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Sceptical Atheist
or
Religious Conservative?*

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David Hume: Sceptical Atheist or Religious Conservative?

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Abstract: *Was David Hume a sceptical atheist, and did he die as one? Or was he, as some would have it, a religious conservative, who turned into a staunch supporter of the established church in his later years? Focussing on Hume's Dialogues¹, this paper addresses the following issues:*

- (1) The structure of the Dialogues in terms of all the dramatis personae, and the master-student or teacher-pupil relation therein.*
- (2) Philo's irony and the result ("religious conservatism," etc.) of missing its presence, recently exemplified in J. Israel's otherwise impressive work on the Enlightenment (2001, 2006, 2011).*
- (3) Philo's final conclusion, and its meaning, taking into consideration the study of the manuscript by M.A. Stewart (2000).*
- (4) Hume's own confirmation, later in life, of his sceptical atheism, also considering Paul Russell's *The Riddle of Hume's Treatise* (2008).*

For the greater part of his life, David Hume was a sceptical atheist, and he died as one. Are we to conclude that, after all, his beliefs were a form of religious conservatism, maybe even turning him into a staunch supporter of the established church in his later years? Hume's *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* seem to leave little doubt on this issue, though other writings are pertinent as well. This paper is meant to clarify this question, and it maintains that his position is, indeed, that of a sceptical atheist. In doing so, I will focus on the *Dialogues* and address the following issues:

1. Quotations are: from Kemp Smith's edition of the *Dialogues* (Indianapolis, 1947) by *DNR* and page number; from *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. D. F. Norton and M. J. Norton (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2007), by "T" followed by book, part, section and paragraph; from *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Tom L. Beauchamp (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000), by "EHU" followed by section and paragraph. The page number of the Selby-Bigge edition (*SB*) is added.

- (1) The structure of the *Dialogues* in terms of all the *dramatis personae*, and the master-student or teacher-pupil relation therein.
- (2) Philo's irony in the *Dialogues*, and the result ("religious conservatism," etc.) of missing its presence, most recently exemplified in J. Israel's work on the Enlightenment (2001, 2006, 2011).
- (3) Philo's final conclusion and its meaning, taking into consideration the study of the manuscript by M. A. Stewart (2000).
- (4) Hume's own confirmation, later in life, of his sceptical atheism, also considering its presence in Hume's first writings, as shown by Paul Russell's *The Riddle of Hume's Treatise* (2008).

1. The structure of Hume's *Dialogues*

In the *Dialogues*, there are three actual participants in the discussion: there is one listener, who is at the same time, narrator of the discussion, and one listener to the narrator. Who are these *dramatis personae*, and where do they come from? What is their discussion about? What might we learn albeit tentatively, I agree, from this very structure?

As to the actual participants, Demea represents orthodoxy, Cleanthes a more enlightened theology, and Philo a form of scepticism. Of course, just as Paul Russell argued so persuasively for Hume's *Treatise*, so the *Dialogues* bear the stamp of their day and age. When composing them, Hume must have been in discussion with contemporaries like S. Clarke, A. Baxter, J. Butler, C. Maclaurin, and, of course, with Berkeley and Locke, next to Bayle, Malebranche and a host of others. Their influence, therefore, will certainly be present in the discussion in the *Dialogues*, as probably the influence of Hume's intimate friends will be, as well. But, it is their joint influence—which, in my view, makes the effort to identify any one of them in particular as being one of the characters in the *Dialogues* an effort that constitutes a dead-end street. Besides, such a one-to-one identification would tie the character down too much.

Hume's admiration for the classics is well-known, and several clues may be found here. In Terentius' comedy *Adelphi*, one of the characters is a certain Demea. Terentius, who is also quoted by Cicero in his *De Natura Deorum*², opposes two educational methods of which the

2. Cicero, *De Natura Deorum*, II, 60, III, 72. Terentius is also referred to by Hume in his *Essays, Moral, Political and Literary*, ed. E. F. Miller, Liberty Classics, Indianapolis, 1985: "Of Simplicity and Refinement in Writing," 193, 195; "Of the Standard of Taste," 243.

authoritarian model is defended by father Demea. In the opening of the discussion in the *Dialogues*, this is exactly what Hume's Demea does: "Having thus tamed their mind to a proper submission and self-diffidence, I have no longer any scruple of opening to them the greatest mysteries of religion, nor apprehend any danger from that assuming arrogance of philosophy, which may lead them to reject the most established doctrines and opinions" (*DNR* 130/1). Reading *De Natura Deorum*, Hume must have come across Terentius, and he thus may have found a classical source for Demea.

In the *Dialogues*, the argument of design is defended by Cleanthes, who is a far less dogmatic character. Very likely, Hume borrowed Cleanthes' name from Cicero's *De Natura Deorum*, specifically, Cicero's character Balbus, who had a certain Cleanthes as one of his teachers (Cicero, *DND* II, 13).

As Socrates of old, Philo is the gadfly, criticizing Demea and Cleanthes. His name comes from the same source as Cleanthes' and, significantly, in the same way, in *De Natura Deorum* we meet with a certain Cotta, having a certain Philo as one of his teachers (Cicero, *DND* I, 59).

Pamphilus recounts the discussion to his friend Hermippus. As it turns out, there is a Pamphilus in *De Natura Deorum* (I, 72), and, in the *Dialogues*, Demea says to Cleanthes that Pamphilus "may indeed be regarded as your adopted son" (*DNR* 130). Cleanthes is Pamphilus' teacher.

Just as there is no Demea in *De Natura Deorum*, there is also no Hermippus, but there was a historical Hermippus, indeed, who had a teacher by the name of Philo (Pauly, 853; Lübker, 530).³ To be sure, *this* Philo lived some two centuries after Cicero.

As a result, the master-student or teacher-pupil relation seems to be relevant to every one of the participants. Arguably, this may all be

3. Pauly, *Paulys Real-Encyclopädie der classischen Altertumswissenschaft* VIII (Neue Bearb.), Stuttgart, 1913; Lübker, *Reallexicon des klassischen Altertums* (1854; Leipzig, 1891). In her "The *Dialogues* as Original Imitation: Cicero and the Nature of Hume's Skepticism," C. Battersby emphasizes the importance of the "master-student relationship between Cleanthes and Pamphilus" (244) but she overlooks the same relation between Philo and Hermippus. In *Hume Studies*, ed. D. F. Norton, N. Capaldi, and W. L. Robison (San Diego: Austin Hill Press, 1976). So I disagree with S. Tweyman in his edition of the *Dialogues* (London, 1991), 94, that "... it is reasonable to disregard Pamphilus' assessment of the main speakers in the dialogue."

coincidence, but is this a reasonable supposition in view of the importance we know Hume attached to the *Dialogues* and his life-long concern with them?

Thus, the following structure appears in the discussion in the *Dialogues*. The actual participants in the discussion are Philo, Cleanthes and Demea, with Demea leaving the scene before the discussion comes to its close. An account of the discussion is given by Pamphilus, pupil of Cleanthes, to his friend Hermippus, pupil of Philo. This pupil of Cleanthes, present as a “mere auditor,” gives us a final judgment, favouring, not surprisingly of course, his teacher Cleanthes.⁴

But what about Hermippus, pupil of Philo? Introducing his account, Pamphilus ends his introduction referring to Hermippus’ opposing “the accurate philosophical turn of Cleanthes to the careless scepticism of Philo,” and to his comparing both of them with the “rigid inflexible orthodoxy of Demea” (*DNR* 128). Hermippus gave this judgement on the basis of “some imperfect account” of the discussion that raised his curiosity and made him ask for a “more perfect account,” the one given in the *Dialogues* as we have them. Whether Hermippus’ judgement remains the same after this account is left to the reader’s judgement, though I would argue that Hume, by way of the literary structure I have explained above, does give us a clue as to what this final judgment of this pupil of Philo might have looked like, had he spoken at all.

The question of which of the characters represents Hume need not really detain us here. Philo usually speaks for Hume, but, at times, Cleanthes, and even Demea, do so as well. Stating the obvious, it was Hume who wrote the *Dialogues*, and what is important is the interpretation of the outcome of the discussion. On route to this conclusion, it is clear to the reader that, when Cleanthes and/or Demea reason along Humean lines, they do so making points against each other and always, either explicitly or implicitly, in accordance with Philo’s stance. With this proviso, we may take it for granted that Philo speaks for Hume.⁵

4. A. G. Vink, “The literary and dramatic character of Hume’s *Dialogues concerning natural religion*,” *Rel. Stud.* 22 (1986): 387-396. R. Foley, “Unnatural Religion: Indoctrination and Philo’s Reversal in Hume’s *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*,” *Hume Studies* 32 (2006): 83-112.

5. Cicero, *DND*, III, 8, transl. H. Rackham, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge: Harvard University Press).

As to the subject matter of the discussion: Hume modelled his *Dialogues* after Cicero's *De Natura Deorum*. The subject in both cases is the question after the attributes and existence of the supreme being(s), though in both cases this happens under the initial pretence of only discussing the attributes. This is aptly illustrated by Cotta in *De Natura Deorum*, in a statement that could easily have turned up verbatim in the *Dialogues* and, interestingly, in the mouth of *any* of the participants in the discussion: "What do I want to know? First of all, why it was that after saying that this part of your subject did not even need discussion, because the fact of the divine existence was manifest and universally admitted, you nevertheless discoursed at such great length on that very point."⁶ The *Dialogues* discuss both the attributes and the existence of God, as is made clear by Cleanthes (e.g., *DNR* 143), Demea (e.g., *DNR* 143, 145) and Philo (e.g., *DNR* 215).

2. Philo's irony and Hume's "religious conservatism"

In interpreting Philo's sayings, Hume's use of irony as a literary device is certainly important. It will not do to explain away every interpretational problem in Philo's statements, simply by calling them ironic. Not seeing the irony, however, is a sure path to misunderstanding, even though it may not always be easy to prove the ironic nature of a specific statement.

This irony is found throughout the *Dialogues*. Just a few examples may illustrate its presence. In part 1, for instance, Philo is answering Demea, saying:

Are you so late in teaching your children the principles of religion? Is there no danger of their neglecting or rejecting altogether those opinions, of which they have heard so little during the course of their education? Your precaution of seasoning your children's minds with early piety is certainly very reasonable; and no more than is requisite, in this profane and irreligious age. (*DNR* 130/1)

Already, here, Philo is creating the atmosphere that will later cause Cleanthes to say to Demea: "your friend Philo, from the beginning, has been amusing himself at both our expense" (*DNR* 213). It is impossible

6. "Philo and the Duties of Friendship," in *Dialogues* 12," *Hume Studies* 28 (2002): 131-147.

to take Philo's words in their literal meaning. A fine example in part 1 is Philo's reference to "David's fool, who said in his heart there is no God" (*DNR* 139). Part 12 abounds with irony, Philo speaking of "a well-disposed mind," a "person seasoned with a just sense of the imperfections of natural reason" and a "sound, believing Christian" (*DNR* 227/8). The irony of these sayings in part 12 is even increased by the fact that the person who could benefit most from their literal (i.e., non-ironic) meaning, the dogmatic Demea, has already left the scene!

This circumstance is, in itself, a piece of irony. Philo says to Cleanthes: "But believe me the most natural sentiment, which a well-disposed mind will feel on this occasion, is a longing desire and expectation, that Heaven would be pleased to dissipate, at least alleviate, this profound ignorance, by affording some more particular revelation to mankind, and making discoveries of the nature, attributes, and operations of the divine object of our Faith" (*DNR* 227). This so-called "confession"⁷ is of little use to Cleanthes, an empirically minded theologian, defender of the argument of design. The only one who could really benefit from this "confession," this call to revelation, just parted company, making this "call to revelation" ironic in more than one way.

Missing the irony in Philo's—i.e., Hume's—statements, has awkward results. I will illustrate this by one of the latest "victims," Jonathan Israel, in his impressive *magnum opus* on the Enlightenment, especially *Enlightenment Contested* (2006) and *Democratic Enlightenment* (2011).⁸

Relevant to the *Treatise*, Paul Russell states that the basic point Hume aims to make "is that sceptical reflections of the kind he engages in leave us with nothing of any significance to believe in." And, at this point, Russell refers to Israel's "serious omission" of entirely overlooking this "basic point" of Hume's in the opening volume of his *magnum opus* (2001).⁹ In the second and third volumes, Israel fares no better as Hume concerns.

7. There is a "confession" in *DND* as well (III. 5), by Cotta, Cicero's sceptic. Philo's confession is discussed in detail in Vink 1986. See also R. Dees, "Morality above Metaphysics."

8. Jonathan I. Israel, *Enlightenment Contested: Philosophy, Modernity, and the Emancipation of Man 1670–1752* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006); *Democratic Enlightenment: Philosophy, Revolution, and Human Rights 1750–1790* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

9. Russell, *The Riddle of Hume's Treatise. Skepticism, naturalism, and irreligion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008). See 283, 385n. Cf. Jonathan I. Israel, *Radical*

First, Israel approaches the Enlightenment with a schedule that may be conveniently termed “Israel’s fork,” claiming “there were always two Enlightenments” (Israel 2006, 11), a radical and a moderate one. In *Enlightenment Contested*, Israel refers to The Netherlands as “the land *par excellence* of dissident and heterodox philosophy.” Here the roots of the radical Enlightenment lie: “The seditious business of reworking Descartes’s duality of substances, extension, and mind into a one-substance materialism¹⁰—the realm of the physical—subjecting the entire cosmos to the rules of mechanical cause and effect, rules which authentic Cartesians applied to bodies but not to the realm of the spiritual, began in the 1650s and 1660s, at Amsterdam and Leiden” (Israel 2006, 31/2). The result of this radical and “seditious” development is exemplified in the work of *philosophes* such as La Mettrie and other *Spinosistes modernes*, the outcome being that “there can be no limit to the application of reason operating on the basis of experience, and hence of knowledge, short of the furthest bounds of human awareness and perception, but that there is no other source of knowledge available to men” (Israel 2006, 49). Alongside this radical Enlightenment, there was a “moderate mainstream Enlightenment,” the difference being “the difference between reason alone and reason combined with faith and tradition...” (Israel 2006, 11).

Because Israel says this difference is “ubiquitous and absolute,” the question naturally is the following: Where does Hume fit in here? Does Hume fit in? Israel uses his fork to place Hume in the moderate mainstream Enlightenment, combining reason with faith and tradition. Maybe, however, the difference is different! Maybe the difference is between, on the one hand, reason as a faculty that works either alone, or combined with faith and tradition, and, on the other hand, reason as a faculty that “is and ought only to be the slave of the passions ...” and “... can never, of itself, be any motive to the will, and can have no influence

Enlightenment. Philosophy and the making of modernity 1650–1750 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

10. In *Democratic Enlightenment* (2011) Israel also refers to this one-substance materialism as a “one-substance metaphysics” (11) or “one-substance monism” (14), adding this would also yield a “moral philosophy apparently more consistent and free of logical difficulties than any philosophical alternative...” (14). Isn’t this debatable? A one-substance monism (I suppose there is no such thing as a “two-substance monism”), whether it be a material or spiritual monism, seems to leave no room at all for an independent moral philosophy. The lack of any independent moral philosophy in Indian philosophy with its (spiritual) monism seems to testify to this.

but so far as it touches some passion or affection”¹¹. In that case, we have a different fork, with Hume on the far more radical, i.e., far more sceptical, side. As Russell has it: “Hume’s sceptical commitments as they concern the material world indicate that he differs from other prominent irreligious thinkers or ‘unbelievers’ of the period with respect to his (non-materialist) ontological commitments” (Russell, 187).

What Israel seems not to sufficiently take into account is that Hume, in his theory of knowledge, is not only “reworking” the realm of the spiritual, subjecting it, as Israel’s radical *philosophes*, “to the rules of mechanical cause and effect,” but is also reworking these very “rules of mechanical cause and effect” themselves! Thus, Hume’s business in this particular field is far more “seditious,” far more radical, than fits in with Israel’s schedule. Hume escapes Israel’s fork.

In *Democratic Enlightenment* (2011) Israel proceeds likewise: “Throughout the history of the Enlightenment, whether we approach it from a scientific, religious, or political standpoint, this fundamental and irresolvable duality between the created and providential and non-created and non-providential schemes of reality was so important that it generally remained the chief factor shaping the Enlightenment’s course” (Israel 2011, 19). And it did so “as most major philosophical questions in dispute, such as whether or not morality is divinely delivered, whether or not the Bible is divine revelation, whether or not the soul is immortal, whether or not prophecy is imposture, whether or not miracles are possible were basically either/or issues” (Israel 2011, 33).. But, if these are really dualities and, really, either/or issues, Hume, contrary to Israel, and therefore again escaping his fork, always turns up on the radical side!

This is not to say that Hume did not have his conservative views. He certainly did; and it is with reason that Neil McArthur refers to Hume as a “precautionary conservative” when it comes to law, commerce and politics: “For a precautionary conservative, our actions are determined by prudential concerns about the consequences of change, which often demand that we ignore our own principles about what is ideally even legitimate.”¹² Israel is equally quite right in referring to Hume’s reluctance to adhering in politics “to any grand plan proposed by

11. *Treatise* 2.3.3.4; SB 415; *A Dissertation on the Passions*, opening Section 5.

12. N. McArthur, *David Hume’s Political Theory: Law, Commerce, and the constitution of Government* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007), 124.

philosophy.” And quoting from Hume’s essay, *The Sceptic*, Israel summarizes: “The value of philosophizing for society Hume sees in refining ‘the temper’ and pointing ‘out to us those dispositions which we should endeavour to attain’ by habit and intellectual activity. In this respect, ‘philosophy’ can do some good politically. But ‘beyond this I cannot acknowledge it to have great influence; and indeed I must entertain doubts concerning all those exhortations and consolations, which are in such vogue among speculative reasoners’” (Israel 2011, 225). Here, Hume certainly was not as radical as the French *philosophes*, though this did not make him withhold his criticism. As Israel says himself: “Nevertheless, Hume devotes his powerful philosophical mind and sophisticated social criticism to essentially conservative political, social and moral goals and was relentless in his attack on the pretensions of philosophy itself” (Israel 2006, 54). It is this relentlessness in Hume’s attack (rather a radical attack at that) that causes Israel troubles. For Hume’s attack is, at once, an attack on the very fork Israel is using.

This being the case, it therefore comes as no surprise that Hume was more radical than fits Israel’s fork in other respects as well. That is to say, not only in his theory of knowledge, but equally in his theory of religion. Following J. C. A. Gaskin¹³, Israel is seduced into considering Hume’s religious stand as a form of *deism*, thus being able to place him on the moderate side of his Enlightenment fork. This makes Israel virtually ignore any irony in Hume’s statements on religion. The consequences are disastrous in my view, because, as a result, Israel’s Hume ends up as a representative of “religious conservatism” (Israel 2006, 691).

The road to this “religious conservatism” is an ascending scale, on which Israel views Hume’s religious stance as: (1) “not altogether incompatible, ultimately, with Newtonian physico-theology and the ‘argument from design’...” (Israel 2006, 221); next saying: (2) “Hume

13. J. C. A. Gaskin, “Hume’s Critique of Religion,” *Journal of the History of Philosophy* XIV (1976): 301-311; *Hume’s Philosophy of Religion* (London: Macmillan, 1978, 1988); “Hume’s Attenuated Deism,” *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie* LXV (1983): 160-173. Different readings of the *Dialogues* and Philo’s final conclusion are discussed in ch. 2 of A. G. Vink, *Philo’s Slotconclusie in de Dialogues concerning Natural Religion van David Hume* (diss, Leiden University, 1985), 39-85. These include, e.g., theistic (W. A. Parent; N. Capaldi), fideistic (T. Penelhum), sceptical/non-theistic (Kemp Smith), anthropomorphic (A. Leroy), naturalistic (C. W. Hendel; R. J. Butler; N. Pike; G. Gawlick), deistic (J. C. A. Gaskin), atheistic (Ch. Echelbarger), immanent (G. Nathan) and agnostic (J. Noxon) readings.

nonetheless supports Locke, Le Clerc, and the *rationaux* on the key question of the necessity of revelation for teaching morality” (Israel 2006, 676) because “The key point for Hume was that it seems so obvious to men that the world must have an intelligent Creator and supervisor, that our sense of morality in significant ways depends on this commonly shared perception” (Israel 2011, 211); adding that: (3) “Hume judged some form of religion enthroneing a divine Creator and universal legislator, and promising reward and punishment in the hereafter, indispensable...” (Israel 2006, 684); explaining how: (4) “he refused to exclude divine Creation and miracles *a priori*...” (Israel 2006, 690); finally resulting in: (5) Hume thus buttressing his “religious conservatism” (Israel 2006, 691).

These four steps and the added conclusion (as a fifth) deserve separate attention, exceeding the bounds of this paper. However, as to (1), this is discussed in my next paragraph. Of course, (2) reminds one of the person “seasoned with a just sense of the imperfection of natural reason,” flying to revealed truth “with the greatest avidity” (*DNR* 227), in the process of which this person turns into “a sound, believing Christian” (*DNR* 228). To consider Hume as such a person is a sure sign of falling victim to Hume’s irony, with the impossible (3), subject of my last paragraph, following in its wake. As to (4), there was little that Hume excluded *a priori*, saying that “any thing may produce any thing” (*T* 1.4.5.30), including divine creation and miracles. However, the *a posteriori* likelihood, the empirical evidence, of either of them ever being known to have occurred as such, approaches zero, as the *Dialogues* testify. As a result, we have, with (5), Hume’s ‘religious conservatism’, drifted a long way from home.

We therefore need to ask: was this ‘religious conservatism’ Hume’s conclusion, as Israel has it? Was Hume a religious conservative after all, in his last years even increasingly “a staunch supporter of the established church”?¹⁴ To answer this, we will (re)visit Philo’s final conclusion.

14. “If the thrust of his moral philosophy was conservative, what remained of ‘religion’, for Hume, especially in *his last years when he increasingly became ‘a staunch supporter of the established church’*, was acceptance of religious practice and duties, in any given country, as they are, provided society and the individual are sufficiently protected by an established toleration and individual liberty from the ‘errors’ of religion.” (Israel 2006, 692; italics added).

3. Philo's final conclusion

Philo's final conclusion "resolves itself into one simple, though somewhat ambiguous, at least undefined proposition, that the cause or causes of order in the universe probably bear some remote analogy to human intelligence..." (DNR 227). In this paragraph I will interpret this conclusion as the heart of Hume's sceptical atheism. Let's first take a closer look.

Philo speaks of "cause or causes," that is, "god or gods," if we are to use these terms at all (Philo does not). Next, the conclusion says "cause or causes of order," and it therefore does not refer to a first cause, but to a cause or explanation of the order to be found within the existing world. The possibility of one or more internal principles of order, a possibility Philo has shown a preference for in the preceding discussion (DNR 146, 162, 174), is certainly included. The conclusion is further sceptically qualified by "probably," "some," and "remote," and thus leaves open the possibility that there may hardly be any analogy at all and that the analogy there is, is only probable, uncertain and based on a remote resemblance. And lastly, Philo refers to a possible analogy or resemblance with human intelligence. He is not referring to an Intelligent Being. This resemblance is structural and presents severe limitations as it depends on and is co-extensive with, on the one hand, our being able to understand the universe and, on the other hand, the universe being something that can be understood.¹⁵

Interesting and important light has been shed on the *Dialogues*, and, more especially, the stages of its composition, by M. A. Stewart¹⁶ in his meticulous study of the dating of Hume's manuscripts. From my point of view, the discussion in the *Dialogues* should be taken as it stands, but the story of its formation is, of course, always intriguing and possibly enlightening. In interpreting Philo's final conclusion this turns out to be the case. Stewart remarks: "Just one paragraph was added in 1776, and this was clearly Hume's priority. It therefore takes on a special significance as his dying testament to posterity. It is the longest paragraph in the whole work, added to the last leaf of the manuscript for

15. A. G. Vink, "Philo's Final Conclusion in Hume's *Dialogues*," *Rel. Stud.* 25 (1989): 489-499.

16. M. A. Stewart, "The Dating of Hume's Manuscripts," in Wood, *The Scottish Enlightenment. Essays in Reinterpretation* (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2000), 267-314.

insertion earlier in Part 12. It clarifies the position of Philo by arguing that the dispute between theist and atheist is, at root, purely verbal.”¹⁷

Interestingly, this insertion is a further clarification of a point of view of Philo’s, who just said “that I am apt to suspect there enters somewhat of a dispute of words into this controversy, more than is usually imagined” (*DNR* 216). Just how much more, is to be clarified in this late insertion, opening thus: “All men of sound reason are disgusted with verbal disputes, which abound so much in philosophical and theological enquiries...” (*DNR* 217). So, by means of this late insertion (*DNR* 217-219), Hume wants Philo to reach his final conclusion, after considering and taking into account the measure of the dispute at hand being verbal too.

The point of departure here is Philo’s question how far “the dispute concerning theism is of this nature and consequently is merely verbal, or perhaps, if possible, still more incurably ambiguous.” The terms in which the position of theist and atheist, respectively, are characterized is of the utmost significance. These terms are for the theist: “the human and the divine mind,” “original intelligence,” “the supreme Being”; for the atheist they are: “a certain degree of analogy among all the operations of nature,” “energies that probably bear some remote analogy to,” “some remote inconceivable analogy,” and “the original principle of order.”

It is hard to imagine the similarity in wording between the position of the atheist in “the verbal dispute” and Philo’s final conclusion to be something of a coincidence, and Stewart’s referring to the special significance of this late insertion makes this even less likely, and indeed “the verbal dispute” contains a clear and meaningful paraphrasing of Philo’s final conclusion. The atheist surmises: “whether the rotting of a turnip, the generation of an animal, and the structure of human thought be not energies that probably bear some remote analogy to each other... if it be not probable, that the principle which first arranged, and still maintains, order in this universe, bears not also some remote inconceivable analogy to the other operations of nature, and among the rest to the oeconomy of human mind and thought” (*DNR* 218).

Having Philo’s final conclusion analysed as above, it cannot be overlooked that: Again, singular and plural are being used, “principle”

17. Stewart, 303. This late insertion, of course, sheds doubt on Rich Foley’s suggestion that Philo is unable to uphold his scepticism in part 12; it is rather strengthened by this insertion.

and “energies”; again, we meet with one or more principles to explain the order in the universe, not to explain the step from non-existence to existence; again, the possibility of one or more internal principles of order is included; again, the conclusion is sceptically qualified by “probably,” “some” and “remote”; and again, we meet, with even more emphasis, with the suggestion of a structural resemblance with human intelligence (“the oeconomy of human mind and thought” and, literally, “the structure of human thought”).

Philo summarizes the verbal character of the dispute concerning theism thus: “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” (*DNR* 218). And as Stewart notes: “To most readers this would not be a verbal matter, since they wanted to be dogmatists. But it is not surprising from a sceptic’s position: it *is* the sceptic’s position” (Stewart, 303).

Philo’s final conclusion is also Hume’s. And it shows a clear and significant correspondence, both in form and content, with the position in the “verbal dispute” ascribed by Philo to *the atheist*. As Paul Russell has it:

Hume’s point is that there are other analogies no less plausible than the one Cleanthes has suggested. These other analogies do not suggest that the cause of this world is something like mind or human intelligence. Clearly, then, the atheist may concede that there is some *remote* analogy between God and human minds and still insist that there remain *other analogies* and hypotheses that are no less plausible. The conclusion to be drawn from this is that *all* such analogies are so weak and ‘remote’ that God’s nature and attributes remain well beyond the scope of human understanding. (Russell, 282)

Hume’s conclusion, then, is at once the sceptic’s conclusion and the atheist’s conclusion. It holds that the cause or causes of order in the universe probably bear some remote analogy to human intelligence....¹⁸ Hermippus characterized Philo’s scepticism as “careless” on the basis of “some imperfect account” of the discussion, that Pamphilus gave at first. In the more perfect account that we possess, Philo’s scepticism

18. In his final conclusion, Philo is therefore certainly doing *much more* than just “Relying on the position attributed to the atheist” as S. Tweyman in his Introduction (op. cit., 93) would have it.

approaches, not unexpectedly, a mitigated scepticism. “Careless scepticism” is what Hume discusses in his *Treatise* and first *Enquiry* as “excessive scepticism,” also called *Pyrrhonism*. In it “the understanding, when it acts alone, and according to its most general principles, entirely subverts itself, and leaves not the lowest degree of evidence in any proposition, either in philosophy or common life” (*T* 1. 4. 7. 7; *SB* 267/8). This scepticism, Hume says in the first *Enquiry*, is “a very extravagant attempt of the sceptics to destroy reason by argument and ratiocination” (*EHU* 12. 17; *SB* 155). In the *Treatise* Hume, however, continues: “Most fortunately it happens, that since reason is incapable of dispelling these clouds, nature herself suffices to that purpose,... I dine, I play a game of back-gammon, I converse, and am merry with my friends” (*T* 1. 4. 7. 9; *SB* 269). And, in the *Enquiry*, he says: “The great subverter of Pyrrhonism or the excessive principles of scepticism is action, and employment, and the occupations of common life” (*EHU* 12. 21; *SB* 158-59). Likewise, Philo, in the *Dialogues*, counters this careless or excessive scepticism by saying: “To whatever length any one may push his speculative principles of scepticism, he must act, I own, and live, and converse like other men; and for this conduct he is not obliged to give any other reason than the absolute necessity he lies under of so doing.” (*DNR* 134)¹⁹ But there is more, Philo says, and this is equally obvious:

When we carry our speculations into the two eternities, before and after the present state of things; into the creation and formation of the universe; the existence and properties of spirits; the powers and operations of one universal spirit, existing without beginning and without end; omnipotent, omniscient, immutable, infinite and incomprehensible: We must be far removed from the smallest tendency to scepticism not to be apprehensive, that we have here got quite beyond the reach of our faculties. (*DNR* 135)

This, again, echoes the first *Enquiry*, where Hume says “... can we ever satisfy ourselves concerning any determination, which we may form, with regard to the origin of worlds, and the situation of nature, from, and to eternity?” (*EHU* 12. 25; *SB* 162)

Careless and mitigated scepticism, therefore, are not unrelated and their relation is well investigated by Paul Russell, who concludes:

19. As if to avoid misunderstanding, Hume repeats this in the much-debated footnote, *DNR* 219, beginning “It seems evident....” See also Stewart, 301 on this note.

Mitigated scepticism is ‘the natural result’ of Pyrrhonism. That is to say, when we are exposed to the reflections of the Pyrrhonist in the philosophical sphere, this, according to Hume, leads us to embrace the ‘mitigated scepticism or academical philosophy’ in the sphere of ‘common life’. He is clear, therefore, that the *point* or *purpose* of Pyrrhonian scepticism is that it leads to a ‘durable and useful’ philosophy in the sphere of common life—namely, the scepticism of the academic philosophy. (Russell, 207/8)

And, so, there is a dynamism in Hume’s scepticism: “Hume employed his extreme (Pyrrhonist) sceptical principles in order to bring us to, and to sustain, the principles of a more moderate, academic scepticism” (Russell, 270). This then, is Hume’s and Philo’s dynamic scepticism, the scepticism also, of the atheist of the “verbal dispute” in the *Dialogues*, containing, in Stewart’s words, Hume’s “dying testament to posterity.”

4. Hume’s sceptical atheism

Atheism may claim, on the one hand, to be able to definitely prove the non-existence of the deity or to definitely disprove its existence. This is a dogmatic atheism, conflicting, as far as Hume is concerned, with the sceptical strain in his thinking. He considered it untenable. On the other hand, atheism may challenge the likelihood of the existence of a deity and of the efforts to prove this existence, in view of our knowledge and experience of the world, in its natural and moral aspects. According to this sceptical atheism, this likelihood, on natural and moral grounds, virtually disappears, and any proof of the existence of a deity so far has failed. This scepticism, however, is mitigated by the bare possibility of the existence of a deity, unlikely as it may be.²⁰ To this sceptical atheism, therefore, the existence of such a deity, though its bare possibility be allowed, is a most unreasonable fancy. In other words: “All we are left with is an obscure hypothesis about the existence of a being that must be ‘infinitely different’ from human minds” (Russell, 281).

The late insertion in the *Dialogues* M. A. Stewart draws our attention to as Hume’s “dying testament to posterity,” is only a part of this testament, because Hume added more to it, confirming his sceptical

20. In Philo’s final conclusion Hume, in his sceptical atheism, combines the two meanings of atheism, as distinguished by Paul Russell, that of “the Pyrrhonian or Sceptic” and that of “Spinozism” or “Stratonic atheism” (Russell, 57).

atheism. James Boswell's well-known "An account of my last interview with David Hume, Esq."²¹ leaves little room for doubt. If we accept Stewart's characterisation of the "verbal dispute," there is no reason not to say the same of Boswell's account of his conversation with the dying philosopher. On the contrary, one of the first remarks Boswell notes about Hume is: "He said he was just approaching to his end. I think these were his words." Boswell spoke with Hume on 7 July 1776. Hume died 25 August.

The account is quite revealing. Boswell notes Hume's saying: "He said he never had entertained any belief in Religion since he began to read Locke and Clarke." And to avoid misunderstandings Boswell asks if he was not religious when he was young, in answer to which Hume said he was, before reading Locke and Clarke, that is. We know Hume remained clearheaded until the very end, as is evidenced by his physicians. Joseph Black wrote to Adam Smith; "He continued to the last perfectly sensible" and William Cullen wrote in his account of Hume's last days "His senses and judgment did not fail till the last hour of his life."²² Hume's saying, then, shortly before his death, that "he never had entertained any belief in Religion" since early in his life, can be taken to mean just what it says. Hume entered college (probably) in 1722 and left it (probably) in 1726. He certainly "began to read Locke and Clarke" in those years, thereby losing any belief in religion. This resulted in intellectual and emotional hardship, contributing no doubt to what we know as his "disease of the learned."²³ It left its marks in his *Treatise*, as Paul Russell made clear, and it also influenced his work on the *Dialogues*, as the beginning of his letter (Dated 18 February 1751) to Gilbert Elliot of Minto shows:

You wou'd perceive by the Sample I have given you, that I make Cleanthes the Hero of the Dialogue. Whatever you can think of, to strengthen that Side of the Argument, will be most acceptable to me. Any Propensity you imagine I have to the other Side, crept in upon me against my Will: And 'tis not long ago that I burn'd an old Manuscript Book,

21. Quoted from Kemp Smith's edition of the *Dialogues*, DNR 76-79.

22. J.Y.T. Greig, *The Letters of David Hume*. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1932; repr. New York & London: Garland, 1983, 2 vols.), II: 449-450.

23. See E. C. Mossner, *The life of David Hume* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980), chap. 6; also R. Graham, *The great Infidel. A life of David Hume* (Edinburgh: John Donald, 2004), chap. 2.

wrote before I was twenty; which contain'd, Page after Page, the gradual Progress of my Thoughts on that head. It begun with an anxious Search after Arguments, to confirm the common Opinion: Doubts stole in, dissipated, return'd, were again dissipated, return'd again; and it was a perpetual Struggle of a restless Imagination against Inclination, perhaps against Reason.²⁴

In this letter, Hume also refers to “the Character of Philo, in the Dialogue, which you’ll own I could have supported naturally enough,” and so he may have burned the manuscript book, but the doubts were there to stay.

Boswell’s account makes clear that to Hume his loss of religion included losing any belief in immortality or a future state, “even when he had death before his eyes” (to Boswell’s astonishment). Hume considered this immortality “a most unreasonable fancy.” The account makes sure that we are dealing with an atheist, prepared to mitigate his scepticism, as Boswell continues: “Mr. Hume, I hope to triumph over you when I meet you in a future state; and remember you are not to pretend that you was joking with all this Infidelity,” which is followed by Hume’s: “No, “No.” “But I shall have been so long there before you come that it will be nothing new.” Boswell closes by saying “I left him with impressions which disturbed me for some time.” And they did for quite some time. On 8 January 1784 Boswell noted in his diary to have awakened after a very agreeable dream in which he found a diary kept by David Hume. From this diary, it appeared that though Hume’s vanity made him publish treatises of scepticism and infidelity, he was in reality a Christian and a very pious man.²⁵

But was Hume such a pious Christian man, even displaying “religious conservatism” as Israel would have it? On the arguments presented here: No. We have to conclude that for the greater part of his life, and in accordance with his dynamic scepticism, Hume was a sceptical atheist and that he died as one.

24. Greig, vol. 1, 153/4.

25. *The Private Papers of James Boswell*, ed. G. Scott and F. A. Pottle (Oxford 1931), XVI: 20.