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An Assessment of Alternatives**

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## Hume's Seneca Reference in *Dialogues* 12: An Assessment of Alternatives

LORNE FALKENSTEIN

*Abstract:* In section 12 of the *Dialogues*, Hume claimed, without reference, that Seneca had written that to know God is to worship him. His source has proven hard to find. This note identifies some possibilities and argues in favour of one of them—one that has not been recognized by recent editors of the *Dialogues*.

In the 12th part of his *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion*, Hume had the character Philo describe Lucius Annaeus Seneca (4 BCE–65 CE) as having written that “to know God is to worship him.”<sup>1</sup> Hume provided no reference for this claim, and identifying it has proven challenging for editors, some of whom have concluded that he must have misrepresented the text. Dorothy Coleman<sup>2</sup> references *The Epistles of Seneca*, III: 89<sup>3</sup> and writes that “What Seneca actually said was *Primus est deorum cultus deos cedere*, or “The first way to worship the gods is to believe in the gods.” John Gaskin earlier said much the same thing, writing “this is not quite what Seneca wrote in the *Moral Epistles*, 95.50: ‘*Primus est deorum cultus deos credere*,’ which is to say, ‘The first step in divine worship is to believe in the Gods.’”<sup>4</sup> Martin Bell also identifies “Seneca, *Epistulae Morales* xcv, 50: ‘*Primus est deorum cultus deos credere*’” as Hume’s source and, like Coleman, offers the Loeb translation, “The first way to worship the gods is to believe in the gods,” but without further comment on the appropriateness of Hume’s reference.<sup>5</sup> Norman Kemp Smith did not attempt to identify the source of Hume’s Philo’s claim. Neither did Thomas Hill

Green and Thomas Hodge Grose.<sup>6</sup> Neither did Richard Popkin, Henry Aiken, or Stanley Tweyman.<sup>7</sup>

In fact, Seneca said exactly what Hume claimed he did. *Ad Lucilium epistulae morales* 95.47 reads “Deum colit qui novit.”<sup>8</sup> The one who worships God is the one who is acquainted with him. At this point in the text, Seneca was engaged in denouncing superstitious attempts to serve the gods by means of practices such as lighting lamps, offering morning salutations, thronging the doors of temples, or offering presents. These actions are done in the belief that serving the gods in whatever ways are imagined to be pleasing to them will avoid their wrath and punishment. But, Seneca declared, these forms of worship arise from an incorrect understanding of the nature of the gods. It is rather the gods who serve us, which they do out of their own good will. This will is so good that it is wrong to say that the Gods are unwilling to do harm. In fact, they cannot do harm. Those who understand this about the gods are the ones who will know how to worship them properly. Presumably, such worship consists in simply admiring them for what they are—in effect, knowing them to be what they are—rather than by attempting to serve them, solicit their favours, or avoid their wrath. *Deum colit qui novit*. Gummere translates the surrounding text as follows:

Precepts are commonly given as to how the gods should be worshipped. But let us forbid lamps to be lighted on the Sabbath, . . . Let us forbid men to offer morning salutation and to throng the doors of temples; . . . God is worshipped by those who truly know Him. . . . Although a man hear what limit he should observe in sacrifice, and how far he should recoil from burdensome superstitions, he will never make sufficient progress until he has conceived a right idea of God—regarding Him as one who possesses all things, and allots all things, and bestows them without price. And what reason have the Gods for doing deeds of kindness? It is their nature. One who thinks that they are unwilling to do harm, is wrong; they cannot do harm. They cannot receive or inflict injury; for doing harm is in the same category as suffering harm. The universal nature, all-glorious and all-beautiful, has rendered incapable of inflicting ill those whom it has removed from the danger of ill.<sup>9</sup>

Compare this passage to the point Hume had Philo make in the *Dialogues*: “To know God, says SENECA, is to worship him. All other worship is indeed absurd, superstitious, and even impious. It degrades him to the low condition of mankind, who are delighted with intreaty, solicitation, presents, and flattery” (150).

Since stumbling across Seneca’s claim that “Deum colit qui novit,” I have discovered that I am not the first to have thought that this is the passage Hume had in mind. So far as I have been able to determine, the suggestion was first made over

ten years ago by Anthony Boyle and reported by Scott Davis.<sup>10</sup> However, Davis still takes Hume to be making an “impossible or at least incomplete” use of Seneca’s remark. As Davis reads it, the remark is “not altogether self-evident,” which may well be when it is taken out of context. Davis first suggests that “It seems to be modelled on the hackneyed ‘to know him is to love him,’ which would suggest that as soon as we recognized the existence and nature of God, we would naturally be inclined to worship him. A pedestrian notion, but a reasonable one nonetheless” (251). However, Davis continues, the notion is not Seneca’s. The point Davis takes from Seneca’s passage is actually not that different from the one that Bell, Gaskin, and Coleman take from the later “*Primus est deorum cultus deos credere.*” According to Davis, Seneca’s view was that “Worship consists in believing in the gods, their majesty, goodness and command. ‘Whoever imitates them’, Seneca concludes, ‘is worshipping them sufficiently.’”<sup>11</sup> And, Davis concludes, “Philo’s subsequent remark renders this reading impossible, or at least incomplete. For in insisting that no *other* form of worship is acceptable he implies that knowing God is itself a form of worship. Indeed, Philo states in terms drawn directly from Seneca that it is the only form in which the Deity is not degraded ‘to the low condition of mankind, who are delighted with entreaty, solicitation, presents and flattery’” (252).

But Seneca’s point is neither that to know god is to love him nor that worship consists in believing in the gods and striving to imitate them. It is precisely the one Philo attributes to him: that any form of worship that involves entreaty, supplication, praise, or attempts at servitude is superstitious and inconsistent with a true knowledge of the nature of the gods as beings who cannot withhold kindness. But then what is left for worship to consist in? Not love, which is not mentioned and perhaps not due to those who cannot do otherwise, or imitation, which is not mentioned either and perhaps impossible for beings like us, but simply what naturally follows from such knowledge as we have: admiration and nothing more. We are left just with Philo’s point that knowing God is itself the only proper form of worship.

The point of the later passage from Seneca, cited by Bell, Gaskin, and Coleman, that one must first believe in the gods in order to worship them, is consistent with the earlier one, that one must understand the nature of the gods in order to avoid the temptation to fall back on superstitious observances. But unless it is read in the context of that earlier remark, it is likely to be interpreted in very different ways that do not seem to be at all consistent with what Philo had in mind (for example, that a prior belief in the existence of Gods is a pre-requisite for worship, a point that does not put us in any position to draw conclusions about the form that worship ought to take).

I conclude that Hume’s Seneca reference is most appropriately taken to have been intended as a reference to just the narrow context of *Epistulae* 95.47, and that considered as such, it is correct and exact.<sup>12</sup>

## NOTES

- 1 See the original edition of Hume's *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion* (London: Anonymously published, 1779), 150, which is readily available through *Eighteenth Century Collections Online*. Gale document # CW3320013721.
- 2 David Hume, *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion and Other Writings*, ed. Dorothy Coleman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 101n15.
- 3 Seneca, "On the usefulness of basic principles," 50 in *Ad Lucilium Epistulae Morales* trans. Richard M. Gummere, 3 vols., vol. 3 (London: William Heinemann, 1925), 88 (Latin), 89 (English). "On the usefulness of basic principles" is letter 95. Nos. 95.47 and 95.50 are letter and verse numbers. 88 and 89 are corresponding page numbers in the Loeb edition.
- 4 Gaskin identifies the same source: "Loeb, iii. 88–89." See David Hume, *Principal Writings on Religion including Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion and The Natural History of Religion*, ed. John Gaskin (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 210.
- 5 David Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, ed. Martin Bell (London: Penguin, 1990), 150n96.
- 6 David Hume, *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion*, ed. Norman Kemp Smith (Indianapolis: Bobbs Merrill, 1947), 226. David Hume, *The Philosophical Works of David Hume*, ed. T. H. Green and T. H. Grose, vol. 2 (London: Longmans Green, 1878; reprinted Aalen: Scientia Verlag, 1965).
- 7 David Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion and the Posthumous Essays*, ed. Richard Popkin (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1980; reprinted 1998); David Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, ed. Henry D. Aiken (New York: Hafner, [1948] 1951); David Hume *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion in Focus*, ed. Stanley Tweyman (London: Routledge, 1991).
- 8 See Gummere, trans., *Ad Lucilium Epistulae Morales* 3: 87, 89.
- 9 *Ibid.*
- 10 Scott Davis, "Irony and Argument in *Dialogues* 12," *Religious Studies* 27 (1991): 239–57, esp. 251–52. Davis credits Boyle with having discovered the passage after Davis himself was unable to find one he considered a likely candidate. Though the Boyle-Davis discovery has not made it into editions of Hume's *Dialogues* that have appeared since, it has not gone entirely unnoticed in the secondary literature. It is cited by William Ladd Sessions, *Reading Hume's Dialogues: A Veneration for True Religion* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002), from which it first came to my attention.
- 11 Davis here references Gummere, trans., *Ad Lucilium Epistulae Morales* 3: 91.
- 12 The increasing availability of electronic editions has made it much easier to track down Hume's references than it was even a few years ago. The magnitude of our debt to past editors, who got so much right without the aid of such resources, cannot be diminished by an occasional correction.