



David Hume. Dialoghi sulla religione naturale. Edited by Gianni Paganini

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Book Review

David Hume. *Dialoghi sulla religione naturale*. Edited by Gianni Paganini. Milano: Biblioteca Universale Rizzoli Classici, 2013. Pp. 430. ISBN 978-88-17-05496-6, Paperback, 12€.

Not as well-known overseas as it should be, there is an important and active Italian tradition of Hume scholarship. One of its most recent and more important representatives is Professor Gianni Paganini, translator into Italian and editor of Norman Kemp Smith's already excellent edition of the *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*. As is well known, it was a posthumous work by the Scottish philosopher and one of his works that raises the most difficulties for his interpreters.

Paganini's edition consists of a faithful and intelligent Italian translation facing the English text as edited by Norman Kemp Smith for the Clarendon Press, ninety one notes that help us understand the text, a select bibliography, a chronology of Hume's life, a short history of the writing of the *Dialogues*, and a seventy-eight page introduction. The last of these provides Paganini's solution to what Mossner called "the enigma of Hume," that is, whether the meaning of this work was religious or irreligious, and in what sense. It is to this introduction and the interpretation of the *Dialogues* that Paganini proposes that we now turn our attention.

At the beginning, and for quite a number of pages, the introduction seems to present a very detailed abstract of the development of the *Dialogues*, so the reader could ask why it summarizes for the reader what is going to be developed shortly in Hume's text. Nevertheless, this expository strategy is the product of a reading

strategy. Paganini reads the *Dialogues* as a “great dramatic representation of ideas, perhaps lacking in action . . . but nevertheless rich in striking scenes, changes of atmosphere, attacks and defenses, returns and rethinking again and again” (5).

This way of approaching the *Dialogues* has itself a very important hermeneutic consequence, namely, that the meaning of the work cannot be what is said by one or another of the speakers. In fact, an old problem for Hume interpreters has been the fact that the ideas of Hume himself are not expressed in the voice of a single character, as in classical dialogues, but, borrowing the words from one of Paganini’s other recent chapters, “it is the whole play that speaks for the writer, and not any single character” (Gianni Paganini, “Theism, Atheism, and Scepticism. Bayle’s Background to Hume’s *Dialogues*,” in *Gestalten des Deismus in Europa*, ed. Winfried Schröder [Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2013], 203–43, 225).

This means that the apparent summary of the work, which could be considered redundant, is not really simply an abstract, but an exposition of its meaning. Using a Platonic metaphor, we could say that its meaning consists in the voyage that the principal characters of the *Dialogues* make during its development and that leaves them, at least the most important of them, Cleanthes and Philo, in a different position from their starting point (51–52).

What, then, are the principal steps of this dialectic process in which the protagonists go about changing their minds and, above all, what is the conclusion that may be drawn from it concerning Hume’s view of natural religion? These are the decisive questions which Paganini answers, which we shall outline in the following terms.

Cleanthes, basically as a result of Philo’s criticism of his views, goes from a strict experimental theism that assumes that the argument from design can be considered a sort of analogical reasoning perfectly similar in value to that which is used in ordinary and scientific reasoning to acknowledging that the argument has instead an irregular nature, not strictly nor properly scientific, in such a way that finally the belief that it can produce is, more than a strictly rational one, a natural one, similar to the belief that sensation gives us. Finally, and to be able to confront the problem of the compatibility between evil and God’s moral attributes, Cleanthes gives up the idea of an infinitely perfect divinity.

If the changes in Cleanthes’s mind during the dialogue are great, greater still and more dramatic are the changes which the skeptical Philo goes through. These changes end with a retraction of his criticisms of the design argument and with the giving of his “philosophical assent” to a “simple proposition” by which “the whole of natural theology” is resolved.

It is just at this point that Paganini follows the path of those who have compared Hume’s views in the *Dialogues* with the work of Pierre Bayle, including people like Norman Kemp Smith, Anna Minerbi Belgrado, and Fernando Bahr. Paganini goes much further than those people, elaborating his most far reaching

hermeneutic thesis: it is works by the philosopher of Rotterdam, and especially the *Continuation des pensées diverses* and *Réponse aux questions d'un provincial*, which have never been translated into English, that provide the background for understanding Hume's philosophical position concerning natural religion. And thus the "simple proposition" of the *Dialogues* is, finally, the equivalent of a footnote to section II:8 of the so-called "Early Memoranda" (probably written by Hume as early as between 1730 and 1734). In that section, Hume records Bayle's thesis of the existence of a universal agreement concerning the existence of a first cause of the order that the universe exhibits, such that discussing whether it is worth calling this cause God or not is a pure verbal discussion, a sterile "logomachia."

Finally, this means that the message hidden in the *Dialogues*, according to Paganini, is a skeptical message, according to which Hume recommends that we stay very far away from theological discussions. On this point Paganini points to an interesting parallelism between the positions sustained by the philosopher from Edinburgh in his *Natural History of Religion* and the philosophical meaning of the *Dialogues* (73–83): both find in philosophy the only useful antidote against fanaticism and superstition.

I find Paganini's interpretation extremely attractive and convincing. I would only add to it further arguments to reinforce the idea that Philo's so-called "retraction" really is very little of a concession or retraction. In my opinion, Paganini's edition of the *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* should be of great interest not only for Italian readers but for every Hume scholar.

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