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Hume's Uses of Dialogue

SAMUEL CLARK

Abstract: What does David Hume do with the dialogue form in the *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*? I pursue this question in the context of a partial taxonomy of uses for dialogue in philosophy in general, distinguishing uses out of playfulness, for self-concealment, to tame opponents, for self-effacement, for causal operation, for self-discovery, and for dramatizing a political ideal. I argue for Hume's use of the last two and investigate the expressions of selfhood and politics which these uses reveal in *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*: for Hume, the self is multiple, and sociable pleasure in company is more important than winning arguments or gaining knowledge. This reading of the *Dialogues* reveals Hume as aiming to transform our individual and collective self-understanding and action and proposes a more political engagement with his thought generally.

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What does David Hume do with the dialogue form in *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*? I pursue this question in the context of a partial taxonomy of uses for the dialogue form in philosophy in general—although I want to emphasize the word “partial.” My driving concern here is Hume's use of dialogue, not to list *all possible* uses of dialogue or to draw conclusions about the uses of dialogue in philosophy in general.

My question sits between two other related questions: a biographical and historical question, “What did Hume *intend* to do with the dialogue form?” and a

question about reception by his audiences, “What did Hume *actually achieve* with the dialogue form?” Both of these are worthwhile questions, and I will not ignore them entirely, but my main focus is more directly textual, and particularly with the text as device. I am centrally interested in considering the various operations which the dialogue form makes possible for Hume and in investigating which of them the *Dialogues* can be shown to perform.

Pamphilus’s Reasons

We should begin by recognizing the explicit reasons given in the *Dialogues* itself: in the first few paragraphs of the text, Pamphilus asks in his framing letter to Hermippus: Why write a dialogue? Why give up the obvious advantages of monologue, which include order, brevity, precision, and clarity? Pamphilus answers his own question with two suggestions. First, the dialogue form can make an obvious but important subject less tedious and more palatable as teaching.¹ That is, it can be a useful pedagogical technique. (I will mention a modern example of that use below.) Second, the dialogue form can make a subject about which reasonable people differ and concerning which no definite system is forthcoming at least pleasant to read about, even if inconclusive:

Any question of philosophy . . . which is so *obscure* and *uncertain* that human reason can reach no fixed determination with regard to it—if it should be treated at all—seems to lead us naturally into the style of dialogue and conversation. Reasonable men may be allowed to differ where no one can reasonably be positive: Opposite sentiments, even without any decision, afford an agreeable amusement; and if the subject be curious and interesting, the book carries us, in a manner, into company, and unites the two greatest and purest pleasures of human life: study and society. (DNR 4: 1–2)

But we need not take Pamphilus to be articulating everything Hume means to do or can do with the dialogue form. I will come back to his reasons later in the context of others, but first, I outline those other possibilities.

Just Play

To begin, a deflationary reason: the use of dialogue is nothing more than writerly playfulness. A dialogue is a difficult and distinctive performance of skill: an ambitious philosopher might therefore write one just as display, much as a poet might write a villanelle or a composer a string quartet; a confident philosopher might write a dialogue just for the fun of it. Now, considering the purely biographical

question about Hume's own intentions, he certainly was an ambitious and confident philosopher. In his short autobiography, *My Own Life*, he says, perhaps half jokingly, that his ruling passion was the desire for literary fame. He consciously took up and mastered several rhetorical and stylistic forms by emulating his idols: Addison and Steele of *The Spectator*; Cicero. He certainly enjoyed displaying that carefully-developed mastery. This is a biographical reason for using the dialogue form, and it perhaps explains Pamphilus's implausible conclusion that "I cannot but think that *Philo's* principles are more probable than *Demea's*, but that those of *Cleanthes* approach still nearer to the truth" (DNR 12.34: 89). This line is a direct echo of Cicero's conclusion to *On the Nature of the Gods*, which could, therefore, be understood as Hume's wink to fellow Tully fans and nothing more.

Whether Hume was doing anything apart from playing with form is a matter for particular argument, which I will offer later. But the general methodological point we should take is that for any particular dialogue, we do need to argue that there is an additional reason: sometimes playfulness is all that is going on. For example, take David and Stephanie Lewis's classic paper, "Holes," a dialogue between characters called "Argle" and "Bargle." I do not think there is any more reason for their writing this as a dialogue than that the Lewises were amusing themselves.² Nothing substantive would be lost by rewriting "Holes" as a monologue, although one would have to insert "a critic of nominalism might say . . .," "the nominalist can reply . . .," and so on.

Self-concealment

Another possible use: self-concealment, or at least distancing or plausible deniability. Perhaps Hume wants to disguise his own unpopular views—his suspected atheism—or to give himself an out when challenged: "it's not *me* who says these disturbing things, it's a *character*." Richard Popkin, in the introduction to his edition of the *Dialogues*, suggests that "in considering how touchy religious subjects were at the time," Hume "was able by means of the [dialogue] form to avoid stating his own views openly."³

This is initially plausible. Self-concealment would have been prudent for Hume: to be *openly* an atheist, if that is what he was, would have been at best to court notoriety and loathing, at worst to put himself at considerable personal risk—at least in early life, before he was wealthy and famous. And there are perhaps other examples of Hume distancing himself by speaking through characters: in the short dialogue usually printed as an appendix to *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, Hume attributes his most troubling thoughts about the cultural relativity of morals to "my friend, Palamedes" (EPM A Dialogue.1; SBN 324).⁴ Or, for another example, section 11 of *An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding* begins: "I was lately engaged in conversation with a friend who loves sceptical paradoxes; where,

though he advanced many principles, of which I can by no means approve, yet as they seem to be curious, and to bear some relation to the chain of reasoning carried on throughout this enquiry, I shall here copy them from my memory as accurately as I can, in order to submit them to the judgment of the reader" (EHU 11.1; SBN 132).⁵ Hume then gives that friend a speech in the character of Epicurus, making a *double* distancing. This speech uses Hume's own epistemology to attack the ideas of life after death and provident guidance of the world.

Self-concealment is perhaps *sometimes* what authors are doing with the dialogue form. But there are four problems with taking self-concealment as what Hume is doing in the *Dialogues*. First, there were easier and better ways to conceal himself, if that was what he wanted. Why not publish anonymously, if it was in practice possible to be a really anonymous author in Hume's social world? Second, writing through a character is unlikely to fool anyone. The boundary between use and mention is porous, and Hume's enemies were never going to be satisfied with the "it's just a character speaking" defense. Hume wrote the character, and his enemies could see, as well as we can, that the disturbing consequences being palmed off on that character follow from Hume's own stated views in epistemology, metaphysics, and ethics. Third, it is not clear that Hume had a good reputation left to protect after the publication of "Of Miracles." Fourth, Hume had no need to conceal himself: he deliberately did not release the *Dialogues* in his lifetime, instead making careful arrangements for its publication in his will.⁶ Hume had nothing personally to lose in being as explicit and offensive as he chose to be, since he knew he would be out of reach of retaliation—although he was also concerned about his friends and tried to reassure his publisher William Strahan, for one, that there was nothing likely to cause trouble in the *Dialogues*.⁷

There is a weaker and more plausible version of the self-concealment thesis: that Hume intended only to escape prosecution for blasphemy, not actually to conceal his views from anyone. On this account, there are two layers to the text: a surface, "plain reading" gauze to which Hume can disingenuously appeal in the face of legal or political attack, and the still visible, and actually-intended, meaning behind it. This is what it means to call the *Dialogues* ironic. I do not mean to claim that nothing like this is going on in the text; I only claim that *more* is going on, and demonstrating that is the job of later sections.

Taming

Perhaps Hume aims to tame his opponents by straw-manning them: in arguments, as in chess, it is easy to win if you play both sides. Writing a dialogue between your own mouthpiece and a safe version of your opponent's is a way of winning—in your own head—a satisfying victory.

This is what happens in some philosophical dialogues, for example, in Berkeley's *Three Dialogues between Hylas and Philonous*.⁸ But Hume's *Dialogues*, unlike Berkeley's *Three Dialogues*, is a genuine dialogue. All three main speakers get some good points in and get to defend themselves; no one is reduced to Hylas's pathetic sequences of "yes," "of course," "no one can deny it," "I have nothing to say to it," and "you will pardon me if I seem a little embarrassed." Demea is treated less well than the other two—he is revealed as an authoritarian fool, and Philo gets to mock him quite a bit before he notices and storms off—but Cleanthes and Philo are well-matched. We have biographical evidence, in a letter from Hume to Gilbert Elliot, that Hume intended them to be equals and went to considerable trouble to give each the strongest arguments available to him.⁹

We can, therefore, conclude that this is not what Hume is doing with the dialogue form, although it is what some writers of dialogues, like Berkeley, are doing.

Self-effacement

Perhaps Hume is doing the opposite of taming his opponents: perhaps he is engaged in self-effacement. If one thought that the evidence or the arguments or the full expression of differing points of view were more important than oneself as an author, one might write a dialogue precisely *not* to advocate one's own view.

For example, Cicero's explicit purpose in *On the Nature of the Gods* is "to clear myself of any suspicion of partiality by presenting the views of the generality of philosophers concerning the nature of the gods,"¹⁰ and he claims that "those who seek my personal views on each issue are being unnecessarily inquisitive" (Cicero, 6). It may be naïve to take Cicero at his word here, but the purpose is at least a recognizable one, even if Cicero himself did not quite live up to it. *On the Nature of the Gods'* main historical importance is as a vector of transmission of Greek thought and philosophical terminology into Latin, not as an expression of Cicero's own views, so his self-effacement was at least partially successful.¹¹

For another example, John Perry, who has well-worked-out views of his own about the problem of personal identity, has also written *A Dialogue on Personal Identity and Immortality*, intended as an undergraduate textbook.¹² It does a good job of setting out several different views in contest with each other, but Perry's author's note says that "my aim has not been to explain and defend my own views on personal identity, but to introduce and develop positions and arguments that have emerged in the literature on that topic." We might think analogously of formal scientific prose or of Wikipedia's neutrality policy.¹³

This is a possible use of the dialogue form, but it is not Hume's use of it in the *Dialogues*. In the first place, *Dialogues* parts 2–11 are not just a compendium of views but form an argument against knowledge of God. Philo argues much more strongly against Cleanthes than Cicero's skeptic, Cotta, argues against his stoic, Balbus.

In the second place, self-effacement looks a non-starter in Hume's case: as any reader of Hume knows, he is intensely self-inscribing. He is vitally a writer of character and individual personality, always loudly present in his own texts.

But then again, as I have already suggested, Hume is not always a writer of *his own* character or *his own* individual personality. Hume loves to put on masks and perform characters, like the mysterious friends I mentioned while discussing self-concealment. It is not always clear which characters are mouthpieces, which foils, which literary references or stylistic exercises. So, perhaps Hume is engaging in self-effacement not by removing personality, but by *multiplying* it: perhaps he is hiding himself in a crowd.

There is something in that, and I will return to it, but it does not, in itself, get us very far, because the question remains: *why* does Hume hide himself in a crowd? That is, what is he doing with the dialogue form?

Causal Operation

According to Jonathan Dancy's reading of the *Dialogues*, Hume intended to perform a *non-rational* operation on his readers' psyches.¹⁴ The *Dialogues* destabilizes, rather than arguing against, the natural human tendency to make the move from apparent marks of design in the world to belief in a human-like designer-God. (We might compare the natural human tendency to see faces everywhere, which is not defeated by our knowledge that there are no actual faces in clouds, cars, trees, and so on.)

The first thing to do is to distinguish Dancy's reading from the uncontroversial claims that texts have affective as well as rational powers and that successful authors know how to use them. Dancy's claim is the much more radical one that, in the *Dialogues*, affect—the causal operation—is all. That is, the appearance that Hume, or his characters, make rational arguments for conclusions which Hume intends his readers to adopt is a carefully-constructed illusion. The *Dialogues* is actually designed to be finally uninterpretable—to leave us with no stable or coherent idea about its author or his views—and for that instability to be *contagious*. It is supposed to spread to our attempts to get coherent ideas about the author *of the world*. The *Dialogues*, as Dancy reads it, is intended to defeat religious belief, *not* by reasoning anyone out of it—Hume does not think that religious belief, or any belief, is reached purely by reasoning—but instead by working a-rationally on the believer to defeat her natural, equally a-rational tendency to see the world as authored.

There certainly are texts which are purely arational causal mechanisms. Advertising provides the obvious examples: think of Gillette advertisements which juxtapose pictures of a man shaving with pictures of jet fighter aircraft. Perhaps there are philosophical texts, or texts that look philosophical on their surfaces, which are like that, too.

However, there are several reasons not to buy Dancy's case for the *Dialogues* as such a text. First, if what you want is for your text to be a religion-destroying arational mechanism, why pick the *dialogue form* instead of some other more obviously causally effective genre? Why not heroic fiction or setting one's assertions to music or juxtaposing the text with symbols of manly power, like jet fighter aircraft? For example, Hume was a master at causing emotional complicity in his readers through narrative monologue: that's often how the arguments in the *Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals* work. Second, Dancy's reading requires that the *Dialogues* is ultimately uninterpretable, but it is not. That claim is just my promise to offer an interpretation adequate to the text, which I will attempt below. Third, the analogy between the author of the *Dialogues* and the author of the world is weak, not least because, interpretable or not, the *Dialogues* does have a clearly identifiable author: his name is on the title page. Fourth, the required psychological mechanism of contagion of confusion about the author from text to world is obscure. Do we normally attribute to God what we interpret as the author of a text's intentions? Do we ever do so?¹⁵

That fourth criticism could be countered by appealing to the widespread understanding of holy books as authored by God; the *Quran*, for example, is supposed to be the word of God reported to Muhammad by the angel Gabriel. Perhaps, then, the move from author-of-text to author-of-world is not so obscure. But, in the first place, the direction of association is importantly wrong here: the *Quran* is supposed to be a text authored by God, already assumed to be author of the world; the *Dialogues* is a text authored by David Hume, who has no claim to divinity. Examples of a move from world-creation to text-creation do not show a tendency to move the other way. And in the second place, if Hume had wanted to exploit our habits of reading holy books, he could have made the *Dialogues* far more like them in style than it actually is: he could, for example, have written something more like Nietzsche's *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, which gains some of its force by its parodic appropriation of the style of the gospels. That he did not make the stylistic connection suggests that he did not mean to make the author-text connection either.

Dancy could also have appealed to Hume's own association of the world with text, when, in part 3 of the *Dialogues*, Cleanthes imagines books appearing and reproducing naturally like animals and plants. But the point of Cleanthes's "natural books" thought experiment is that the actual world bears marks of deliberate design at least as apparent as the imagined world filled with *Illiads* and *Aeneids* growing on trees would; the point is not to promote the authors of individual texts to divine status. It is the library, not the single book, which is compared to the created world. There does not seem to be enough here to support Dancy's very large claim.

For these reasons, Dancy's causal operation reading is not convincing for the *Dialogues*, although it may apply to other dialogues. However, I will return to what I take to be the important insight in Dancy's reading in my conclusion.

I now offer two reasons for writing dialogues which do explain what Hume is doing with the dialogue form in the *Dialogues*.

Self-discovery

We could read the *Dialogues* as an autobiography: Hume's reflexive attempt to uncover, record, and understand his own self by exploring its structure and development.¹⁶ But can an autobiography be multi-character and multivocal rather than monologic? We might object that autobiographies do not normally set different parts of their author's self against one another; we might even think that autobiographies *must* have unitary subjects.

But in the first place, there is no such necessity: a *fictional* character's self-discovery by self-multiplication is a recognizable literary trope, used in *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, Conrad's "The Secret Sharer," and *Fight Club*.¹⁷ The technique is available to autobiographers, and it is used, for example, by Robert Pirsig in *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*. Pirsig attempts to understand himself by distinguishing his younger self, under the name Phaedrus, from himself at the time of writing. Part of his point is that he *cannot* understand himself properly as a single person, that his life is marked by discontinuity between his lost, brilliant earlier incarnation and himself at the time of writing.¹⁸ In the second place, even if it is unusual, autobiography *by dialogue* has the advantage of resisting the distorting pressure to satisfying narrative and coherence to which many single-voiced autobiographies willingly or unwillingly succumb.

In the third place, we can support, or at least further articulate, the idea of a multi-character autobiography using a reading of Hume's own account of the self. That account has two parts: first, a skeptical argument, which uses Hume's general theory of the nature and origin of ideas to argue that we have no idea of a self underlying and owning all our changing perceptions, ideas, memories, and desires over time; and second, a more tentative account of how we, nonetheless, do have and use an idea of personal identity (an idea of which Hume makes considerable use in other parts of his work, for example, in his theory of pride and his account of the virtue of justice). Hume says several things here, and it is not clear how to fit them together into a coherent theory,¹⁹ but one suggestion he makes about the identity of the self is by an analogy with the identity of nations:

I cannot compare the soul more properly to any thing than to a republic or commonwealth, in which the several members are united by the reciprocal ties of government and subordination, and give rise to other persons,

who propagate the same republic in the incessant changes of its parts. And as the same individual republic may not only change its members, but also its laws and constitutions; in like manner the same person may vary his character and disposition, as well as his impressions and ideas, without losing his identity. Whatever changes he endures, his several parts are still connected by the relation of causation. (T 1.4.6.19; SBN 261)²⁰

A minimal reading of this analogy would take only the point about causation: the identity over time of, say, Scotland, is a matter of causal connections between parts (members, laws, constitutions), not of the identity over time of a nation-soul underlying and owning those parts; similarly, the identity over time of David Hume is a matter of causal connections between parts (character, dispositions, impressions and ideas), not of the identity over time of a person-soul. We get the idea of an identical self over time by a natural tendency to conflate sufficiently gradual change with identity (T 1.4.6.22; SBN 263). A more ambitious and, therefore, more tentative reading makes more of the analogy between the parts of an individual and the citizens of a republic. The right patterns, first, of causal connections among and gradual change internal to one group of parts, and, second, of difference from other similarly internally connected and changing groups, could give rise to ideas of multiple selves in “one” person, by the same natural process of conflation. Just as we have ideas of Edinburgh and of Glasgow as distinct self-identical entities which are parts of Scotland, we might have ideas of different sequences of parts of David Hume as such entities.

I do not mean definitely to attribute this view to Hume—the textual evidence for his theory of the self is notoriously inconclusive and contradictory—but I do think it is worth exploring in relation to his use of dialogue. To be clear, my argument is not that Hume held this view of the self, and, therefore, that we should expect to find it expressed in *Dialogues*; rather, it is that this view of the self helps us to defend the idea of an autobiography in dialogue form and, therefore, to understand one use of that form. All texts are in a weak sense autobiographical in that they deliberately or accidentally reveal their authors to some degree. The account of the self just sketched makes clearer the distinctive way in which a dialogue can reveal its author and in which the *Dialogues* reveals Hume.

Perhaps, then, dialogue is a means of self-discovery by giving individual voices to the citizens of the republic of the self. We might compare dialogue to the actor's form of self-discovery: Orson Welles claims that “there is a villain in each of us, a murderer in each of us, a fascist in each of us, a saint in each of us, and the actor is the man or woman who can eliminate from himself those things which will interfere with that truth.”²¹ The advantage of the script-writer, or the author of a philosophical dialogue, over the actor is that she does not have to be just one of the characters and nor, therefore, does she have to eliminate the others.

On this reading, the use of dialogue for Hume is that it allows him to individuate his own different citizens in two ways. First, individuation in time: each character in the *Dialogues* could represent a different stage in the development of Hume's own thought. Pamphilus is the naive young Hume, Demea the priggish teenager who used to make up lists of virtues so he could rate himself against his classmates (Mossner, *The Life of David Hume*, 34), and so on. Second, individuation (as it were) in space, in the extent of the current self. Thus, Philo and Cleanthes, the skeptic and the natural theologian, are both parts of Hume, and their tensions are not to be subsumed in a finally unified self. Like most people, Hume is not perfectly consistent or unified. As Walt Whitman said:

Do I contradict myself?
Very well then I contradict myself,
(I am large, I contain multitudes.)²²

This, then, is one important thing Hume is doing with the dialogue form in the *Dialogues* and perhaps elsewhere, but it does not yet catch a further, *political* use of dialogue, and that is what I want, finally, to consider.

Dramatization of an Ideal Politics

Part 12 of the *Dialogues* poses a problem of interpretation. At the end of part 11, Philo seems to have won the debate, Demea leaves in a huff, and the obvious conclusion to draw is that there are no arguments which produce knowledge of God's nature. At best, in the absence of revelation, we ought to suspend judgment. But then in part 12 Philo performs a complete U-turn: he dismisses his own skeptical arguments as mere playful sophistry, says that of course Cleanthes's argument from design for an anthropomorphic God is accepted by all reasonable people, and, even more oddly, suggests that "to be a philosophical skeptic is, in a man of letters, the first and most essential step towards being a sound, believing *Christian*" (DNR 12.33: 89). Pamphilus then closes the dialogue by announcing that *Cleanthes's* views are the most plausible.

There is a long-standing dispute in the philosophical and historical literature about what is going on here,²³ but a straightforward reading is available: Hume really does think—correctly or incorrectly—that where his argument ends is with Philo and Cleanthes not disagreeing about anything substantial. Philo is expressing Hume's own view, and the U-turn is unproblematic. But this straightforward reading is unsatisfactory for several reasons. In the first place, it ignores Hume's decision to write a dialogue. The straightforward reading relies on a superficially appealing way of reading the *Dialogues*, and especially part 12, which neglects that

central decision: it may seem that Philo, the skeptic, is Hume's mouthpiece. But asking of the *Dialogues'* characters "Which one of these is Hume?" is a mistake. The *Dialogues* is a play. Hume was a master at writing treatises and essays in a single voice, and he had a deep concern for literary form and rhetorical strategy. The fact that he chose the dialogue form for this piece and not for those others is not accidental and suggests that the message is in the whole, in the interactions of all the characters, not in any one character. Shakespeare does not appear in his own person in *Hamlet*; there is no need to ask whether Rosencrantz or Guildenstern is Tom Stoppard; it is similarly a mistake to expect Hume to be behind just one of the masks he adopts in the *Dialogues*.²⁴

Having noticed that formal choice, we can see that the straightforward reading also ignores the sudden, rhetorically showy, and deeply implausible character of Philo's U-turn. Philo's change of position is not the smooth and gradual result of careful back and forth with Cleanthes; it is a jarring reversal. It is performed using a great deal of flowery rhetoric of a kind much more characteristic of Cleanthes than of Philo in previous parts of the dialogue. And, perhaps most importantly, it is argumentatively extremely weak: Philo's earlier critical arguments clearly apply to his own statement of the argument from design just as well as they did to Cleanthes's, and his claim that their dispute is merely verbal is perverse. Hume must mean to draw our attention to something here: Philo's U-turn is a dramatic signal, not a sincere argument. It is a Brechtian move which jars us out of identification with a character who (whether we agree with him or not) had previously seemed at least rational and therefore explicable, and into a more distanced, critical point of view on the drama as a whole.

An alternative and still fairly straightforward reading could be offered here: by giving Philo obviously absurd lines intended to be read in a heavily sarcastic tone of voice, Hume is drawing our attention to is the skeptic's total victory over knowledge of God. But this still does not address the point that the *Dialogues* is a play, not a monologue, and it further ignores the multiple indications of *political*, rather than solely philosophical or argumentative, intent in the *Dialogues* and in part 12 in particular. Hume's apparent model for the *Dialogues*, Cicero's *On the Nature of the Gods*,²⁵ is centrally concerned with what the different views of the nature of the gods teach us about the public duties we owe to them: "We should attend, investigate, and pass judgement on the views we are to hold on religion, divine observation, holiness, and religious ceremonial; on good faith and oath-taking; on temples and shrines and solemn sacrifice" (Cicero, 8) Similarly, questions of education for public life run all through the *Dialogues*. Pamphilus is Cleanthes's student, and Demea starts the conversation in part 1 by stating a theory of education: his purpose in teaching his children is to tame their minds "to a proper submission and self-diffidence" (DNR 1.2: 4) so that they will be ready to receive the religion he will eventually impart to them without the self-confidence or tools

of rational defense. In general, the other characters are very aware of Pamphilus's presence and of what example they are setting him. The *Dialogues* adopts the political vocabulary of Hume's explicitly political *History of England*, *Natural History of Religion*, and many of his essays on politics and religion: the vocabulary of *superstition* and *enthusiasm*, which Hume regards as mirror-image pathologies both of belief and of social action. In part 12 in particular, Philo and Cleanthes are concerned to describe the proper role of "true religion" in social and political life. The *Dialogues* is not just about what we can know about God or the gods: it is also about how to live together with that knowledge, or its absence.

So, if we reject the straightforward readings in favor of claiming that the message of the dialogue is in the characters and their interaction and that the topic is (at least partly) political, what political message is conveyed through the medium of the interacting characters in part 12 of the *Dialogues*? I want to make a conjecture, to be justified by its value in making sense of part 12 and of the *Dialogues* as a whole: Hume's political message is the exemplary performance, and endorsement as ideal, of the life that his characters share, despite their disagreements. We should read part 12 of the *Dialogues* as a *utopia*—a dramatized ideal politics—in which Hume makes it vivid how the types represented by Philo and Cleanthes, but not by Demea, can live together.

To read part 12 as a utopia is to see three attempted operations in it. First, criticism by contrast: we are supposed to recognize that our own political life often falls short of the one dramatized and condemn it where it does. Second, expansion of imagination: we are supposed to widen our understanding of what is available to us, having seen a fictional version of it, at least in microcosm. Third, motivation: we should come to love and be moved to pursue the dramatized ideal.²⁶

One could characterize the utopian politics of part 12 as *toleration*: rational or reasonable agreement not to enforce some of what one thinks most important and to respect others' views, which one thinks are wrong, about those most important things.²⁷ That is not exactly mistaken, but it is incomplete, and the clue to its incompleteness is one of Pamphilus's already-mentioned reasons for using the dialogue form: that it "unites the two greatest and purest pleasures of human life: study and society" (DNR 4: 2). The toleration account, with its emphasis on mutual *respect*, misses the *pleasure* that Philo and Cleanthes take in their discussion and—more importantly—in each other's company.

Cleanthes and Philo are friends: specifically, they are (at least) what Aristotle called *pleasure* friends, who delight in one another.²⁸ Philo is, therefore, happy to drop their disagreement and back down for the sake of that friendship and the pleasures it provides, and Cleanthes does not object to his insincerity. He could quite properly have responded to the U-turn "Don't patronize me: you don't believe that for a second," but he goes along with the attempt to restore harmony instead. Philo's U-turn and Cleanthes's acceptance of it perform an endorsement of the

relative value of friendship—the pleasures of society—over winning an argument or insisting on knowledge.²⁹

Part 12, then, is a dramatization of that view: a dramatization of political hedonism and political anti-rationalism and of the victory of passion over reason and of society over solitary reasoning. Hume is, first, an anti-rationalist: belief, action, and moral judgment are all matters of passionate response—of delight and disgust, pleasure and pain, desire and aversion—rather than (only) reasoning. In politics as elsewhere, Hume thinks that “reason is, and ought only to be the slave of the passions” (T 2.3.3.4; SBN 414–15). Hume is, secondly, against solitude. This is not the trivial point that any politics is, by definition, *non*-solitary: it is the substantive point that Hume condemns the politics of the monastery, a social organization devoted to making as much space as possible for solitary prayer and meditation. For Hume, this and other social forms like it are politics devoted to vicious character, to the reproduction of the “gloomy, hair-brained enthusiast” (EPM 9.3; SBN 270). The political lesson dramatized by part 12 is that knowledge and who is right are less important than taking pleasure in one another’s company.

Summing up this section: what Hume does with the dialogue form in the *Dialogues*, and especially in part 12, is exemplify and recommend an anti-rationalist, hedonistic, and anti-solitude politics. We should read *Dialogues* part 12 as a dramatic utopia because this reading explains Philo’s U-turn, connects the explicitly and implicitly political elements of *Dialogues* with Hume’s wider political thought, and—most importantly—productively transforms our understanding of what the text does.

Conclusion

I have considered a range of possible uses of the dialogue form for Hume’s *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*: out of writerly playfulness, for self-concealment, to tame his opponents, for self-effacement, to carry out a causal operation on his readers, for self-discovery, and for dramatizing a political ideal. I have argued that the last two uses are particularly important for understanding Hume’s *Dialogues*. Hume uses the dialogue form there first, as a way of discovering and understanding himself as multiple, both over time and in his own current person, by individuating and giving voice to some of the citizens in his republic of the self; and, secondly, as a way of dramatizing and endorsing an anti-rationalist, hedonist, and anti-solitude politics in which reason is the slave of the passions, and especially the slave of the pleasure that friends take in one another’s company, regardless of whether they agree in their reasoning.

One final objection to my reading is that if Hume intended to do *all this* with the *Dialogues*, he failed: no-one seems to have got the point until now. My reply appeals to the central insight of Dancy’s causal reading and to Hume’s anti-rationalism: it

does not much matter for Hume whether we, his readers, intellectually *understand* what he is doing. What matters is how we are changed by reading, and what we are therefore motivated to *do*. If we come to accept ourselves as also multiple, if we come to value community over solitude or victory in argument, if Cleanthes-like natural theologians and Philo-like skeptics become better friends and better able to live together, if we come to mock or ignore Demea-like dogmatists and tyrants rather than taking them seriously, if we enjoy the pleasures of society and worry less about the correct account of our knowledge of God, then the *Dialogues* will have succeeded.

NOTES

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1 David Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, 2nd ed., ed. Richard Popkin (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1998), 1. Hereafter cited in the text as “DNR” followed by part and paragraph followed by page numbers.

2 David Lewis and Stephanie Lewis, “Holes,” *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 48 (1970): 206–12.

3 Popkin, “Editor’s Introduction,” ix.

4 References to the *Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals* are to David Hume, *An Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals*, ed. Tom. L. Beauchamp (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), hereafter cited in the text as “EPM” followed by section and paragraph and to *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge, revised by P. H. Nidditch, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), hereafter cited in the text as “SBN” followed by page numbers.

5 References to the *Enquiry concerning Human Understanding* are to David Hume, *An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Tom L. Beauchamp (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000), hereafter cited in text as “EHU” followed by section and paragraph, and to *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge, 3rd ed., revised by P. H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), hereafter “SBN” followed by page numbers.

6 See 591–93 of Ernest Campbell Mossner, *The Life of David Hume* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1954) and Appendix C of Norman Kemp Smith’s edition of *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1963).

- 7 Letter of June 1776, in *The Letters of David Hume*, ed. J. Y. T. Greig (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1932), 2: 322–24.
- 8 George Berkeley, *Three Dialogues Between Hylas and Philonous*, ed. Jonathan Dancy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).
- 9 Letter of 10 March 1751, in Greig ed., *Letters*, 1: 153–55. On what we can conclude about Hume's own views from this letter—namely, very little—see Peter Dendle, “A Note on Hume's Letter to Gilbert Elliot,” *Hume Studies* 20 (1994): 289–91.
- 10 Marcus Tullius Cicero, *The Nature of the Gods*, trans. P. G. Walsh (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 7.
- 11 I make no claim to expertise here and thank Gillian Clark for sharing hers.
- 12 John Perry, *A Dialogue on Personal Identity and Immortality* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1978).
- 13 Retrieved 27 September 2013 from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Neutral_point_of_view.
- 14 Jonathan 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.
- 15 Martin Bell offers further critique of Dancy from a historical point of view in “The Relation between Literary Form and Philosophical Argument in Hume's *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion*,” *Hume Studies* 27 (2001): 227–46.
- 16 This suggestion is also made, though to rather different purposes, by John O. Nelson, “The Role of Part XII in Hume's *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*,” *Hume Studies* 14 (1988): 347–72. I discuss autobiographical self-examination in general and in other authors in Samuel Clark, “Love, Poetry, and the Good Life: Mill's *Autobiography* and Perfectionist Ethics,” *Inquiry* 53 (2010): 565–78; Samuel Clark, “Pleasure as Self-Discovery,” *Ratio* 25 (2012): 260–76; and Samuel Clark, “Under the Mountain: Individuality, Basic Training, and Comradship,” *Res Publica* 19 (2013): 67–79.
- 17 Robert Louis Stevenson, *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (London: Hesperus, 2003); Joseph Conrad, “The Secret Sharer” in *Twixt Land and Sea: Tales*, ed. J. A. Berthoud et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008); and *Fight Club*, directed by David Fincher (Twentieth Century Fox, 1999), film.
- 18 Robert Pirsig, *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance: An Inquiry into Values* (London: The Bodley Head, 1974).
- 19 The difficulty of doing so can be gestured at by noting the variety of recent attempts and discussions, which include Donald L. M. Baxter, “Hume's Labyrinth: Concerning the Idea of Personal Identity,” *Hume Studies* 24 (1998): 203–33; Michael J. Green, “The Idea of a Momentary Self and Hume's Theory of Personal Identity,” *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 7 (1999): 103–22; Robert S. Henderson, “David Hume on Personal Identity and the Indirect Passions,” *Hume Studies* 16 (1990): 33–44; Louis E. Loeb, “Causation, Extrinsic Relations, and Hume's Second Thoughts about Personal Identity,” *Hume Studies* 18 (1992): 219–31; David Pears, “Hume's Recantation of His Theory of Personal Identity,” *Hume Studies* 30 (2004): 257–64; Abraham Sesshu Roth, “What was Hume's

Problem with Personal Identity?" *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 61 (2000): 91–114; Paul Russell, "Faith, Skepticism and Personal Identity," *Hume Studies* 21 (1995): 351–54; Galen Strawson, *The Evident Connexion: Hume on Personal Identity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011); Udo Thiel, *The Early Modern Subject: Self-Consciousness and Personal Identity from Descartes to Hume* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), part 6; and Wayne Waxman, "Hume's Quandary Concerning Personal Identity," *Hume Studies* 18 (1992): 233–53.

20 References to the *Treatise* are to David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. David Fate Norton and Mary J. Norton (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), hereafter cited in the text as "T" followed by Book, part, section, and paragraph numbers, and to *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge, revised by P. H. Nidditch, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), hereafter cited in the text as "SBN" followed by page numbers.

21 *Orson Welles: The One-Man Band*, directed by Vassili Silovic and Oja Kodar (Bayerischer Rundfunk, 1995), film.

22 Walt Whitman, "Song of Myself," in *Leaves of Grass*, ed. Jerome Loving (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 78.

23 For example, William Austin, "Philo's Reversal," *Philosophical Topics* 13 (1985): 103–12; John Bricke, "On the Interpretation of Hume's *Dialogues*," *Religious Studies* 11 (1975): 1–18; Scott Davis, "Irony and Argument in *Dialogues XII*," *Religious Studies* 27 (1991): 239–57; Richard Dees, "Morality above Metaphysics: Friendship and Philo's Stance in *Dialogues XII*," *Hume Studies* 28 (2002): 131–47; John O. Nelson, "The Role of Part XII in Hume's *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*," *Hume Studies* 14 (1988): 347–72; and A. G. Vink, "Philo's Final Conclusion in Hume's *Dialogues*," *Religious Studies* 25 (1989): 489–99.

24 This paragraph draws on Samuel Clark, "No Abiding City: Hume, Naturalism, and Toleration," *Philosophy* 84 (2009): 75–94.

25 On Hume's debts to Cicero, see for example P. G. Walsh, Introduction to Cicero, *The Nature of the Gods*, ed. and trans. P.G Walsh (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), xlv; J. C. A. Gaskin, "Hume on Religion," in *The Cambridge Companion to Hume*, ed. David Fate Norton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 313–44, 341.

26 I draw on Samuel Clark, *Living Without Domination: The Possibility of an Anarchist Utopia* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), for this characterization of the work of utopian texts.

27 I offer this reading in Clark, "No Abiding City."

28 Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* trans. Terence Irwin, 2nd ed. (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1999), book 8.

29 Dees, "Morality above Metaphysics," similarly reads part 12 as being about friendship, but he takes Hume's point to be about the necessity of etiquette in common life, rather than about politics.