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Hume Studies Volume XXVIII, Number 1 (April, 2002) 131-148.

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Morality above Metaphysics: Philo and the Duties of Friendship in *Dialogues* 12

RICHARD H. DEES

In part 12 of Hume's *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion*,¹ Philo famously appears to reverse his course. After slicing the Argument from Design into small pieces throughout most of the first eleven parts of the *Dialogues*, he suddenly seems to endorse a version of it:

One great foundation of the COPERNICAN system is the maxim, *that nature acts by the simplest methods, and chuses the most proper means to any end*; and astronomers often, without thinking of it, lay this strong foundation of piety and religion. The same thing is observable in other parts of philosophy: And thus all the sciences almost lead us insensibly to acknowledge a first intelligent Author; and their authority is often so much the greater, as they do not directly profess that intention. (DNR 214–15)

Even more amazingly, Philo then asserts that the difference between an atheist and a theist is merely verbal (DNR 217–19), and he concludes by asserting that his form of skepticism is a prerequisite for becoming a “sound, believing Christian” (DNR 228).

The reversal is so remarkable that it has prompted considerable speculation about what Hume and Philo could mean. Interpretations fall into two

basic camps.² On one side are those who think that Philo's concession is either insincere or that his concession really amounts to nothing. Norman Kemp Smith, for example, supposes that Hume is simply making a concession to conventional wisdom to keep the book from being condemned too harshly.³ Graham Priest, as another example, thinks the concession that the creator of the universe bears some resemblance to human intelligence is meaningless since Philo is essentially arguing that anything can resemble anything else in some respect.⁴ On the other side are those who think Philo's reversal demonstrates a sincere expression of a religious faith, albeit an unorthodox one. On this view, Philo truly believes in an intelligent designer of the universe, but maintains that the more conventional attributes that Christians find in that designer are not justified.⁵ One important variant of this view is the belief that religious faith is a product of common life, which Philo's arguments in the earlier parts of the *Dialogues* ultimately do nothing to undermine.⁶

Both interpretations have their problems. The second camp must explain how the view Philo seems to accept does not fall prey to the very objections that he has raised against it in the rest of the *Dialogues*. The strategy of these interpreters, then, is to show that the new sentiments are not subject to the old objections because they are not the result of an argument, but of an irresistible sentiment, a natural belief, or an essential component of common life. The first camp, on the other hand, has difficulty explaining why Philo appears to make any concessions at all. Usually, these interpreters argue that Hume could not conclude the *Dialogues* with an openly skeptical view of religion without risking condemnation—though they must then explain what exactly Hume feared once he had decided to publish the work posthumously. In any case, they must rely on motivations outside the *Dialogues* to explain Philo's claims, and so it concedes that the reversal does not fit within the dramatic logic of the work.⁷ So the cost of the first interpretation is that it forces us to admit that the *Dialogues* fail internally.⁸

I want to suggest yet another way to read these passages, one that takes the arguments seriously, but which also pays attention to the conversational context in which they take place. My claim is that Philo's concession is an attempt to maintain a friendship with Cleanthes that might have been damaged by the spirited arguments that Philo laid against him earlier in the conversation and to reaffirm the moral principles that they importantly share. On this view, Philo never renounces his skeptical arguments, but he recasts them in ways that emphasize his points of agreement with Cleanthes so that he can then refocuses the conversation on the moral questions that he takes to be of the utmost importance. In this way, Philo enacts a belief for which he argues in part 12 itself: the belief that morality is more important than metaphysics.

I. The Conversational Context

To find the meaning of Philo's apparent reversal in part 12, we must first understand the conversational context in which it takes place. That context has two elements: roughly, what occurs immediately before the change and what happens after it.

In parts 9–11, Philo and Demea have teamed up to argue that the evil in the world can not be rationally explained in a way that is compatible with God's power and His goodness. Against Cleanthes's claim that the suffering in the world is far outweighed by the happiness (DNR 200), Philo, with Demea's acquiescence, insists that we cannot rationally account for *any* suffering in the world as long as we suppose that God is either infinitely powerful or good. He concludes by noting that since God is ultimately responsible for everything in the world, He must also be responsible for the evil and suffering in the world:

[Y]et so long as there is any vice at all in the universe, it will very much puzzle you anthropomorphites, how to account for it. You must assign a cause for it, without having recourse to the first cause. But as every effect must have a cause, and that cause another; you must either carry on the progression *in infinitum*, or rest on that original principle, who is the ultimate cause of all things. (DNR 212)

At this point, Demea finally realizes the game Philo is playing, and his sensibilities are shocked:

Hold! Hold! cried DEMEA: Whither does your imagination hurry you? I joined in alliance with you, in order to prove the incomprehensible nature of the divine Being, and refute the principles of CLEANTHES, who would measure every thing by a human rule and standard. But I now find you running into all the topics of the greatest libertines and infidels; and betraying that holy cause, which you seemingly espoused. Are you secretly, then, a more dangerous enemy than CLEANTHES himself? (DNR 212–13)

Demea had supported Philo because he thought Philo was simply defending the incomprehensibility of God's nature. When he discovers Philo's true intentions, he is dismayed. Cleanthes, on the other hand, has understood Philo's intentions all along, and he shows his disdain for Philo's tactics:

Believe me, DEMEA; your friend PHILO, from the beginning, has been amusing himself at both our expence. (DNR 213)

After this exchange, Demea loses all interest in the conversation, and Pamphilus, the narrator, ends part 11 with this report:

PHILO continued to the last his spirit of opposition, and his censure of established opinions. But I could observe, that DEMEA did not at all relish the latter part of the discourse; and he took occasion soon after, on some pretence or other, to leave the company. (DNR 213)

So, Philo's argumentative spirit has upset Demea so much that he leaves in a huff, and part 12 begins in the aftermath of this social unpleasantness.

Demea's exit at the end of part 11 is obviously dramatic, and its most apparent significance is that it represents the departure of the real enemy of the *Dialogues*, since his view represents the forces of mysticism and superstition, against which both Philo and Cleanthes are fighting. That view is correct as far as it goes: Demea does represent a dangerous perspective which, Philo argues, has led to interminable warfare between proponents of different religions.⁹ But Demea's departure, as I will argue, changes the dynamics of the *Dialogues* for a different reason. What is important to see at this junction, however, is that Philo's apparent concession follows the dramatic height of the *Dialogues*, in which one of the participants has been so offended by Philo that he feels he must leave the conversation.

After the apparent concession, Philo's chief arguments in part 12 focus on the relationship between religion and morality.¹⁰ When Cleanthes argues that "[t]he doctrine of a future state is so strong and necessary a security to morals, that we never ought to abandon or neglect it" (DNR 219), Philo vigorously disagrees. Whenever religion is mentioned in history, he contends, we are bound to find stories of conflict and misery (DNR 220). Hume's own *History of England* certainly confirms this point. The English Civil War, Hume claims, was merely the most vivid example of the pernicious effects of religion on civil society. The motivations that led the parties into open warfare, he claims, "were undoubtedly not of a civil, but of a religious nature. . . . The fanatical spirit, let loose, confounded all regard to ease, safety, interest; and dissolved every moral and civil obligation" (H 5:380).¹¹ Likewise, Philo argues that vulgar religion either excites the imagination and incites a dangerous fervor in people, or it breeds hypocrisy as people feign the fervor they are supposed to feel. Either way, morality is sacrificed:

[W]here the interests of religion are concerned, no morality can be forcible enough to bind the enthusiastic zealot. The sacredness of the cause sanctifies every measure. (DNR 222)

Indeed, the focus on eternal salvation

is apt to extinguish the benevolent affections, and beget a narrow, contracted selfishness. And when such a temper is encouraged, it easily eludes all the general precepts of charity and benevolence. (DNR 222)

When eternal salvation is at stake, it overwhelms everything else; common decency and simple charity stand no chance.

When he replies to this point, Cleanthes does not object to Philo's claims about the effects of religion. Instead, he claims that whatever its faults, religion supports morality because it consoles people (DNR 225). That objection provokes a lengthy lecture from Philo, the gist of which is that most religion is based not on consoling the sad and the miserable, but on nurturing fear: "terror is the primary principle of religion, it is the passion which always predominates in it" (DNR 225–6). The real effect of religion, then, is not consolation, but "gloom and melancholy" (DNR 226). Cleanthes tacitly accepts this claim, and so he acquiesces to Philo's conclusion that religion does little, if anything, to promote morality. In effect, he agrees with Philo that people need a morality by which they can actually live, a morality that affirms life, but that religion itself does not supply one.

Philo thus stands the usual argument against atheists and skeptics on its head: the true threat to morality comes not from them, but from the most pious, who do not feel constrained by the requirements of an earth-bound morality. So, Philo claims, we do not need religion to teach morality; instead,

the smallest grain of natural honesty and benevolence has more effect on men's conduct, than the most pompous views, suggested by theological theories and systems. (DNR 221)

Common life and commonsense are more important for teaching morality than religious proselytizing. Religion as such is not incompatible with this view of morality, Philo thinks, but the morality of common life is supported only by a "philosophical and rational" religion (DNR 220). Whether Philo is actually embracing such a religion here, as many commentators believe,¹² misses the point he is trying to make. Philo is most concerned to reaffirm the

common morality that he thinks we all feel. Honesty and benevolence are what are important; theological systems are not. Thus, for Philo, being right about the metaphysical questions concerning God's nature and existence is less important than supporting that common morality. Securing agreement on these metaphysical questions is trivial compared to the agreement that is necessary to sustain the morality that is essential to society and common life. Metaphysics, on this view, is subordinate to morality.

The content of that common morality, of course, will be important. Given Philo's railings against the fear and gloom of much religious morality, we can safely assume that he agrees with Hume's own pronouncements against the "hair-brained enthusiast" who gives his life over to "[c]elibacy, fasting, penance, mortification, self-denial, humility, silence, solitude, and the whole train of monkish virtues" (EPM 9.3; SBN 270). In its place, Hume offers a morality of personal merit, which finds virtue in any quality that is useful or agreeable to oneself or to others.¹³ In this morality, honesty and integrity are important virtues, but so are wit, cheerfulness, kindness, intelligence, and a good business sense.¹⁴ Significantly for my purposes, the man of perfect virtue is also a polite conversationalist. One acquaintance describes such a person:

I met him lately in a circle of the gayest company, and he was the very life and soul of our conversation: So much wit with good manners; so much gallantry without affectation; so much ingenious knowledge so genteelly delivered, I have never before observed in any one. (EPM 9.2; SBN 269)

Good manners and good conversation characterize a good person. Indeed, Hume devotes an entire chapter in the *Treatise* to showing how etiquette arises and the important role it serves in tempering our expressions of pride to smooth social interactions between people (T 3.3.2; SBN 592-9).¹⁵ A Humean morality of common life is one in which good manners are not mere niceties; they are essential tools of social life.

Insofar as Philo himself follows such a morality, it requires him to be a respectful guest and a good conversationalist, and it requires him to observe the rules of civility that make so many interactions in society possible. When Philo carries his arguments so far that they outrage Demea, he has violated that civility. Indeed, at the beginning of part 12, Cleanthes admonishes Philo for taking the matter so far:

Your spirit of controversy, joined to your abhorrence of vulgar superstition, carries you strange lengths, when engaged in an argument;

and there is nothing so sacred and venerable, even in your own eyes, which you spare on that occasion. (DNR 214)

Thus, by breaking the bounds of civility, Philo has not only offended Demea, but Cleanthes as well. The insult to Cleanthes is especially troublesome, since Philo and Cleanthes are close friends. Indeed, Philo himself remarks that they live together in “unreserved intimacy” (DNR 214).¹⁶ So, Philo has so offended Demea that Demea leaves, and he has thereby insulted his friend. On the very standard of morality he professes, then, Philo has acted poorly.

II. The Content of the Concession

Thus, the context of concession is that Philo has violated the standards of morality that he fervently hopes to support. As such, he needs to make amends for his behavior, and he needs to repair the tear in his friendship with Cleanthes. To be sociable, Philo must not alienate his host and friend, and he must find some way to make good his insult to him. For that reason, Philo puts into practice the lesson that, we have seen, he seeks to convey in the rest of the conversation. In part 12, he attempts to *show* that he values morality and friendship over the fine points of metaphysics. And so, he professes to believe a version of the design argument. The argument he seems to endorse is that we can discern a design in the universe from the fine workmanship that nature seems to display. In doing so, he hopes to show Cleanthes how much they truly share.

However, the argument Philo presents does not seem to be any different from the one he has soundly rejected. After all, he offers a proposal in part 8 that shows how just the kind of order that he has described can result without the intervention of an intelligent designer. Moreover, the argument he has just completed in part 11 is based on the premise that the order we do find in the world is not what we would expect from an omnipotent being. We would blame the architect of a drafty and noisy house, Philo says, even if it were true that a change in any one part would make the matter worse:

The architect would in vain display his subtilty, and prove to you, that if this door or that window were altered, greater ills would ensue. What he says, may be strictly true: The alteration of one particular, while the other parts of the building remain, may only augment the inconveniencies. But still you would assert in general, that, if the architect had had skill and good intentions, he might have formed such a plan of the whole, and might have adjusted the parts in such a manner, as would have remedied all or most of these inconveniencies. (DNR 204)

The pain and suffering of the world suggests, then, that it was not the product of a competent designer. While the disorder in the world in part 11 is about moral qualities rather than the strictly natural qualities of the world, the moral disorder shows that the natural order is not so finely crafted as Philo seems to say it is in part 12. After all, the pain that the house causes is the result of a poor overall design, one that a better architect could have easily corrected.

So the argument in part 12 does magically escape the criticisms that Philo has leveled against Cleanthes's versions of the Argument from Design. Nevertheless, Philo pointedly does not pose those objections here. Instead, he leaps into one of his most puzzling—if not bizarre—assertions: he claims that the dispute between theists and atheists is merely verbal. In that passage, I think, Philo shows how he can assert a belief in the design argument without giving up any of his previous objections to it.

Philo curiously maintains that once the theist admits that the analogy between human intelligence and the alleged intelligence of God is “great and immeasurable, because incomprehensible” (DNR 218), and the atheist admits that there is some remote analogy between the principles of the universe and an intelligent cause (DNR 218), nothing is left but a “dispute of words” (DNR 216):

Where then, cry I to both these antagonists, is the subject of your dispute? The Theist allows, that the original intelligence is very different from human reason: The Atheist allows, that the original principle of order bears some remote analogy to it. Will you quarrel, Gentlemen, about the degrees, and enter into a controversy, which admits not of any precise meaning, nor consequently of any determination? (DNR 218)

Philo emphasizes the ambiguities in the theist's and the atheist's position, and he then declares that dispute is merely one about the degree to which the analogy to human intelligence holds—a dispute, he claims, that is not worth a serious argument.

Surely, such a position is disingenuous, for at least two reasons. First, the “remote analogy” to which even the atheist must concede is one that allows the principles of nature to bear as much resemblance to the “rotting of a turnip” (DNR 218) as to human intelligence. So, implicitly, Philo puts in the mouth of the atheist the objection that he himself raised in parts 5–7 that the analogy in the Argument from Design does not imply that the cause of the universe must be an intelligent designer. Indeed, as A. G. Vink points out, at the end of the *Dialogues*, Philo himself will only admit that the “*cause or causes*” (DNR 227) of the universe bear an analogy to an intelligent designer, and so he does not even concede a belief in a single Creator of the

universe.¹⁷ So the version of the design argument that Philo accepts is so attenuated that it is actually compatible with the objections he offered earlier to it. The universe bears *some* resemblance to human intelligence, he says, but he still allows that it also bears some resemblance to an animal or a vegetable. Thus, the commentators who maintain that upon examination, Philo concedes very little are, I think, correct.

Nevertheless, Philo takes some pains to soft-pedal the objections that he still has, and he accentuates the points of agreement. Everyone can accept, he claims, that *some* principle of order is at work in the universe, and so everyone can admit that it bears *some* analogy to intelligence. He can then cast the difference in the positions of the atheist and the theist as just a difference of opinion about exactly how similar the principles of nature are to human intelligence. He can thus assert a belief in a version of the design argument, as long as we understand it in a minimalist fashion. So although Philo does not actually abandon any of the objections he raised in the earlier parts of the conversation, in part 12, he downplays their significance, and he emphasizes the similarities, rather than the differences, in his position and Cleanthes's.

The second reason that Philo's assertion that the dispute between theists and atheists is merely a matter of degrees is disingenuous is that even disputes about degrees can be genuine. All shades of gray are not alike, even if the difference between them is exactly how much black and how much white they contain and even if no one is willing to fight about the differences. However, the degree to which a country is free is surely a matter of degrees, and such a dispute can be of the utmost importance in determining what kinds of changes are needed in it. So the dispute over the exact degree to which a quality is present might in fact be worth debating, *if* something of importance rests on the outcome. So when Philo claims that the dispute between theists and atheists is a matter of degrees that is not worth an argument, he is in effect declaring that nothing important hinges on whether we can say there is an intelligent creator to the universe. Such a claim, however, only makes sense if the truly important questions in life do not depend on the existence of such a creator. If what is really important in life is morality and friendship, then as long as people agree about that morality—as Philo and Cleanthes do—their particular views about God are irrelevant. We should not, then, invest too heavily in our answers to metaphysical questions; we should instead put our energy into preserving morality.

So Philo once again emphasizes his points of agreement with Cleanthes. For Philo, maintaining his friendship with Cleanthes is more important than insisting on the correctness of his metaphysical views. By downplaying his disagreements with Cleanthes about the nature of God, Philo is able to maintain

the civility of his conversation with Cleanthes, even if he failed to do so while Demea was still present. And in doing so, he can center the conversation on the more important topic of morality.

This interpretation has, I think, two distinct advantages. First, we can explain why Philo suddenly seems to reverse his position, without supposing that he has retracted his previous objections. Philo still means everything he says in parts 2–8, but because he wishes to stress the more important points on which he and Cleanthes agree, he is not willing to reiterate those objections in part 12. Just as importantly, Philo means everything he says in part 12; however, he carefully frames his remarks to emphasize the sentiments that he and Cleanthes share. In this way, he begins to stress the issues that he thinks are really important: the support for a morality of common life and the friendship he has with Cleanthes. Second, we can explain Philo's apparent reversal within the literary context of the *Dialogues* themselves. Philo himself has good reasons to say what he does. So, we do not need to suppose that Hume puts these views in Philo's mouth merely to quiet the criticisms that might be lodged against the *Dialogues*. We only need to suppose that Philo wants to maintain his friendship with Cleanthes and that the demands of Philo's friendship—and not of Hume's prudence—require a respectful silence about their continuing points of disagreement.

III. The Natural Belief Interpretation

The most serious objection to this interpretation comes from those who think we should take the content of Philo's concession at face value. On these views, we do not need to suppose that Philo is in any way hiding his genuine sentiments. He is simply professing a sincere belief in God, even if the form of Philo's religion is somewhat unorthodox. The problem for these interpretations is to explain why the new version of the Argument from Design does not fall prey to Philo's earlier objections. On the interpretation I have put forward, Philo accepts a version of the argument that is not incompatible with those objections. But those who think we should ascribe a more robust belief in God to Philo will have to show how the new version actually avoids them. The most plausible claim is that Philo does not accept the Argument from Design as an *argument*, but only as a claim that inevitably strikes people as correct. In this way, the interpreters try to treat belief in religion as a natural belief, much like Hume's own beliefs about external bodies or causation.¹⁸ Indeed, Philo does seem to claim that insofar as we infer nothing but intelligence in the designer, we should assent to the analogy:

[W]hat can the most inquisitive, contemplative, and religious man do more than give a plain, philosophical assent to the proposition, as often as it occurs; and believe that the arguments, on which it is established, exceed the objections, which lie against it? (DNR 227)

A thinking person, who sees the limits of human reason, can assent to the limited proposition that there is a creator of human-like intelligence. For that reason, Philo concludes,

To be a philosophical sceptic is, in a man of letters, the first and most essential step towards being a sound, believing Christian; a proposition, which I would willingly recommend to the attention of PAMPHILUS. (DNR 228)

Thus, Philo seems to endorse the view that a philosopher should accept the Argument from Design in some form as a kind of inevitability and that this acceptance is the basis of some form of Christian belief.

Unfortunately, the claim that a belief in God is a natural belief is simply not plausible. On Hume's view, we have many beliefs that strike us as true that turn out to be false. We can not, for example, help but feel fright when we are hung from an iron cage above a precipice, even if we know we are safe (T 1.3.13.10; SBN 148). So a naturally occurring belief like this one is warranted only if it is based on a principle that is "permanent, irresistible, and universal" (T 1.4.4.1; SBN 225). But, as J. C. A. Gaskin argues, our belief in God is not like that: it is not based on anything so universal or irresistible.¹⁹ Certainly, Hume was well aware that people could live perfectly well without a belief in God in a way that they simply could not live without an belief in causation.²⁰ The most that could be said for this view, then, is that our causal reasoning itself is based on an implicit belief that the universe is ordered so that the principle of induction is valid, and therefore, that we must also believe in a deity. So, Donald Livingston argues that we need to suppose that the universe is ordered to engage in any form of critical thinking at all, and that such a belief sanctions a belief in God.²¹ Thus, although Livingston does not think a belief in God is a full-fledged natural belief like the beliefs "in self, world, and society," he thinks it acts "as a virtually natural belief deeply embedded in participation in common life."²² Livingston is, however, too quick to jump from a need for a background belief that the universe is ordered to a belief in the deity. Indeed, Philo's introduction of the "Epicurean hypothesis" (DNR 182) in part 8 is designed to undercut precisely this leap. We simply do not need to suppose that the universe is governed by an intelligent being to

suppose that it can operate according to scientific laws that will create order in it.²³ So even if Philo were presenting the claim that we can not help but believe in God, it would be a mistake, and if we have reason to believe Philo's purposes lie elsewhere, we should not attribute that mistake to him.

The question then becomes, "Why does Philo seem to assert such a belief?" The answer lies, I think, in reading the passages quoted above carefully. In the first passage, Philo argues that an "inquisitive, contemplative, and *religious*"²⁴ (DNR 227) person should assent to the design argument; he does not claim that *every* inquisitive and contemplative person should agree to it. Since Philo has already conceded that a "philosophical and rational" (DNR 220) religion is compatible with morality, he adds nothing new here—especially since Philo explicitly argues here that the analogy can "afford no inference that affects human life" (DNR 227). The assent to the analogy is then harmless in someone who already believes in God, if she understands that such a belief does not affect morality. The danger of religion lies in those who use it to undermine commonsense morality, and the contemplative religious person should be able to understand this point—if she is able to regard religious claims about morality with a healthy dose of skepticism. It is for that reason that skepticism is the "first and most essential step toward being a sound, believing Christian" (DNR 228).²⁵ Without skepticism, religious belief leads too easily to fanaticism, and so it is a necessary prerequisite for becoming a true Christian. But Philo's remark does not then imply that the skeptic must become a Christian. Instead, that piece of advice applies to any intellectual who is religious, but it is particularly suited to a religious person who is just learning to make his way through the intellectual world. In other words, it is perfect advice for Cleanthes's student, Pamphilus—to whom it is explicitly directed.²⁶

So, the words that seem to confirm Philo's adherence to a natural belief in God based on the design argument really only support a claim for believers. It does not support the claim that Philo himself accepts such a faith, but the advice Philo gives is suited for the present company and for Pamphilus in particular, so it is advice that Cleanthes is sure to appreciate and that will also help restore the bonds of friendship between them.

IV. Additional Support

The strength of this interpretation is that it explains Philo's apparent reversal without relying on consideration external to the *Dialogues*. It explains why Philo says what he says without supposing that he renounces the arguments of parts 1–11, and it does so in a way that makes sense within the dramatic context of the *Dialogues* themselves.

Nevertheless, two small external considerations add further support to this interpretation. First, as Allan Silver has suggested, friendship became an important theme in the eighteenth century as a means of securing trust in a world in which markets were becoming dominant and in which traditional ties were becoming (for better or worse) more attenuated.²⁷ Writers of the Scottish Enlightenment in particular highlighted the importance of friendship, and so the fact that Hume would give friendship a central role in the *Dialogues* is hardly surprising.

Second and more importantly, Philo's treatment of his more orthodox friend exactly parallels the manner in which Hume himself treated his moderate friends in the Scottish clergy. Hume was always unwilling to make statements that would have forced the Church of Scotland to excommunicate him. For that reason, he suppressed his essays on the immortality of the soul and on suicide.²⁸ Why it mattered to him may seem unclear, since Hume already had a reputation as an atheist, and his unorthodox views had already led to his rejection for academic positions at the University of Edinburgh and the University of Glasgow.²⁹ However, Hume's friendships with the moderate clergy were important to him, and excommunication would have jeopardized their position within the Scottish Church, and it would have forced them to cease contact with him. If Hume had explicitly proclaimed himself an atheist or even a deist, that action would have forced the hand of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland. While a pronouncement of excommunication may have reflected worse on the church than on Hume in the long run,³⁰ it would have caused great problems, less for Hume himself, than for his intellectual compatriots in the Scottish Enlightenment like Hugh Blair and William Robertson. Indeed, at the request of Blair and Gilbert Elliot, Hume decided not to publish the *Dialogues* in his lifetime,³¹ and even Adam Smith was reluctant to be associated with them.³² For the sake of his friends, then, Hume kept a judicious silence about certain matters.

Indeed, in a letter to James Edmonstoune, Hume even declares that he sees little harm in honoring the conventions of society with respect to religion, even if he could hardly do so with a straight face:

It is putting too great a respect on the vulgar, and on their superstitions, to pique one's self on sincerity with regard to them. . . . I wish it were still in my power to be a hypocrite in this particular. The common duties of society usually require it; and the ecclesiastical profession only adds a little more to an innocent dissimulation, or rather simulation, without which it is impossible to pass through the world. Am I a liar, because I order my servant to say, I am not at home, when I do not desire to see company?³³

Like the innocent lie that spares a friend's feelings when one has no desire to see a particular person at a particular time, Hume views a profession of religion to be an innocent misrepresentation. In either case, if the person is lying merely to protect her self-interest, it would be crass and certainly immoral, but done out of concern for others, it is acceptable. Of course, this "dissimulation" is innocent only if the matter itself is of little importance, so that sparing someone's feelings or their sensibilities outweighs the substance of the lie. For Hume himself, then, professions of religion are not important; we can then lie about them without causing any harm. Supporting a commonsense morality, on the other hand, is crucial for society. In that respect, Hume's sentiments exactly mirror Philo's.

V. Conclusion

I have suggested that Philo backs away from his hard-hitting arguments in the earlier parts of the *Dialogues* because he realizes that his enthusiasm for those arguments could seriously damage his relationship with his good friend, Cleanthes. By de-emphasizing his differences with Cleanthes in declaring that the argument from design is partially correct and in declaring the dispute to be merely verbal, Philo hopes to repair the potential damage he has done in his relationship with Cleanthes. To mend the relationship and to emphasize their shared sentiments on moral matters, Philo acquiesces to Cleanthes's arguments, albeit in a very guarded fashion. In doing so, Philo puts into practice the lessons he preaches in the *Dialogues*. For Philo, then, as for Hume, morality is always more important than metaphysics.

NOTES

This paper has benefited from the helpful comments from William Charron, the editors and referees of *Hume Studies*, and the graduate students in my seminar on Hume's philosophy at Saint Louis University in spring 2000.

1 David Hume, *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion*, ed. Norman Kemp Smith (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merill, 1947). All references to Hume's works will be in the body of the text. Quotations from the *Dialogues* will be designated "DNR" followed by the page. "T" will designate quotations from *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. David Fate Norton and Mary J. Norton, Oxford Philosophical Texts (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), which will be identified by section and paragraph. These references will be followed by page references (marked "SBN") to *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. L. A. Selby Bigge, 2nd ed., revised by P. H. Nidditch (Oxford:

Clarendon Press, 1978). "EPM" will designate quotations from *An Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals*, ed. Tom L. Beauchamp, Oxford Philosophical Texts (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), which will also be identified by section and paragraph. These references will be followed by page references (marked "SBN") to *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). "A Dialogue" is referred to by page numbers in both the Beauchamp and Selby-Bigge/Nidditch editions. "H" will designate volume and pages from *History of England, from the Invasion of Julius Caesar to The Revolution in 1688*, 6 vols. (Indianapolis: Liberty Classics, 1983).

2 I leave to one side the very interesting suggestion made by Jonathan Dancy that the text has no meaning, precisely because reading it is supposed to undermine causally the tendency we have to believe in a designer. Such a suggestion can be right only if Dancy is correct that we can not find a real meaning in the text itself. If the interpretation I propose is correct, then Dancy's view must *ipso facto* be mistaken. See Dancy, "For Here the Author is Annihilated': Reflections on Philosophical Aspects of the Use of the Dialogue Form in Hume's *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*," *Proceedings of the British Academy* 85 (1995): 29-60.

3 Norman Kemp Smith, "Introduction," in Hume, *Dialogues*, 1-123.

4 See Graham Priest, "Hume's Final Argument," *History of Philosophy Quarterly* 2 (1985): 349-52. For other interpretations in this camp, see A. G. Vink, "Philo's Final Conclusion in Hume's *Dialogues*," *Religious Studies* 25 (1989): 489-99; and Michael Szczekalla, "Philo's Feigned Fideism in Hume's *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion*," *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie* 80 (1998): 75-87. With some qualification, J. C. A. Gaskin also falls into this camp as well. Although he thinks that Philo's concession amounts to an acceptance of a "attenuated deism," he thinks it has little religious importance, and he rejects the "natural belief" interpretations of the other camp. See Gaskin, *Hume's Philosophy of Religion* (London: Macmillan Press, 1978), chap. 10.

5 See, for example, Nelson Pike, "Hume on the Argument from Design," in David Hume, *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion*, ed. Nelson Pike (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1970), 125-238; Stanley Tweyman, *Scepticism and Belief in Hume's Dialogues concerning Natural Religion* (Dordrecht: Martinus Nijhoff, 1986), chap. 8; H. O. Mounce, *Hume's Naturalism* (London: Routledge, 1999), chap. 8. Dorothy Coleman's view falls into this camp, because she thinks Philo does accept the Argument from Design in some form, though without the superstitions and inconsistencies. Because this "true religion" has little effect on most people, she thinks, Cleanthes's view actually triumphs. See Coleman, "Interpreting Hume's *Dialogues*," *Religious Studies* 25 (1989): 179-90.

6 See, for example, Peter Fosl, "Doubt and Divinity: Cicero's Influence on Hume's Religious Skepticism," *Hume Studies* 20 (1994): 103-20; and Donald Livingston, *Philosophical Melancholy and Delirium: Hume's Pathology of Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), chap. 3.

- 7 Coleman rightly warns against such an approach. See "Interpreting Hume's *Dialogues*," 180.
- 8 As Kenneth Winkler pointed out to me, these external considerations become relevant if they can show why Hume might set up Philo to take a certain kind of position.
- 9 For this reason, Scott Davis's suggestion that Demea actually *preserves* the importance of religion by leaving is mistaken. The dangers of unreflective religion, as outlined in *Dialogue 12*, are too great to countenance this view. See Davis, "Irony and Argument in *Dialogues XII*," *Religious Studies* 27 (1991): 239–57.
- 10 Most commentators note the importance of Philo's focus on morality here, but few note exactly how important it is. One exception is William Austin, "Philo's Reversal," *Philosophical Topics* 13 (1985): 103–12.
- 11 In this passage, Hume is summarizing the state of affairs between the Puritans in the Long Parliament and Charles I just before the outbreak of the Civil War. For an excellent general discussion of the role of religion in the *History*, see Christopher Bernard, "Hume and the Madness of Religion," in *Hume and Hume's Connexions*, ed. M. A. Stewart and John P. Wright (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994), 224–38.
- 12 See, for example, Coleman, "Interpreting Hume's *Dialogues*," and implicitly in Livingston, *Philosophical Melancholy*, 61–7.
- 13 Hume summarizes his findings in EPM, section 9 (SBN 268–94), in "A Dialogue" (EPM 185–99; SBN 324–43), and in T 3.3.1.24–31 (SBN 587–91). For my views on how these qualities fit together or do not, see my "Hume on the Characters of Virtue," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 35 (1997): 45–64.
- 14 See the description of a different "Cleanthes" at EPM 9.2 (SBN 269–70).
- 15 For a discussion, see Dees, "Hume on the Characters of Virtue," 51–4.
- 16 John Nelson notes the importance of Philo and Cleanthes's relationship, but he oddly reads too much into this "intimacy" when he thinks that this profession of intimacy would be inappropriate for a mere guest in the house. For that reason, his speculation that Demea, Cleanthes, and Hume represent different stages of Hume's own life, while interesting, is unwarranted. See Nelson, "The Role of Part XII in Hume's *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion*," *Hume Studies* 14 (1988): 347–71, especially, 361–6.
- 17 See Vink, "Philo's Final Conclusion."
- 18 Variations of this claim are present in Tweyman, *Scepticism and Belief*; Mounce, *Hume's Naturalism*; and Coleman, "Interpreting Hume's *Dialogues*."
- 19 Gaskin, *Hume's Philosophy of Religion*, chap. 8.
- 20 Even if Hume himself was not an atheist, he certainly met plenty during his time in Paris. See, Ernest Mossner, *The Life of David Hume* (Edinburgh: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1954), 483–6.
- 21 Livingston, *Philosophical Melancholy*, 64–7. See also Fosl, "Doubt and Divinity."

- 22 Livingston, *Philosophical Melancholy*, 65.
- 23 Livingston seems oddly taken with a kind of etymological reductionism when he claims that the very idea of a law presupposes an intentional creator. See *Philosophical Melancholy*, 66.
- 24 Emphasis added.
- 25 A similar point is made in Nelson, "The Role of Part XII," 355–8.
- 26 Livingston makes a similar point. See *Philosophical Melancholy*, 78–9.
- 27 Allan Silver, "Friendship in Commercial Society: Eighteenth-Century Social Theory and Modern Sociology," *American Journal of Sociology* 95 (1990): 1474–1504. While Silver's account is quite suggestive, more work on the idea of friendship in the Scottish Enlightenment is warranted.
- 28 Mossner, *Life of David Hume*, 322–5. In fact, in 1755 and 1756, serious efforts were made to excommunicate him. See 336–55.
- 29 Mossner, *Life of David Hume*, 158–60, 245–50.
- 30 As Mossner argues. See *Life of David Hume*, 353–4.
- 31 For Blair, see David Hume, *New Letters of David Hume*, ed. Raymond Klibansky and Ernest Mossner (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1954), 72 and 72n. For Elliot, see David Hume, *The Letters of David Hume*, ed. J. Y. T. Greig, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1932), 1:380. See Mossner, *Life of David Hume*, 319–20.
- 32 See Hume, *Letters*, 2:316–18, 334, and Mossner, *Life of David Hume*, 592–3, 602–03.
- 33 Hume, *Letters*, 1:439–40.