



**Review of Marianne Groulez. *Le scepticisme de Hume: les Dialogues sur la religion naturelle***

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## *Book Reviews*

Marianne Groulez. *Le scepticisme de Hume: les Dialogues sur la religion naturelle*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2005. Pp. 154. ISBN 2-13-053579-8, Paperback, €12.

Marianne Groulez's book has two objects: 1) it offers a general interpretation of Hume's avowed "mitigated skepticism," based on the whole corpus of Hume's works; 2) it offers a study of moderate skepticism within Hume's *Dialogues concerning natural religion*, which is itself naturally grounded on the previous general interpretation. It seems to me that this second object actually turns out to be a global interpretation of Hume's *Dialogues*. Indeed, the study of the relationship between moderate skepticism and religious belief in the *Dialogues* enables Groulez to examine the whole economy of this book, the main arguments and the evolution of its protagonists, the place of the author himself and, finally, the link between the dialogue genre, skepticism, and religion.

The first part of the book endeavours—successfully I think—to analyse the signification of Hume's skepticism. Groulez qualifies it as a "metaskepticism," thus alluding to the fact that Hume himself characterizes its own moderate skepticism as "skeptical of skepticism." The author provides an original interpretation of it, mainly through a comparison between Hume's and ancient skepticism. Of course, M. Groulez does not overlook the fact that in the *Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*, Hume explicitly identifies its own mitigated skepticism with

the skepticism of the New Academy, whereas he rejects the pyrrhonian doubt as excessive. Nevertheless, M. Groulez recalls that Sextus Empiricus considered pyrrhonian skepticism as “metaskeptical,” that is, skeptical of the potentially dogmatical tendency of skepticism itself. This remark does not lead the author to see in Hume an unconscious pyrrhonian. Indeed, she notices that Hume’s metaskepticism is also “naturalist.” Hume thinks that both reasoning and practical beliefs are natural necessities, whereas Sextus did not clearly state that theoretical belief belonged entirely, as Hume says, to the “sensitive part of our nature.” Groulez then shows that Academic skepticism may also be characterized as metaskeptical. More interesting, Carneades, one of the most prominent figures of the skeptical Academy, provided a quasi pre-Humean description of the consistent skeptic: a genuine skeptic *knows* that his judgment must be suspended in all matters, he nevertheless *assents* to what is the most probable and, meanwhile, he perfectly *acknowledges* that this approval is not rationally grounded. This portrait is, indeed, very similar to Hume’s own descriptions of the true skeptic (see esp. *A Treatise of Human Nature* 1.4). But, once again, Groulez points out an important difference between this ancient description and Hume’s one. According to Hume, the skeptical assent to natural beliefs is not a privilege of the wise: his ideal skeptic is not essentially different from the common man. To this precise analysis of Hume’s debt to ancient skepticism and of his distancing from it, Groulez adds a direct examination of Hume’s avowed *mitigated* and *careless* skepticism. Two points seem to me particularly noteworthy: first, the difference which Hume implicitly establishes between *carelessness* (a positive easiness) and *indolence* (a negative easiness), second, the affinity between excessive skepticism and abstruse philosophy on the one hand (both rejected by Hume on account of their uneasiness and of the seclusion and melancholy they induce), and the parallel affinity between moderate skepticism and “easy” and “accurate” philosophy on the other hand (both valued by Hume in order to attain and communicate true knowledge). Finally, the author suggests that besides the form of the essay, which Hume considered as the most able manner to unite accuracy and communicability, the genre of the dialogue could also serve the same purpose.

The study of the relationship between careless skepticism and religious belief in the *Dialogues concerning natural religion* forms the second main part of Groulez’s book. In my opinion, this examination proves to be a fruitful approach to Hume’s last work. Indeed, both Philo (who is explicitly presented as an adept of “careless skepticism”) and Cleanthes (the adept of “experimental theism”) profess to be mitigated skeptics. Besides, both accuse each other of being committed to the total skepticism they reject. However, Groulez firmly establishes that these characters strongly disagree concerning the *due limits* of their moderate skepticism. While Philo says in the First Part of the *Dialogues*—and constantly maintains—that the

religious belief *does not* belong to the set of the natural beliefs which naturally limit, and ought to limit, skepticism; Cleanthes thinks that the belief in the Design of God *is* a natural belief to which a genuine mitigated skeptic should assent. More precisely, Groulez shows that Cleanthes adopts two successive strategies to sustain his claim: first, he presents the belief in the Design Argument as a belief resulting from a well-established reasoning from cause to effect (Dialogues, II); secondly, he presents this belief as an instinctive and unavoidable one (Dialogues, III-end). With this second argument, Cleanthes assumes that the belief in Design is similar to the natural beliefs which Hume himself, in *Treatise* 1.4, considered as proper limits to skepticism, for example, the belief in an external world or the belief in personal identity. Philo's refutation also has two stages. At first, he argues that God and the present world are two *unique* objects, thus incommensurable with the productions of human design; so that, at best, the so-called "proof" of Cleanthes reduces itself to a very slight probability. Secondly, Philo replies to Cleanthes that the so-called "evident" resemblance between natural productions and human artifacts is in fact the result of an anthropomorphical prejudice. Philo then suggests other better resemblances (this world is similar to a vegetable, an animal, etc.) which all aim at proving that natural religion is not a natural *belief* but is rather a natural *disease*, due to man's adulation of his own reason. Groulez very ingeniously remarks that Philo's replies to Cleanthes use two *traditional* (*pyrrhonian*) devices: 1. the discovery of an *isosthenia* between the arguments of the dogmatists and other equiprobable hypotheses; 2. the use of the arguments of the dogmatists as a weapon against them. Philo uses the first device when he counterbalances Cleanthes' Design argument with other hypotheses concerning the origin of the universe. With the second device, Philo shows that Cleanthes favorite principle "*the liker the better*" actually makes the materialist hypothesis more probable than the religious one; indeed, men do observe innumerable cases of an apparent autonomous activity of matter. This technical interpretation of Philo's skeptical offensive enables M. Groulez to reinforce her idea that, according to him, religious matters are a proper target (and not a due limit) to skeptical assaults. Normally then, an entire suspension of judgment should be the result of Philo's skepticism. Nevertheless, it is well known that in the 12th and last part of the *Dialogues* Philo eventually admits that the arguments of experimental theism possess an evidence to which the most resolute skeptic must assent. Wondering how this apparent conversion is to be interpreted, Groulez considers that it depends on the interpretation one makes of Philo's willingness to *mitigate* his own skepticism. Some interpreters think that Philo acknowledges that the religious belief should be included in the set of the natural beliefs which are proper limits to skepticism. But Groulez observes that the evidence which Philo eventually admits is only so for "the most careless and most stupid *thinker*" (*Dialogues*, XII, my emphasis). At this point, Groulez makes an argument against

the previous interpretation which seems to me perfectly decisive: Philo cannot think that the religious belief in a Design is a *natural* one, *for he does not think it is a universal one*. In Philo's opinion, such a belief is only the faith of the thinking part of mankind; it is a *philosophical belief*. Groulez then concludes that if Philo's discussion with Cleanthes has actually produced a change in his mind—he actually discovers that an assent to the religious belief should mitigate his skepticism—he does not state that such a belief has the *extension* of natural ones. Besides, he argues that it is a purely *theoretical* belief, with no practical consequences. These are two major differences with the profane natural beliefs.

Groulez devotes the last chapter of her book to examining the relationship between skepticism and the genre of the dialogue. The author argues that this literary form proves to be suitable to skepticism in general and to Hume's metaskepticism in particular. Indeed, the dialogue submits all dogmatic assertions to refutation, and it makes it impossible for the reader to identify the Authorship's opinions and convictions. Groulez also supports a suggestion she made in the first part of her book: the *Dialogues* are a proper way to make abstract philosophy easier to communicate. Besides, this last chapter provides a subtle description of the evolution of Hume's own attitude towards religion as a matter of philosophical investigation. We won't reproduce here the portrait of Hume Groulez delicately draws while following the course of this evolution. We hope this omission will introduce in this review a flavour of the suspense which is also present in Groulez's *Le scepticisme de Hume*.

To conclude, we consider this book as highly commendable, not only for the historiographical precisions it provides concerning the link between Hume and ancient skepticism, but also on account of its new and perfectly consistent explanation of Hume's Dialogues concerning Natural Religion.

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