infect every part of the area—every mental state that is concerned with the topic. If it does this, it will infect the natural tendency to suppose a designer as much as any rational conclusions we might be tempted to form in the light of the available evidence. (47)

So Dancy calls this the “causal” interpretation. He expresses the leading idea of this interpretation as “the message is just that there is no message” (49).

Section II

The first of the interpretations which Dancy considers has the drawback, in my view, that it gives an explanation of Hume’s use of dialogue which makes no appeal to any philosophical considerations. Dancy’s objection to it does, I think, include this point, but it is based also on another. This is, that if we were to dismiss the use of the dialogue form as philosophically unimportant we would then be able to strip out from the text a single, monological attack on religious beliefs, which would be Hume’s authentic voice. Dancy’s complaint is that DNR is “a work that is clearly concerned with the opposition between feeling (which I am calling natural belief) and reason,” and that we already know, from the *Treatise*, that Hume’s “official view is that reason can do little in the long run against natural belief” (34). Consequently, any interpretation that claims to find a monological rational argument against religious belief expressed through the dialogical literary form must be mistaken. Nevertheless, Dancy frequently appeals to the alleged fact that Hume’s purpose is to attack religious belief. These are the two planks of Dancy’s own interpretation: we know that Hume says that natural beliefs cannot be overturned by rational argument (and, to repeat, we know that “the main message” is “the opposition between . . . natural belief and reason” [34]); but we also know that Hume has, overall, an “anti-religious purpose” which is “to defeat superstition” (45). Thus Dancy’s own interpretation is generated. Superstition is to be defeated⁷ but according to Hume’s “official view” this cannot be done just by rational argument. So it has to be done causally. Art (the construction of an uninterpretable dialogue) must do what reason cannot. The two instantiation interpretations are rejected because they both leave in play two perspectives, whether ones that are held in balance or ones between which the mind oscillates. But Dancy is convinced that Hume aims for a univocal and stable outcome, the abandonment of religious belief, which his own philosophy says cannot be achieved by argument.

I believe that Dancy's approach both oversimplifies the context in which Hume writes and also misidentifies that context.⁸ This blocks better accounts of the philosophical significance of the way Hume writes. Let me start with the question of the design argument. Dancy does not investigate what this argument is. He does not recognize that, by the time Hume writes in mid-eighteenth century, the widespread use of appeals to natural order and natural purposes to support belief in a divine designer of nature made by a whole series of theologians and philosophers in the previous eighty years had shown that "the design argument" could designate quite diverse patterns of reasoning.

Part of what Hume does in DNR, I shall suggest, is to exploit this diversity.⁹ In DNR 2.4, Cleanthes gives what he claims is an "argument *a posteriori*," which proves "at once the existence of a deity, and his similarity to human mind and intelligence." The stress is on proof of similarity, of analogy, because, just earlier, Philo and Demea have denied that the divine perfections "have any analogy or likeness to the perfections of a human creature." Cleanthes's argument is pretty sketchy, and very soon after it Hume has Philo give another version. When Philo begins his criticisms, it is not clear whether it is what Philo has said or what Cleanthes has said or, indeed, something said outside the dialogue, which is being criticized. "But can you think, *Cleanthes*, that your usual phlegm and philosophy have been preserved in so wide a step as you have taken, when you compared to the universe houses, ships, furniture, machines . . . ?" asks Philo (DNR 2.19); but it was Philo who made the comparison with a house, and no one has so far mentioned ships or furniture. Evidently this does not matter. Details are not important, precisely because the audience knows already what Cleanthes's argument is (or they think they do). Their interest is focused on how the drama between the three characters now gets played. Yet it turns out that how that goes is initially driven by the question, just what *is* the argument that Cleanthes has gestured towards?

Kemp Smith suggested that Philo restates the argument in order to enforce his initial criticism that the resemblance between human artifacts and the universe is so slight that the conclusion of similar causes is no more than "a guess, a conjecture, a presumption" not a "proof" (DNR 2.7). Kemp Smith says,

To enforce this objection, and to prepare the way for his further criticisms, Philo gives a restatement of Cleanthes' argument. This restatement he prefaces by a brief formulation of the presuppositions, and of the consequent type of empiricism in which he and Cleanthes are so far in agreement.¹⁰

How does Kemp Smith know that Philo and Cleanthes are in agreement about the presuppositions and consequences of “empiricism”? We know that Cleanthes has read Locke, but whom else has he read? Philo is cast in the role of the skeptic in the dialogue, as Pamphilus tells Hermippus (you the reader) at the beginning. Being familiar with many dialogues on religious matters, you the reader are familiar with the role of the sceptic: he is to raise objections and difficulties so that truth may emerge, and goodness triumph.¹¹ Philo clearly has read the famous sceptic David Hume.¹² But maybe Cleanthes either has not, or if he has, he has not become the sort of “empiricist” that Hume was. It is true that Cleanthes says his argument is *a posteriori*, true that Philo’s version is also *a posteriori*, and true that Cleanthes gives his assent when Philo asks him whether “I have made a fair representation of it” (DNR 2.14). But he later wants to withdraw that assent, and his reason is that Philo is not following the conventions of his role as a “careless sceptic” (Pamphilus’s description). When Cleanthes sees how Philo is criticizing the argument, he wants to deny that Philo’s target is his own version:

The declared profession of every reasonable sceptic is only to reject abstruse, remote, and refined arguments, to adhere to common sense and the plain instincts of nature; and to assent, wherever any reasons strike him with so full a force, that he cannot, without the greatest violence, prevent it. Now the arguments for natural religion are plainly of this kind; and nothing but the most perverse, obstinate metaphysics can reject them. Consider, anatomize the eye: Survey its structure and contrivance; and tell me, from your own feeling, if the idea of a contriver does not immediately flow in upon you with a force like that of sensation. (DNR 3.7)

Cleanthes has put forward a version of the design argument, and he sees that Philo’s version is different. It is different because it locates the crucial move at a point where Cleanthes initially suspects no weakness. When Philo attacks at a point that Cleanthes has not thought is controversial, Philo seems to him to be engaging in “perverse, obstinate metaphysics.” And so for him Philo is not playing the role of a “reasonable sceptic.” Cleanthes thinks that the crux of the design argument, the point where the work is done, is elsewhere.

The way in which Cleanthes understands the design argument is closer to the presentation by Henry Home, Lord Kames, Hume’s friend, than it is to Hume’s own understanding of it.¹³ Writing after the publication not only of Hume’s *Treatise* but also of the first *Enquiry*, Kames directly rejects Hume’s

analysis of probable reasoning, i.e., of “arguments *a posteriori*.” In his essay “Of our Idea of Power,” Kames rejects both reason and experience (meaning here the observation of repeated conjunctions of events) as the source of that idea, and insists instead that it is by a “peculiar manner of perception, that we discover a relation betwixt certain objects, which makes one be termed the cause, the other the effect.” This manner is a “simple feeling,” a sense by which when we see one billiard ball strike another

we are obviously so constituted, as not only to perceive the one body acting, and exerting its power; but also to perceive, that the change in the other body is produced by *means* of that action or exertion of power. This change we perceive to be an *effect*; and we perceive a necessary connection betwixt the action and the effect, so as that the one must unavoidably follow the other. (Kames, 278–9)

So, for Kames, the “inference” from effect to cause is a matter of an immediate “feeling.” He is at pains to emphasise his difference from “the author of the treatise of human nature” (Kames, 282) on this. Hume’s explanation of the idea of necessary connection is “a violent paradox, because, in reality, it contradicts our natural feelings, and wages war with the common sense of mankind” (Kames, 284). Just so Cleanthes reproaches Philo for waging war on common sense.

Kames uses his thesis that *a posteriori* inferences from effects to causes result from a special feeling to explain the version of the design argument he gives in his essay “Of our Knowledge of the Deity.” He rejects what he calls “metaphysical reasoning” (Kames, 315) as used by the Boyle lecturers in part because they are incomprehensible to the vulgar. If knowledge of the deity rested on metaphysics, the vulgar would be bereft of religion and morality. Even if the causal principle itself (that everything that comes into existence is caused to do so by something else) could be established by reason or experience, nevertheless

I find no *Data* to determine *a priori*, whether this world has existed of itself from all eternity, in a constant succession of causes and effects; or whether it be an effect produced by an Almighty Power. It is indeed hard to conceive a world eternal and self-existent, where all things are carried on by blind fate, without design or intelligence. And yet I can find no demonstration to the contrary. (Kames, 317–18)¹⁴

Kames, then, did not think that one can infer a cause from an effect *a priori*, but nor did he accept Hume's account of inferences *a posteriori* which he thought was "metaphysical" and "paradoxical." Instead he appeals to "feeling," a particular faculty by which the mind acquires sufficiently reliable although fallible causal beliefs. In his view, not only do we have this "feeling of a cause" when we perceive something to be an effect, even if we do not know what the cause is (his explanation of why we accept the causal principle), but also we invest the cause with whatever is proportioned to the effect. Whenever we perceive that the effect is itself "properly adapted to some end" (Kames, 295) then we ascribe to the cause (although it may otherwise be unknown) intelligence and design. In the case of human artifacts, experience has shown that the intelligence and design which must be present in the cause, given the nature of the effects as adapted to ends, is located in human minds. In the case of natural objects, such as plants and animals, we know from experience that these are not man-made. Hence we ascribe the design and intelligence we "feel" to a superhuman mind.

The important point to notice here is that Kames therefore thinks that the main task of the design argument is to provide empirical evidence of the existence of adaptation of means to ends throughout nature. That effects that exhibit means-to-ends adaptation are caused by a mind endowed with design and intelligence is simply something we "necessarily feel." By "necessarily" Kames means nothing stronger than that the judgement is inevitable given the operation of this "feeling" or "sense."¹⁵ Kames's example shows that the notion that the inference from the order of nature to a divine designer depends on feeling or sense and that we are simply so constituted by nature as to make this inference is not necessarily to be seen as a case of Humean natural belief. Hume, it is clear, could have had in mind, when framing Cleanthes's arguments, a thinker like Kames. The clash between Philo and Cleanthes need not be seen, in the way Dancy does see it, as a clash between skeptical reason and Humean natural belief.

This brings me to my second criticism of Dancy, about which I shall be brief. Insofar as Hume structures his examination of religious beliefs in terms of the distinction first explored in the *Treatise*, between the abstract and reflective reasonings of the study and the engaged everyday consciousness of the market place, he surely does so by parcelling out this work between DNR on the one hand and *The Natural History of Religion* on the other. It is this latter work that examines the origin in human nature of religious beliefs, and it argues that all popular religions originate in the culturally varying outputs of the passions and the fancy. This point has already been very well made by Michel Malherbe (op. cit.) and by others, and I will not labor it. If it

is accepted, then we ought to consider the discussion about a *feeling* that characterizes the tendency of the mind towards the idea of a designer when contemplating means-to-ends adaptations as being what one might call “a feeling of a tendency of reason.”¹⁶ If we decide that Hume the author is prepared in the end to give some weight to such a “feeling,” it is nevertheless likely, given the division of labour between DNR and the *Natural History*, that the feeling is one which arises in the minds of those few among the human race who have the leisure and inclination for abstract philosophy, even if Kames claims that it is a universal constant of human nature. It seems pretty clear that in the *Natural History* Hume denies that any form of religious belief is one of the constant and invariable products of human nature that he identifies in the *Treatise*.

This brings me to my third criticism of Dancy’s approach, which is the question what is the concern of DNR. At the beginning of his discussion he says “The *Dialogues* are concerned with the argument from design to the existence of God” (29). This is obviously too narrow and Dancy quickly adds that DNR also discusses other issues, including Demea’s *a priori* argument. But he does not seem to me to give sufficient weight to the title, dialogues “concerning Natural Religion.” As we all know, “natural” here stands in contrast to “revealed.” DNR discusses religion strictly without appeal to alleged revelations enshrined in religious traditions. But it does not discuss merely natural theology, meaning by that the various doctrines about the existence and nature of the deity that might be established by reason independently of revelation. The topic, announced by the title, is natural religion, where a religion is not merely a set of doctrines but also a complex of practices, a form of life. Cleanthes, as the spokesperson for natural religion, is emphatic that what matters to him are conclusions of natural reason which support a belief in divine providence. His argument is not intended to justify belief in a deity that is merely the cause of order in nature¹⁷ but one that rewards the just and punishes the wicked:

The most agreeable reflection, which it is possible for human imagination to suggest, is that of genuine theism, which represents us as the workmanship of a being perfectly good, wise, and powerful . . . the happiest lot which we can imagine, is that of being under his guardianship and protection. (DNR 12.25)

This distinction, which I think Dancy does not sufficiently consider, between natural theology and natural religion¹⁸ is relevant, I shall now suggest, to the question Dancy says must be answered: why did Hume write in dialogue form?

Section III

In his recent book, Michael Prince examines the debates about dialogue that went on in the eighteenth century among philosophers, theologians, and literary theorists. He shows that the dialogue form and its proper uses became a matter of controversy in such a way that anyone who wrote a dialogue on any topic thereby implied a certain position on philosophical and critical questions. In particular, to write a dialogue on religion was to imply a commitment to natural religion, that is, to the view that religion is a matter of reason.¹⁹ Prince quotes (15) from Henry Dodwell, *Christianity not Founded on Argument* (1742):

Whereas, were religion indeed a rational institution, a man might surely well dispute it without a crime A free and amicable correspondence might well be admitted, and the wildest opponent received upon an equal foot with his most orthodox and approved antagonist. All other methods of proceeding bespeak plainly the question already determined beyond all possibility of controversy. And so indeed it is.

The dialogue form represented the activity of free, rational enquiry and thus to make anything the topic of dialogue was thereby to imply that the questions being considered were ones which it was appropriate to determine by reason. This is why Demea insists on distinguishing between the question of the existence of God, which is a matter for reason to determine, and the question of the divine attributes, which is not.²⁰ Of course Demea thinks that the question of the existence of God has already been conclusively established by reason, and his belief that the divine attributes are incomprehensible to human reason makes him finally unable to continue a dialogue in which reason seems to be arriving at heretical conclusions on the topic. Eventually he has to reject dialogue.

In the eighteenth-century debate about dialogue and its appropriate use, the example of Shaftesbury's "The Moralists" and also Shaftesbury's critical theories about dialogue found in the opening section of "The Moralists," the "Advice to an Author," and the "Miscellaneous Reflections"²¹ were very influential. Shaftesbury argued that the proper function of a philosophical dialogue was to arrive at the truth not by systematic argument given in the author's own voice but by a dramatic presentation of debate between characters, each speaking in their own voice, from which truth would emerge by convergence on a "common sense." He therefore attacked dialogues, particularly those written by clergymen, in which the author's own voice is evident

throughout and the other characters are either evidently strawmen or else merely ridiculed. In dialogues of this kind, which Shaftesbury thinks are debased, the characters are not “real” in the sense that they lack credibility, and this failure is the obverse of the failure of debased dialogues which is that the author’s voice is in the end the only one that can be heard:

’Tis by their Names only that these *Characters* are figur’d. Tho they bear different Titles, and are set up to maintain contrary Points; they are found, at the bottom, to be all of the same side; and, notwithstanding their seeming Variance, to co-operate in the most officious manner with the Author, towards the display of his own proper Wit, and the establishment of his private Opinions and Maxims. (Shaftesbury, 2.268)

Conversely, Shaftesbury maintains that a genuinely philosophical dialogue must be one from which, in the phrase Dancy uses in his title, “the author is annihilated.” The important point about the annihilation of the author is, for Shaftesbury, not that the author *could not* write a monological treatise on the topic,²² but that the proper purpose of the author of a philosophical dialogue cannot be achieved if the author’s voice is present. This is because a philosophical dialogue ought to be like a mirror or like a painting in which the reader can see himself or herself represented. The philosophical dialogues of the ancients were able to do this to a high level:

’Twas not enough that these Pieces treated fundamentally of *Morals*, and in consequence pointed out *real Characters* and *Manners*: They exhibited ’em *alive*, and set the Countenances and Complexions of Men plainly in view. And by this means they not only taught Us to know *Others*, but, what was principal and of highest virtue in ’em, they taught us to know *Our-selves*. (Shaftesbury, 1: 104).

The philosophical dialogue annihilates the author so that readers can see in it not the author but themselves. The readers see their own conflicting opinions, their own uncertainties, played out before their eyes and in the resolution of the dialogue they find a resolution for themselves. They achieve their own identities (their own characters, own sentiments) through identifying with the common sense of the others. They discover themselves.

Hume evidently knew Shaftesbury’s theory of dialogue.²³ As both Prince and Malherbe point out, Pamphilus’s opening letter to Hermippus recalls Shaftesbury’s discussion of the virtues of the ancient philosophical dialogues

and the difficulties of writing modern imitations. But is Hume himself committed to the model? Malherbe argues that he is not. He argues that Shaftesbury regarded the dialogue as a means of discovering truth in moral philosophy because his conception of dialogue was fundamentally dialectical: truth emerges from thesis and antithesis and, as in Plato, we recognize her when she appears. But, Malherbe points out, Hume recommends and practises the experimental method in moral subjects, and the appropriate genre for that is the systematic treatise. Dialogue is a genre that belongs to the “easy and obvious” species of moral philosophy,²⁴ and it therefore reinforces and endorses the common sense of mankind; but it cannot discover philosophical truth, which is the task of the “abstract” species. This, Malherbe claims, is the clue to understanding Hume’s use of dialogue on the topic of natural religion. The experimental method can be applied successfully to the question of the origin of religion in human nature, which Hume does in the *Natural History*. But there is no systematic treatise on the foundation in reason of religion; there is only a dialogue. Given that Hume differs from Shaftesbury about the relation between dialogue and truth, the fact that Hume writes a dialogue indicates that no truth is to be found:

The question of the foundation of religion remains [viz. at the end of the *Natural History*] unsolved. The answer is to be found in the *Dialogues*; and the answer is that the question cannot be answered. The foundation of religion is something that is prey to endless controversy and irreducible scepticism. Here, the subject itself demands the method of dialogue.²⁵

Malherbe’s conclusion, therefore, is that in Hume’s hands the religious dialogue becomes simply skeptical: it instantiates the message that no rational conclusions can be reached on the topic.

There is force to this argument. Shaftesbury himself was concerned about the possibility that dialogue might be the appropriate method not only for moral philosophy that aims at displaying the truth, but also for Pyrrhonian skepticism that aims at balancing contrary views so as to produce *epoche*, suspense of judgment. If so, a Pyrrhonian skeptic might write a kind of anti-dialogue in which the end state is dissolution rather than resolution. Malherbe thinks that this is just what Hume did.

Nevertheless, I am not persuaded. Malherbe refers, correctly I think, to Hume’s discussion of the two species of philosophy in the opening section of the first *Enquiry*. This is quite a sustained discussion, certainly in Hume’s own voice, of the relation between philosophy and styles of writing. In it Hume

argues that philosophical painters²⁶ need the discoveries of philosophical anatomists in order to achieve their own ends of representing human nature in a familiar, pleasing and engaging manner.²⁷ So it is wise to assume that one of Hume's own compositions in the easy and obvious manner, DNR, is a combination of anatomy and portraiture, one that has benefited from earlier dissections (back in the study, to mix metaphors). And, of course, Hume had already written systematically (or certainly more systematically) about religion in the first *Enquiry*. My suggestion is that appeal be made to the distinction already mentioned between natural *theology* and natural *religion*. Natural theology can be treated systematically, and Hume did so in the first *Enquiry*. But the discovery there is that there is no such thing as a "natural religion" as Cleanthes (and all those in the eighteenth century whom he represents) requires, namely a reasoned basis for religious *practices*.

There seems to be some agreement, as we have seen, that the message of DNR is about what is absent. Dancy thinks that what is absent is the author, in a special way that is more than just the Shaftesburian convention of dialogue. Malherbe thinks that what is absent is any rational conclusion about the foundation of religion in reason. My suggestion is that what is absent is that which the title says Hume's work concerns, namely natural religion itself. Hume writes a dialogue concerning natural religion because he cannot write a treatise about a subject that does not exist. If one follows reason, conclusions can be reached if only tentatively, but they belong entirely to theoretical philosophy. If one wants a *religion*, a form of life, a guide to action that is in any way different from secular morality, then one must abandon reason and go to join Demea, outside the scene of dialogue in which the norm of rational enquiry rules. "To be a philosophical sceptic is, in a man of letters, the first and most essential step towards being a sound, believing *Christian*" (DNR 12.33) can then be read against itself, as the lesson that reason cannot lead to a religion. Hume's principal target emerges as the thesis that religion can be reasonable.

I would like to end with a tentative comment on Philo's "recantation." When Philo makes this speech he refers especially to biological adaptation. As Isabel Rivers has shown,²⁸ and as Dancy also notes, Hume is here using a series of examples that were widely copied from text to text among natural theologians in the eighteenth century. Rivers argues that what is distinctive of Hume's use is that unlike these other writers he does not go on (does not have Philo go on) to draw any conclusions about divine *providence*. He seems simply to accept that, when we encounter such phenomena, we always treat them in terms of concepts of "purpose . . . intention . . . design" (DNR 12.2). Also, he connects this language of purpose and design *first* to the "maxims"

by which natural philosophers guide their research: “an anatomist, who had observed a new organ or canal, would never be satisfied, till he had also discovered its use and intention” (DNR 12.2). DNR was translated into German in 1780 and Kant had read it before he published the *Critique of Judgment* ten years later. In the “Critique of Teleological Judgment,” Kant also considers such “maxims” as principles by which natural philosophers guide their research, under the principle, which reflective judgement gives to itself, of the purposiveness of nature for our judgement. Like Hume, Kant thought of such a “tendency of reason,” as I called this aspect of the action of the mind, as something brought to experience by the contemplative mind. Kant of course then develops this notion, in the context of the critical philosophy, in a way that precisely *blocks* any objective knowledge of a divine designer. He does this in such a way that the analogy between “natural purposes,” as Kant calls organisms, and human artifacts is completely refuted. Human artifacts can be explained by efficient causation, Kant says, but natural purposes cannot be so explained. The example of Kant’s thinking about biology may suggest that, in the eighteenth century, *some* conceptual connection between biological adaptation and intelligent design seemed to be unavoidable, even to philosophers like Kant and Hume. But, it seems to me, their greatness is evident in the way in which they see already that it must be possible in some way to go on thinking of design in nature without invoking a divine designer to account for it.

NOTES

An earlier version of this paper was delivered at the 27th International Hume Society Conference at the College of William and Mary, Williamsburg, Virginia, in July 2000. I am grateful to Dorothy Coleman, who commented on the paper, and to members of the audience for their questions and discussion. I am also grateful to Jonathan Dancy for written comments, and to the three anonymous referees for this journal.

1 M. A. Box, *The Suasive Art of David Hume* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990); Peter Walmsley, *The Rhetoric of Berkeley’s Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990); William Walker, *Locke, Literary Criticism, and Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994); Adam Potkay, *The Fate of Eloquence in the Age of Hume* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994); Michael Prince, *Philosophical Dialogue in the British Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Thomas M. Lennon, *Reading Bayle* (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 1999); Isabel Rivers, *Reason, Grace, and Sentiment*, volume 2: *Shaftesbury to Hume* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

2 In the text I shall refer to this as DNR. Kemp Smith's edition is most commonly used by Hume scholars, but not exclusively, and we await the volume of the new Clarendon Press Critical Edition that will contain DNR. I shall give references to DNR by citing part and paragraph. The text from which I quote is my own edition, David Hume, *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion*, ed. M. Bell (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1990).

3 Apart from works already cited I have benefited from: Michael Morrisroe, Jr., "Hume's Rhetorical Strategy," *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 11 (1965): 963-74 and "Characterization as Rhetorical Device," *Enlightenment Essay*, 1 (1970): 95-107; John Bricke, "On the Interpretation of Hume's *Dialogues*," *Religious Studies* 11 (1975): 1-18; David Simpson, "Hume's Intimate Voices and the Method of Dialogue," *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 21 (1979): 68-92; Gary Shapiro, "The Man of Letters and the Author of Nature: Hume on Philosophical Discourse," *The Eighteenth Century: Theory and Interpretation* 26 (1985): 115-37; William Lad Sessions, "A Dialogic Interpretation of Hume's *Dialogues*," *Hume Studies* 17 (1991): 15-39; Michel Malherbe, "Hume and the Art of Dialogue" in *Hume and Hume's Connexions*, ed. M. A. Stewart and John P. Wright (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1994), 201-23; Jonathan Dancy, "'From Here the Author is Annihilated': Reflections on Philosophical Aspects of the Use of the Dialogue Form in Hume's *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion*," in *Philosophical Dialogues: Plato, Hume, Wittgenstein*, ed. Timothy Smiley (*Proceedings of the British Academy* 85) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 29-60.

4 See, in addition to volume 2 of her *Reason, Grace, and Sentiment*, Isabel Rivers, "Shaftesburian Enthusiasm and the Evangelical Revival," in *Revival and Religion since 1700: Essays for John Walsh*, ed. J. Garnett and C. Matthew (London: Hambledon Press, 1993), 21-39.

5 Simon Blackburn, "Playing Hume's Hand" in *Religion and Hume's Legacy*, ed. D. Z. Phillips and T. Tessin (London and New York: 1999), 3.

6 Dancy may be missing something here by conflating religion and superstition. In Hume superstition is one form of vulgar religion, and enthusiasm is another. Hume attacks both, for example in *The Natural History of Religion*. But he also attacks philosophical or "natural" religion, as exemplified by Cleanthes.

7 Here the point made in note 6 is again relevant.

8 There is of course another problem with Dancy's view. If Hume's purpose is to attack religious belief, why is that his purpose? Evidently Hume's own immunity from the natural tendency to infer a divine designer when contemplating the order of nature cannot have been an effect of failing to interpret DNR. So, for Dancy, what is its basis?

9 For the diversity of the design argument, see Earl Wasserman, "Nature Moralized: The Divine Analogy in the Eighteenth Century," *English Literary History* 20 (1953): 39-73.

10 *Hume's Dialogues concerning Natural Religion*, ed. N. Kemp Smith, 2nd ed. (London: Nelson, 1947), 99.

11 This theme and the way in which eighteenth-century dialogues present it is a major topic of Michael Prince's important study, *Philosophical Dialogue in the British Enlightenment*.

12 It is helpful to keep distinct the David Hume, author of the *Treatise* and the *Enquiries*, whom Philo seems to have studied, and the David Hume who writes the *Dialogues*. Philo may have read other sceptics, too, such as Bayle, and his arguments and conclusions may not be purely Humean.

13 The similarities between Hume's Cleanthes and Henry Home, Lord Kames, were noted by M. A. Stewart, "Hume and the Metaphysical Argument *a priori*," in *Philosophy, Its History and Historiography*, ed. A. J. Holland (Dordrecht: Reidel, 1985), 243–70. References of the form (Kames, n) are to page n of the facsimile edition of *Essays on the Principles of Morality and Natural Religion* (1751) (New York & London: Garland Publishing Inc., 1976).

14 This hesitancy about cosmological arguments (arguments *a priori*, i.e., from the causal principle) was widely shared at this time. It was thought that even if they were successful they did not provide reason to think that the First Cause was a divine mind endowed with design, intention, wisdom, and goodness, and unless this was shown the divine being whose existence they established would be useless to the cause of religion, which is, in Cleanthes's words (DNR 12.13), "to regulate the hearts of men, humanize their conduct, [and] infuse the spirit of temperance, order, and obedience." Newton shared this reservation with the Boyle lecturers. R. S. Westfall, *Force in Newton's Physics* (London and New York: 1971), 419–20, quotes from one of Newton's manuscripts:

Even arguments for a Deity if not taken from Phaenomena are slippery and serve only for ostentation. An Atheist will allow that there is a Being absolutely perfect, necessarily existing, & the author of mankind & call it Nature: & if you talk of infinite wisdom or of any perfection more than he allows to be in nature hee recon it a chimaera And hee may tell you further that y^e Author of mankind was destitute of wisdom and designe because there are no final causes & that matter is space & therefore necessarily existing & having always the same quantity of motion, would in infinite time run through all variety of forms one of w^{ch} is that of man Metaphysical arguments are intricate and understood by few The argument w^{ch} all men are capable of understanding and by w^{ch} the belief of a Deity has hitherto subsisted in the world is taken from Phaenomena. We see the effects of a Deity in the creation & thence gather the Cause & therefore the proof of a Deity & what are his properties belong to experimental Philosophy.

Samuel Clarke in his Boyle lectures of 1704 also regarded the issue of whether or not the deity is a mind endowed with design and goodness as "the main Question between us and the Atheists," and said that the proper view of the nature of the deity cannot "be Demonstrated strictly and properly *a priori* But *a posteriori*, almost every thing in the World Demonstrates to us this great Truth" (Samuel Clarke, *A Demonstration of the Being and Attributes of God* [1705] [facsimile, Stuttgart/Bad Canstatt: Friedrich Frommann Verlag, 1964], 102–3).

15 “To substitute feeling in place of reason and demonstration, may seem to put the evidence of the Deity upon too low a footing. But human reason is not so mighty an affair, as philosophers vainly pretend. It affords very little aid, in making original discoveries. The comparing of things together, and directing our inferences from feeling and experience, are its proper province. In this way, reason gives its aid, to lead us to the knowledge of the Deity. It enlarges our views of final causes, and of the prevalence of wisdom and goodness. But the application of the argument from final causes, to prove the existence of a Deity, and the force of our conclusion, from beautiful and orderly effects to a designing cause, are not from reason, but from an internal light These conclusions rest entirely upon sense and feeling” (Kames, 340).

16 I will come back to what I mean by this rather peculiar phrase later on.

17 As noted above, Newton and Clarke both thought that the crucial point to establish against “atheists” was the existence of divine *providence*.

18 Philo (at DNR 12.34) speaks of natural theology rather than natural religion in order, I believe, to mark his distance from Cleanthes right to the end of DNR.

19 As we see, Cleanthes says when he invokes Locke’s authority for the view “that religion was only a branch of philosophy” (DNR 1.17).

20 Demea’s speech at the start of part 2 expresses adherence to a religious tradition that affirms the mystery of God. He refers to Malebranche in support and says he could further “cite all the divines almost, from the foundation of Christianity, who have ever treated of this or any other theological subject” (DNR 2.2). In fact, the view that religious doctrines express mysteries which the human mind cannot fully understand had been out of favor with some theologians in both Scotland and England in the couple of generations before Hume composed DNR. For example, Sullivan *comments on “the failure of either Tillotson or Synge ever to preach on 1 Corinthians 2: 5 (“That your faith should not stand in the wisdom of men, but in the power of God”)*” (Robert E. Sullivan, *John Toland and the Deist Controversy*, [Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1982], 67), and Drummond and Bulloch quote a critic of the Scottish Moderates complaining that they

did not refuse to sign the Confession of Faith, but were very shy as to preaching its truths, spoke of it as containing antiquated notions, hinted in quarters where they thought themselves safe that they did not believe some of its doctrines, and constructed their discourses so as to indicate an Arian or Arminian cast of sentiment which could not be misunderstood. (Andrew L. Drummond and James Bulloch, *The Scottish Church, 1688–1848*, [Edinburgh: St. Andrews Press, 1973], 56.)

Hume, then, places Demea in a tradition that is skeptical about the powers of human reason to understand religious truths and in which the central doctrines of Christianity (the Fall, the Incarnation, the Atonement, the Trinity) are all “covered in a deep cloud from human curiosity” (DNR 2.1). Demea uses biblical rather than philosophical language. For example in this part he (in contrast to Tillotson or Synge) borrows his language from 1 Corinthians 2, and when he does speak of the divine attributes he insists on the infinity and perfection of God’s wisdom and benevolence,

on their distance from human varieties. For him, there exists an authoritative tradition of theological doctrine against which the efforts of natural theology should be judged. He would endorse the sentiments of Robert South's sermon of 1694, "Christianity Mysterious, and the Wisdom of God in Making It So," rather than those of the Scottish Moderates and English Latitudinarians (see South, *Sermons Preached Upon Several Occasions* [London: J. Bettenham for Jonah Bowyer, 1727]). This evidence for the character of Demea is consistent with Michael Prince's suggestion (120, 140) that Hume named him after the fictitious person, "Honest Demea," mentioned by Crito in Berkeley's dialogue *Alciphron*.

21 References in the text of the form (Shaftesbury, [volume number]: [page number]) are to: Anthony Earl of Shaftesbury, *Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times*, edited in two volumes by Philip Ayres (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999).

22 Shaftesbury says of "The Moralists," which is taken as a model of the annihilation of the author, that "'Tis . . . at bottom as *Systematical, Didactick, and Preceptive*, as" his own monological "Inquiry Concerning Virtue Or Merit" (Shaftesbury, 2: 265).

23 For discussion of the relation between Hume and Shaftesbury, see Rivers, *Reason, Grace, and Sentiment*, chapter 4.

24 David Hume, *Enquiries concerning Human Understanding and concerning the Principles of Morals*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge, 3rd ed., revised by P. H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), 5.

25 Malherbe, 216.

26 Recall Shaftesbury's analogy between dialogue and painting.

27 Not stretched out, flayed on the mortuary slab.

28 Isabel Rivers, "'Galen's Muscles': Wilkins, Hume, and the Educational Use of the Argument from Design," *The Historical Journal*, 36 (1993): 577-97.