'For Here the Author is Annihilated': Reflections on Philosophical Aspects of the Use of the Dialogue Form in Hume's *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*

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HUME's *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*[1] are justly famous as a triumph of art and reason. Hume himself admitted satisfaction with them; 'On revising them', he wrote not long before his death, 'I find that nothing can be more cautiously and more artfully written'.[2] The *Dialogues* are concerned with the argument from design to the existence of God, which is really an argument *from* the nature of the physical world *to* design and thereby to a designer. There are three main protagonists in the *Dialogues*, Philo, Cleanthes and Demea; they are introduced by Pamphilus, Cleanthes' ward and pupil, and the discussion ostensibly concerns the nature of Pamphilus' education, particularly his religious edu-

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[1] All references to the *Dialogues* will be to the standard edition by Norman Kemp Smith (London: Nelson, 1947), reprinted by Bobbs-Merrill in the Library of Liberal Arts, cited as *DNR*.

[2] J. Greig ed., *Letters of David Hume* 2 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1932), 2, p. 334. This volume will be referred to as *Letters*.

cation. In the broadest outline, Cleanthes defends the argument
from design, Demea defends an *a priori* argument to the exist-
ence of God, and Philo argues against both. Philo's voice is the
dominant one, and his arguments have been generally deemed
by philosophers to be the final refutation of the argument from
design. These two considerations have encouraged readers to
take Philo to represent Hume. There are complications besetting
this identification, in the fact that both Demea and Cleanthes
express distinctly Humean views on various occasions, and Philo
performs what appears to be an astonishing volte-face in Part
XII, where after seeming to destroy the argument from design
by sustained Humean argument over Parts II–XI, he turns round
and accepts it. This volte-face is one of the crucial features of
the *Dialogues*, success in the explanation of which is a test of any
interpretation. Philo and Demea appear to join forces against
Cleanthes in Parts II–VIII, but in Parts IX–XI Philo and
Cleanthes succeed in demolishing Demea's own adherence to *a
priori* arguments, and to any form of appeal to natural or moral
evil; such appeals are taken rather to create difficulties in the
religious hypothesis than to offer any sort of support for it.
Demea at this stage stomps off in dudgeon, setting the stage for
Philo's apparent candid recantation.

    There are three other features of the *Dialogues* that I take to
be uncontentious and relevant to our topic. The first is that it is
important not to take too seriously anything that Pamphilus says
in the preface, and in particular not to swallow wholesale his
proffered justification for the use of dialogue form in the present
case. The second is that Hume included several allusions to the
Ciceronic model that his *Dialogues* follow. One significant
allusion is the distinction between questions concerning the
existence of a divine being and questions concerning divine
nature. Pamphilus and Demea in Hume's dialogue, and Balbus
the Stoic in Cicero's, all draw this distinction, and assert firmly
that the existence of the divine being hardly deserves arguing,
since it is universally agreed, even though the subsequent dis-
cussion in both dialogues effectively shows that the distinction is

untenable.[3] Another Humean allusion to Cicero, which has caused great problems for unwary interpreters, is the final sentence of all, in which Pamphilus confesses: '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'. This is an echo, though a variant, of the final sentence of Cicero's dialogue, which reads 'we parted, Velleius thinking Cotta's discourse to be the truer, while I felt that Balbus approximated more nearly to a semblance of the truth'. The third is that none of the main protagonists is even apparently consistent; all make mistakes, and fail to remember or even to see their own points and those of others. This last point I think significant.

However, even if we accept all these points as uncontentious, they merely set the scene for the real difficulties in the *Dialogues*. I take there to be three crucial questions to which in the present context we need answers:

1 What conclusion did Hume hope to leave with us (if any)?
2 Why did Hume adopt the dialogue form?
3 Why does Philo recant (if he does)?

In each case the answer to one question should tell us the answer to the next. In this paper I consider four possible approaches to the *Dialogues* that do in this way generate answers to all three questions. After the first, each of the other approaches seems to me to be better, though more extreme, than the one before it. My eventual conclusion will be that it is as hard to determine the message of the *Dialogues* as it is to determine the existence and nature of God.

The first approach is the traditional one. Hume's problem in pursuing his criticisms of religious belief is that it was socially unacceptable in his time to come out in the open with anything of the sort. One had to wrap everything up, and disguise one's authorship by some device or other. We see an early version of Hume's response to this need in his *Inquiry Concerning Human*

[3] Cicero, *De Natura Deorum*, II. iii-iv; *DNR*, p. 128 (Pamphilus) and p. 141 (Demea).

Understanding, sec. xi (Of a Particular Providence and of a Future State), and there were other models around, most notably Shaftesbury's *The Moralists*. But Hume goes further than anyone else in the care with which he camouflages himself in the *DNR*. He offers, in the voice of Pamphilus, a quite specious reason for using the dialogue form, one which accepts uncritically a completely non-Humean distinction between questions concerning the existence and those concerning the nature of God. He ends the *Dialogues* with an attempt to persuade us (again in the voice of Pamphilus) that in his view Cleanthes, not Philo, is the victor. And there are many other vagaries of the three main protagonists which are just further evidence of Hume's skill at the art of self-concealment. Despite this skill, however, it is clearly Philo who represents Hume and whose conclusions we are meant to take on board. It is of course true that Philo offers a rather awkward recantation at the beginning of XII. But this is just more camouflage; it is not intended to distract us from the conviction, already established by annihilating argument in Parts II-XI, that the argument from (or to) design is a broken reed.

Though of course there is truth in the initial point about the social conventions of Hume's time, I cannot accept any of the thoughts that are here extracted from it. Some softeners first. First, it is clear to all which voice is dominant in the *Dialogues*, even though one Thomas Hayter thought it worth publishing an immediate reply to Hume whose main point was that, despite the final sentence of Part XII, it is Philo, not Cleanthes, whose arguments are intended to carry conviction.[4] Second, the Ciceronic remarks at the end of Part XII are not really more than conventions of the dialogue form, or references to the tradition within which Hume was writing. Third, Hume's position on these matters was already well known — notorious, even. But these points are not worth much in themselves; thoughts about tensions in the interpretation — call it the camouflage interpre-

[4] T. Hayter, *Remarks on Mr. Hume's Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* (Cambridge, 1780).

tation — can easily be reworked as thoughts about tensions in the social conventions of the time. It may be true that this interpretation requires Hume to be both self-obscuring and self-revealing, the first for social reasons and the second for the furtherance of his underlying purpose. But the inconsistency of these aims can be presented as part of the situation rather than as a problem for the interpretation.

Much more worrying, in my view, is that the camouflage interpretation makes explicit room for the question which has so dominated philosophical work on the *Dialogues*, namely which character represents Hume. I hope to persuade you that this is quite the wrong question. But having once asked it, and given the obvious answer, we can appeal to the camouflage interpretation to paper over any difficulties in the answer given. Philo says some very un-Humean things, and Cleanthes and Demea say some very Humean things. But these facts, which might lead us to doubt the need to identify any one character with Hume, are in the present interpretation accounted for as instances of irony. This appeal to irony acts as a magic wand. All of Philo's lapses from pure Humeanism are re-read as Humean irony, in order to preserve the claim that Philo's voice is Hume's. This renders the camouflage interpretation invulnerable by making it self-preserving. But in my view that sort of invulnerability is a weakness rather than a strength. There are indeed occasions when Philo, at least, indulges in irony. But since, as I hope to persuade you, Philo is not and does not represent Hume, his irony is not Hume's irony, and any divergences between his position (or rather the various positions he espouses) and Hume's are not irony of any sort; for Hume, not speaking in his own voice, is *a fortiori* incapable of speaking ironically in that voice.

These remarks still form no direct argument against the camouflage interpretation. The main weakness of that interpretation is its assumption that the position with which we are intended to be left is the one best supported by the argument, all subterfuge and camouflage now being forgotten. Quite apart from the apparent tension between this fact and the supposed

extraordinary subtlety of Hume's self-camouflage, there is a real question whether this is consistent with official Humean doctrine. As we will see, there are other ways of reading the *Dialogues* which take a quite different line, one much more in tune with the views expressed at the end of Book 1 of the *Treatise of Human Nature* (and in later works as well). That official view is that reason can do little in the long run against natural belief. The *Treatise* contains a sustained argument in favour of a general scepticism about both inductive and deductive reasoning. Hume allows that many of our most important beliefs, such as those about an external world or about our persistence as distinct owners of our experiences, are formed in ways that do not rely on either inductive or deductive reason. He argues that these beliefs are largely false. But he then admits that his arguments have no power to prevent us from forming these beliefs, except for the short periods in which we are sitting in our study thinking about the arguments rather than out there engaged in the practical purposes of ordinary life. Our nature has two sides, the practical and the contemplative, and the demands of the former are much more insistent than those of the latter. So if there really is such a thing as natural religious belief, it is not obvious what purpose Hume thinks is served in the long run merely by providing annihilating arguments against it. It will survive all such onslaughts.

The point here is not that, in the light of his scepticism, Hume cannot officially propound any view as supported by reason. That would be ridiculous. It is rather that this cannot be the main message in a work that is clearly concerned with the opposition between feeling (which I am calling natural belief) and reason. To suppose otherwise is just to forget one half of Hume's teaching. The voice of reason can be used to defeat opinions derived from reason, but not those held in place by nature.

This point will reappear later, playing a constructive rather than a destructive role, for the other three interpretations all deny that the elements I have mentioned are camouflage. They

see those elements as part of the message, in one way or another, rather than as what we would nowadays call noise, something to be set over against the message and whose only role is to obscure it. For the moment I take it, at the least, that though the camouflage interpretation cannot be exactly disproved, it is at least clear that there may be others. In constructing these others, I am much indebted to an excellent article by David Simpson.[5] This article contains the seeds of three different interpretations, which Simpson, for all his acuity, does not succeed in keeping separate from each other.[6] The first two of these can be conceived as different versions of an 'instantiation theory'. The third is the one whose overall merits I will be trying to establish.

The first such version is anti-rationalist. This has it that Hume is attacking what Simpson calls 'rationalist' conceptions about self-consistency and consensus as the aim of intellectual enquiry and debate. On this approach, the *Dialogues* offer us many voices — at least three, and perhaps more. More than one of these voices remain in play at the end, and as they remain in play, so the reader is expected not to select one as the winner, but to move inexorably between them, seeing the point of each but rejecting none. There is no rational need for, or expectation of, a consensus of opinion, therefore, nor is there any sense in which each thinker is expected to be self-consistent; self-consistency is an aim without application. There are just different views, and the aim of rational thought is to see the points of each, keeping as many in play as possible. We do not need to say that everything mooted at any point remains unimpugned at the end, however. It is consistent with this sort of anti-rationalism to allow that some views (such as those of Demea) fall by the way-

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[5] Hume's Intimate Voices and the Method of Dialogue', *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, 21: 1 (1979), 68–92.
[6] I find the first two of these also run together in an interesting article by Christine Battersby, 'The *Dialogues* as Original Imitation: Cicero and the Nature of Hume's Skepticism', in *McGill Hume Studies* eds D. F. Norton *et al.* (San Diego: Austin Hill Press, 1979), 239–52.

side, insisting only that at the end of the day more than one is left.

If this is the message, dialogue is a natural vehicle for it, and the *Dialogues* carry that message by instantiating it. Part XII offers us a tension between natural faith and religious scepticism, and we are not expected to resolve this tension in favour of one side or the other, but rather to adopt both sides of it, somehow. The ideal end of rational thought is to reach a state of equilibrium, a state of rest which contains inner tensions which hold it in place. This makes it reasonable to call the present interpretation the 'balance interpretation'.[7]

According to this interpretation, the *Dialogues* also carry a further, derived message, which is that given the plurality of surviving voices there is autonomy in our choice of voice, and in the light of that autonomy there is a proper intellectual attitude to those who prefer other voices, namely tolerance. The requirement to be tolerant here as elsewhere falls out as a consequence of the admission that there is more than one reputable choice — or voice.

What explanation can we give of Philo's recantation, consistent with this approach? The answer to this question emerges when we are more accurate about the tension instantiated in Part XII. This tension is not just between faith and scepticism, but between a natural tendency to infer a designer in response to the observed nature of the world and sceptical attacks on that tendency. Philo expresses his new view thus: 'A purpose, an intention, or design strikes everywhere the most careless, the most stupid thinker'; and this seems to be an echo of Cleanthes' earlier rhetorical demand, 'Tell me from your own feeling, if the idea of a contriver does not immediately flow in upon you with a force

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[7] There is a lot of talk of balance by both Battersby and Simpson; there is some justification for this in Pamphilus' remark that 'Reasonable men may be allowed to differ, where no one can reasonably be positive. Opposite sentiments, even without any decision, afford an agreeable amusement' (*DNR*, p. 128).

like that of sensation'.[8] Now if this is indeed the tension we are asked to end with, and the tension is intended to be instantiated by the discussion in Part XII, it is important for Philo to abandon his earlier out and out opposition to the inference to a designer. Indeed he needs to admit the inference and place it somehow beside his earlier sceptical attacks. And this is just what happens.

Before criticising this interpretation, I want to mention one important aspect of the concept of self-consistency which is supposed to be part of the rationalist picture of intellectual enquiry. There are two understandings of self-consistency at issue. The first is that the self-consistent person always says the same thing; the second is that he never contradicts himself.[9] These are different, as we can see in the case of the *Treatise*. The eventual tension in the *Treatise* is between a general, Pyrrhonist scepticism and our natural tendency to believe in an external world and to reason inductively. According to Hume, we move backwards and forwards between these, now saying one thing, now doing the other. If so, we lack self-consistency in the first sense but not in the second. The views we express need not actually contradict each other; the conflict between them is not one of logical inconsistency. It could have been, but it is not. My suspicion, however, is that the rationalist model properly appeals to self-consistency only in the sense of non-self-contradiction. There is a danger of confusion here.

I reject the balance interpretation, the first version of an instantiation theory. My reasons are as follows. First, what we

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[8] That this appeal to feeling is indeed one side of the tension present in Part XII may be further supported by the letter to Gilbert Elliot which Hume wrote in March 1751 (*Letters*, 1, 153–7: Letter 72) at p. 155: 'The Propensity of the Mind towards [Cleanthes' argument], unless that Propensity were as strong & universal as that to believe in our Senses and Experience, will still, I am afraid, be esteem'd a suspicious Foundation. Tis here I wish for your Assistance. We must endeavour to prove that this Propensity is somewhat different from our Inclination to find our own Figures in the Clouds, our Face in the Moon, our Passions & Sentiments even in inanimate Matter. Such an Inclination may, & ought to be controul'd, & can never be a legitimate Ground of Assent'.
[9] David Simpson confuses these two senses of 'self-consistent'; see his op. cit., pp. 82–3.

are being offered is a general attack on what is here being called 'rationalism', in support of a position which seems to be held quite generally, that is, independent of any particular intellectual conclusion. This general attack, what is more, makes some appeal to the *Treatise* as a model. But Hume's attachment to anything at all resembling this in the *Treatise* derives entirely from his belief in the truth of Pyrrhonist scepticism. This scepticism is not just one view or one voice for him; it is the truth. If this scepticism were false, there would be no temptation to infer that the role of intellectual enquiry and debate is not to arrive at consensus and self-consistency (in either sense). So the sort of disengaged keeping of several balls in the air at once that is here offered as Hume's proper conclusion is only at issue because of a non-disengaged intellectual commitment to one particular result.

My second reason has to do with the suggestion that Hume intends us to retain both our intellectual scepticism and our tendency to infer a designer. This intention seems at odds with his purpose in writing the *Dialogues* in the first place. They are an attack on religious belief, not an attempt to find another countervailing ball to keep in the air along with that belief.[10] This difficulty cannot be dodged by announcing that the anti-religious purpose is just one of Hume's voices, even though, like any self-respecting sceptic he recommends that we be sceptical about our scepticism. This sceptical *topos* is a further remark by the voice of reason, not something to be set against rational conclusions.

Third, Hume's official position is not one about keeping several views in the air at once, but about oscillating between them. At no point, in the *Treatise* at any rate, is it supposed that we are to accept both scepticism and natural belief at the same

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[10] See Dr Cullen's account of Hume's famous imagined conversation with Charon, reported by Adam Smith in a letter of 9 November 1776 to W. Strahan (reprinted in the Kemp Smith edition of the *DNR*, pp. 243–8). Cullen wrote that Hume 'thought he might say he had been very busily employed in making his countrymen wiser and particularly in delivering them from the Christian superstition, but that he had not yet completed that great work' — the suggestion being that the publication of the *DNR* would be that completion (quoted in E. C. Mossner, *The Life of David Hume*, London: Nelson, 1951, p. 601).

time. We move incessantly from one to the other, and from each
the other appears ineligible. To the ordinary person in the street,
and even to intellectuals in their everyday life, scepticism seems
strained and ridiculous. To the sceptic, the human tendency to a
belief in an external world and to inductive reason is something
which at best we cannot manage to do without, and at worst
involves the assertion of falsehoods. Neither side, then, is any-
thing but rude about the other.

Finally, there is an important point about the distinction
between dialogue and dialogue form. A dialogue can have as
many authors as it has voices. A dialogue form has one author
but many voices, none of which need be the author's voice. Now
it would be sufficient for the anti-rationalist point that Hume
should have offered a dialogue of the sort that he once mooted
to his friend Gilbert Elliot:

> I have often thought that the best way of composing a Dialogue,
> wou'd be for two Persons that are of different Opinions about any
> question of importance, to write alternatively the different Parts
> of the Discourse, & reply to each other. By this means, that vulgar
> Error would be avoided, of putting nothing but nonsense into the
> mouth of the Adversary; And at the same time, a Variety of
> Character & Genius being upheld, would make the whole look
> more natural & unaffected. Had it been my good Fortune to live
> near you, I shou'd have taken on me the Character of Philo, in
> the Dialogue, which you'll own I coud have supported naturally
> enough: And you would not have been averse to that of Cle-
> anthes.[11]

These remarks have, amazingly, been taken to show that one of
the voices in the *Dialogues* as we have them is Hume's voice.[12]
But the point I want to make by appeal to them is that a dialogue,
so conceived, would be as good for the anti-rationalist purpose
as a production in dialogue form. This being so, the balance

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[11] op. cit., p. 72.
[12] By E. C. Mossner; see his 'Hume and the Legacy of the *Dialogues*' in *David
Hume: Bicentenary Papers*, ed. G. P. Morice (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University
Press, 1977), 1–22, at p. 4.

interpretation offers only an incomplete explanation of the phenomenon before us — or, rather, the *Dialogues* one would expect if this were their message would surely be very different from the ones we have in fact got. How different, we have yet to see.

So much, then, for the balance interpretation. It seems to me to make the mistake of turning into the message what is properly only the medium — or, perhaps more precisely, to confuse means with end. There is however a second instantiation theory which escapes all the criticisms I have levelled at the first. Instead of supposing, in a non-Humean way, that we keep several voices on the go at once, it talks more suitably in terms of oscillating between different voices, each of which we adopt fully *pro tem* in a way that requires abandoning the other. The two voices between which we oscillate are, on the one hand, a sceptical voice and on the other a natural tendency to infer a designer. Again, the suggestion is that the *Dialogues*, especially in Part XII, instantiate this oscillation, and that by the way they instantiate it they promote the same oscillation in the reader.

This interpretation generates an account of Philo's recantation similar to the one we have seen before. It is an instance of oscillation. Philo was convinced by his arguments, which are indeed convincing, but finds he cannot escape admitting the force of the natural tendency to infer a designer. So he appears to recant — but once we have recognised the possibility of oscil-lation, apparent recantation is no longer what it seems. Hume does not recant in the *Treatise* when he lurches from the voice of reason to the voice of nature. Nor does Philo recant here. His eventual conclusion is that scepticism and faith go together: 'To be a philosophical sceptic is, in a man of letters, the first and most essential step towards being a sound, believing Christian'.[13] By the time we have got to this stage, Philo is sliding about all over the place. But his conclusion is not *about* oscillation; it is an *instance* of oscillation.

[13] *DNR*, p. 228.

The difference between this version and the balance interpretation is that there is here no attack on rationalist conceptions of consensus and self-consistency. Hume expects a consensus about the undeniability of scepticism, from all those whose theoretical bent survives long enough for them to follow his arguments properly. The sceptical voice is required by reason, therefore. But the non-sceptical voice which expresses our non-rational human nature is not optional, either. In fact, although more than one voice is required by our complex nature and one cannot speak with both at once, there is no voice that is merely permitted; all permitted voices are required, though we are not required to speak in any one of them all the time. There is therefore not much room left for tolerance. In fact, this second version of an instantiation theory has not much time for thoughts about autonomy and tolerance at all. Whichever position we are in, the other seems just wrong. In one position, scepticism is true, even though it is beyond us to act as if it were true. In the other, scepticism is ridiculous.

Now it will be already obvious that I think this version a great improvement on the last. Crucially, it has got right the point that Hume's official account in the *Treatise* is one about oscillation, and it shares two important virtues with the previous version. They both undermine any tendency to seek to identify Hume with one of the voices between which we are to oscillate (it is important that both voices be Hume's, without either having a claim to be exclusively Hume's voice), and they agree in rejecting any suggestion that the message of the *Dialogues* is identical with the conclusion best supported by the argument.[14] But I still think that this interpretation is wrong.

[14] The idea of Humean oscillation was perfectly familiar to his readers. George Horne, Bishop of Norwich (1730–92), wrote a reply to Adam Smith's Letter to William Strahan, which he entitled *A Letter to Adam Smith Esq. LL.D. on the Life, Death and Philosophy of his Friend David Hume Esq*. This reply, written anonymously and signed only 'By one of the people called Christians', and published in 1777 by the Clarendon Press, Oxford, is to be found bound together with Hume's autobiographical *My Own Life* and Smith's Letter to W. Strahan;

First, the analogy with the *Treatise* is less than perfect. The oscillation in the *Dialogues* is not between scepticism and natural belief, but rather between a natural tendency and complex rational counter-arguments. These counter-arguments are sceptical in one sense, indeed, which is that they involve the refusal to accept the thrust of the argument from design. But they are not sceptical in the official sense of being expressions of a genuinely philosophical scepticism. To be sure, that sort of general scepticism is mooted in Part I of the *Dialogues*. But from then on we get just ordinary counter-arguments against a supposedly *a posteriori* inference. So the oscillation we end up with will be merely between an acceptance of those arguments and the natural tendency to infer a designer when one contemplates the complexity of the world. The contrast between the rational acceptance and the natural tendency is not the same as the contrast between a philosophical scepticism and the belief in external objects.

Second, we should remember that just before his death Hume added a substantial passage to Part XII which suggests that the difference between the sceptic and the believer is 'merely verbal, or perhaps, if possible, still more incurably ambiguous'.[15] This added section is peculiar, partly because it adds to the perfectly sound point that 'there enters somewhat of a dispute of words into this controversy, more than is usually imagined'[16] the very weak suggestion that any dispute concerning a matter of degree is 'entirely verbal ... and admits not of any precise determi-

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there are copies in the Bodleian Library and in the Codrington Library at Oxford. In this piece Horne wrote against Hume: 'I could indeed wish, if it were possible, to have a scheme of thought, which would bear contemplating, at any time of the day; because, otherwise, a person must be at the expence of maintaining a brace of these metaphysical Hobby-Horses, one to mount in the morning, and the other in the afternoon' (pp. 7–8). Horne adds a precis of Hume's system in a Postscript, of which he says: 'In the Postscript to this Letter, a view will be taken of the HUMIAN system, taken exactly as it appeared to it's author at six o'clock in the evening' (p. 7, fn.).

[15] *DNR*, p. 218.
[16] *DNR*, p. 216.

nation'.[17] But whether it is coherent or not, this attempt to fudge the difference between the two sides seems ill-designed to serve the purposes imputed to Hume by either version of the instantiation interpretation, and we will have to look elsewhere for an explanation of it.

Third, the oscillation picture would lead us to expect much less fluidity in the voices between which we are supposed to oscillate. This is, after all, what we find in the *Treatise*. There the arguments for scepticism are as hard-edged as one could hope, and so are the rebuttals on behalf of natural belief. This explanation of the *Dialogues*, therefore, leaves entirely out of account the way in which the different voices shimmer. They have no determinate shape. This is an effect of the way in which the main protagonists are not presented as ideally consistent philosophical technicians, but as comparatively fallible. When they make a mistake, we are not always tempted to impute that mistake to Hume, but rather retain the freedom to suppose that he represents his character here as confused, as forgetful, as philosophically naive or whatever. And because of their human failings, in attempting to understand their point of view we are forced to treat them in the way in which we treat anyone else, and, what is more, to treat each one separately.[18] As I have said, they shimmer before us. We know roughly where they are, of course, but exactly what Philo's position is by the end of Part XII nobody could hope to say with any confidence. My own temptation, as we will see, is to take this fact to be very revealing. But on either

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[17] *DNR*, p. 219; this is in a note added by Hume at around the same time, and printed from the third edition onwards (until the recent edition by A. W. Colver and J. V. Price (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976)) as a footnote to the main text. How successive generations of editors supposed it coherent to have a footnote of this substantial sort in a dialogue which is largely direct rather than indirect speech escapes me. It would be the only place in the *Dialogues* where this sort of authorial voice appears, and its presence as a footnote would make a real difference to the interpretation I propose below.

[18] See the discussion of the merits of dialogue form in Shaftesbury's *Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times etc.* ed. J. M. Robertson, 2 vols (London: Grant Richards, 1900), 1, 132.

instantiation theory the shimmering is hard to explain. There is nothing like it in the *Treatise* and neither should there be, for maximum effect. As far as thoughts about oscillation will take us, then, we again see that there is a significant feature of the *Dialogues* which we have failed so far to explain.

A possible reply to this is that the shimmering, the fluidity of the voices we hear in the *Dialogues*, is a literary or aesthetic matter, a product of art, and therefore to be considered separately from philosophical or rational matters such as the balance of the argument or the exact relation between scepticism and natural belief. But this suggestion is exactly one of the things at issue in the *Dialogues*. Cleanthes distinguishes between instruction and entertainment, while Pamphilus, in the preface, seems to think that the two are, at least on occasion, more closely linked.[19] So one of the questions raised here is exactly whether one can distinguish between philosophy and literature in the way that the present suggestion tries to do. An interpretation should therefore avoid assuming as given one answer to that question.

The contrast between fixed voices, as in the *Treatise*, and the shimmering ones we find in the *Dialogues* is important.[20] It is not just that we are dealing here with a dialogue. Dialogue need not shimmer; the fixed/shimmering distinction cuts across that between monologue and dialogue. Consider the sort of dialogue which Hume describes in his letter to Gilbert Elliot; the voices in such a piece could, and one might say should, be as fixed as possible. But there is a significant feature that distinguishes what we might call formal dialogue, i.e. dialogue in which though there are many voices, they are all the work of one author, from other dialogue, in which, one way or another, there are many authors. This difference means that the shimmering we find in a formal dialogue, even if there be non-formal dialogues in which the voices shimmer (as well there may), still raises a quite different

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[19] *DNR*, pp. 137 (Cleanthes) and 128 (Pamphilus).
[20] We should note, by the way, that shimmering is no threat to rationalism; it in no way undermines an interest in establishing a rational consensus, or in preserving self-consistency.

problem. This problem is the identification of the author's voice. In the formal case the attempt at that identification has a further level of complexity. For in dealing with Hume's *Dialogues* we have to face the question, when we come across a mistake or incoherence in the position of a protagonist, whether that mistake is theirs or Hume's. As an example, consider the question whether the two protagonists be really disagreeing or not. If we decide that they are not, we have to decide further whether Hume has or has not failed to see this. It may be that though, as represented, they are not disagreeing, they are not represented as failing to disagree.

I will return to the contrast between the fixed and the shimmering shortly. My final point against the oscillation interpretation is that the model of oscillation does not suit Hume's anti-religious purpose. It would not be ideal, for that purpose, merely to have set something against religious belief so that that belief expresses only one side of our nature. And this is all the more worrying when we remember that in the *Treatise* the conclusion is that the natural tendency to belief in an external world and to inductive inference is left effectively dominant, with only the occasional interruption on the occasions when we retire to our study. *Mutatis mutandis*, what this means is that on the oscillation model, even among the studious few, the tendency to suppose a designer is left dominant, even though it is not the sole occupant of the field. This is surely not a very satisfactory conclusion for one who aims to defeat superstition.

So I find myself unable to accept the oscillation picture as a full account of what Hume is up to in the *Dialogues*. What I am left looking for is an interpretation which respects as far as possible the anti-religious purpose I ascribe to Hume, and which makes the fullest possible use of the shimmering that is so carefully written into the text.

We have come to the conclusion that Hume can neither establish his desired result by argument, nor by instantiation. What other method might there be? The only one that occurs to me is a causal attempt to induce the reader to enter a state in which

the natural tendency to suppose a designer is no longer possible even as one terminus of oscillation. This would resolve what must otherwise be a significant problem for Hume, which is that if the *Dialogues* were to be successful in destroying that tendency in its readers by rational means, this very fact would disprove Hume's naturalistic theory of belief, for his arguments and reasonings would have a force which he could not officially explain. The idea is that even though we cannot *persuade* a reader of the justice of our cause, we might cause the reader to abandon his original position by operating on him in some other way. The question becomes, then, what that way is and why the use of the dialogue form is an important part of it.

What aspect, then, of reading Hume's text, or what experience that we get from that reading, should destabilise the natural tendency to suppose a designer? I want to suggest that the way in which the characters and their voices shimmer before us prevents us from establishing any doctrine as the message carried by the text, and that this situation is intentional. The text is designed to be effectively uninterpretable. But the experience of trying to sort things out has an effect on the reader, that of rendering him voiceless in a way that undermines the natural tendency. This effect is quite different from that of reading powerful sceptical (with a small 's') arguments against the argument from design. The voicelessness stems from the way in which the *Dialogues* resist all attempts to establish their message.

One way of putting this point is to say that the message of the text is that there is no message. There is more than an appearance of self-contradiction in this suggestion, as we see if we ask ourselves whether that message could be true. But this appearance is undermined, I think, when we remember the distinction between two questions:

1   Which intellectual position is best supported by the arguments of the text?

2   What state did Hume hope to leave his readers in?

In a 'normal' text, the answer to the second of these would be given by the answer to the first. But the need to remain consistent

with the views of the *Treatise* shows us that the answer to the second question in the present case may not be any very direct consequence of our answer to the first. For instance, if the reader were to end up unable to believe anything on the subject of natural religion, that state might have been one intended by Hume without being promoted by the balance of argument. And something like this is what I suggest is going on here. Hume is seeking a way of undermining a natural tendency to suppose a designer. Argumentation is incapable of this task. But the effect that reading the text may have on the reader might be exactly to destabilise that tendency. If this is the intended effect, it is in another sense the message of the text, even if the text achieves that effect exactly by being effectively uninterpretable (and so messageless).

How is it, though, that the experience of reading a text should be thought capable of destabilising a natural tendency? Haven't we got here just a more complex example of an attempt on the part of reason to do something of which it is for principled reasons incapable? I think not. This criticism fails to take sufficiently into account the fact that what the present interpretation (call it the causal interpretation) is appealing to is the *experience* of reading the dialogues. That experience is one of instability. What Hume is intending, then, is that this experience should come to infect every part of the area — every mental state which is concerned with the topic. If it does this, it will infect the natural tendency to suppose a designer as much as any rational conclusions we might be tempted to form in the light of the available evidence. We should not suppose that the non-rational nature of the tendency will inoculate it against that infection. The contrast between 'natural belief' and rational belief will not serve for that purpose. Nor, I think, is there any other contrast that will do the job. For instance, the tendency to suppose a designer, though it has the force of a sensation, is that peculiar sort of Humean sensation which has a propositional content. So there is no propositional/non-propositional distinction at play here.

This is the first part of my interpretation of the *Dialogues.*

Before I pass on to the second part, I want to add a comment on the relation between my 'causal' interpretation and what I suppose is the most popular account of what is going on in Part XII. This account holds that the contribution of Part XII is to argue that the natural tendency to suppose a designer, though it undeniably exists, has in fact no determinate content. The argument is based on the suggestion that it is all a matter of degree, so that there is no fact of the matter anyway, and on the suggestion that none can deny that 'the cause or causes of order in the universe probably bear some remote analogy to human intelligence' (p. 227). Now I can certainly allow that this is *one* of the things going on in Part XII, so long as it is deemed entirely subservient to Hume's main aim of instilling a kind of voicelessness in his readers. But still the standard interpretation is in competition with mine; I am not in a position to allow that the two interpretations could be true together. I would effectively allow this if I accepted that Hume is trying to do two things here, first to deprive the natural tendency of determinate content, and second to put us into such a whirl that we cannot say or believe anything on the matter anyway. But I cannot accept this, since these two aims would be in tension with each other. To the extent that Hume achieved the first, he would make it the harder for him to achieve the second, since he would have offered a firm rational conclusion as the one recommended by reason. Not only that, but if this had been one of Hume's aims he could surely have done it far more cleanly and effectively than he actually does. And his official theory is that such an aim is doomed to failure anyway.

I now introduce the second element in my interpretation, which enriches the first considerably. I move towards this by rejecting a remark of David Simpson's: 'it is the model of the dialogue, and not just the specially constructed dialogues themselves, which I take to be of special importance in Hume's philosophical style'.[21] Simpson says this because he takes the important

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[21] op. cit., p. 81.

point to be the plurality of voices, in accordance with the balance interpretation. But it seems to me, by contrast, that the important question is whether there is a problem about authorship or not. One can have many voices, as I have already said, each with its own author; this is the style of the Gilbert Elliot letter. Hume's *Dialogues* are not like that. There are many voices, but none of them is the author's voice. This raises an insistent problem about authorship. The author is not constructed or even implied by the text, and we become therefore involved in a multi-layered attempt to reconstruct an author out of the materials available. The text does not create an author; the reader is obliged to do the work for himself. And this obligation cannot be avoided, for it derives from the need to determine the message carried by the *Dialogues*. If we find the message, we find the author. If the author always eludes us, so does the message. In this sense, message and author are effectively identical.

I want to add to this picture some considerations built on a throw-away remark of Simpson's.[22] The idea is that the experience of trying to reconstruct the message of the *Dialogues*, which is the same as that of trying to construct an author, comes to seem like that of trying to discover or reconstruct an Author of Nature. In each case the enquiry is causal; we are inferring from effect to cause. In each case, too, the reader comes to feel involved in an act that is more one of creation than of discovery. Sometimes, of course, such acts of creation are successful. But in the case of the *Dialogues* the text is too powerful for us. The way in which the characters shimmer before us prevents us from establishing any doctrine as the message of the text. This leaves open the possibility we have already seen — the message is just that there is no message — but this has now come to mean that the author is not to be found. And this gives us, by analogy, the message

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[22] 'This author, in fact, has vanished from his creation, and is unapparent in the same sense that God (for Hume in one of his voices) is unapparent in his own. He has left his reader with a problem, that of constructing causes out of effects, which is not so far from the problem Philo finds that God (if he exists) has left mankind.' op. cit., p. 89.

carried by the world: no God is to be found. To put it another way: the message of the *Dialogues* is that no author can be constructed; the message of the world is that no God can be constructed. The sense of 'message' at issue here, of course, is not the one that identifies the message of the text with some truth that the text can be interpreted as announcing. It is not quite that the world is telling us that there is no God, nor that the text is telling us that there is no author. Rather — and this is the essential theme common to the two elements of the causal interpretation — the text is actively working to destabilise the (existence of the) author, and by analogy the world is actively working to destabilise the suggestion that there is an Author. We are understanding thoughts about messages here in terms of the state that reading the text is intended to leave the reader in, and by analogy the state that examining the world should leave the examiner in.

But don't we all know that there is an author for the *Dialogues*, and by analogy shouldn't we admit straight off that there is an Author for the world, even if we cannot find either of them and have no idea what they are telling us in their respective creations? The quick reply to this is that allowing that two things are analogous in one respect does not license the insistence that they be analogous in other respects. But the strength of that reply will vary according to the context. I need, therefore, to point out relevant differences between the belief that there is an author for the text and the belief that there is an Author for the world.

The main difference is that the need for an author of the *Dialogues* is established inductively. Our belief that this text was authored is the result of inductive reasoning. But the *Dialogues* consist largely of an argument that the belief in an Author of nature is not established inductively. Hume has destroyed any *inference* to a designer by showing that there is no effective inductive argument to that conclusion. This means that the tendency to suppose a designer should not exist at all, if we conceive of it as inferential, for it is an inference that Hume cannot officially explain. That tendency, therefore, must properly be con-

ceived of as non-inferential, even though it involves a *movement* of thought from the recognition of the complexity or intricacy of the world to the belief in an Author. A confession is in order, therefore: at various points earlier in the present paper I have spoken of the tendency as a tendency to infer, and we now see that this was a mistake.

There are two further reasons for thinking of this tendency as non-inferential. Although it involves the acquisition of belief, that belief comes with the force of a sensation, which is something that inference can, for Hume, never achieve. Causal reasoning increases the liveliness of its conclusion, but never raises it to that of an impression. Second, the premise of our inductive conclusion that there is an author for the text is quite different from the starting point of our move to the belief that there is an Author, for the latter is some thought about complexity or intricacy, which, to say the least, the former need not be.

This being so, the fact that we know inductively that the text has an author should not be held to *support* a sense that the world is Authored, even if the analogy be admitted. What we see in the case of the text is that the ordinary inductive belief that there is an author is one which the text is actively working to destabilise. That belief is present, sure enough, but for quite other reasons, and the text is doing what it can to undermine it. In the case of the Author of nature, where we do not have the ordinary inductive belief to begin with, the analogy between text and world should therefore do nothing to support our sense of an Author, and its destabilising role will be left as the analogy's only contribution.

Overall, then, the causal interpretation holds that the *Dialogues* are effectively uninterpretable, that this fact is designed for a certain destabilising purpose, and that there is a significant analogy between the attempt to discover or create an author (or a message) and the attempt to discover an Author in nature. In this interpretation, thoughts about the analogy are, however, elaborations on the more basic idea that the shimmering which we find in the *Dialogues* is essential to Hume's purpose.

Of course Hume's method has its dangers. There is a degree of uninterpretability beyond which the proper attitude is that the text is just confused. There is, however, no specific and usable account of just where that point comes. One thing is clear, that the buzzing whirl of suggestions floated in the *Dialogues* would be quite intolerable in a single-voiced text. This is one way in which the dialogue form of the text is related to its message. But there is a more specific point to be made. In this form it is possible for the author to disappear. What we are given is various voices, none of which are Hume. The message, therefore, is not identical with the overall view of the dominant voice, but is some function of all the voices (or all the surviving voices, at least).

A text in which none of the voices is the author's voice is notably different from an ordinary philosophical tract such as the *Treatise*. It is also one, as we have already seen, in which there is almost no room for irony, as usually conceived. Since Hume never speaks in his own voice, there is no opportunity for him to engage in irony. Philo certainly indulges in irony in his treatment of Demea. He is represented as ironical, but the representation is not ironical. Indeed, the tendency to explain all deviations from a rational norm of consistency or from official Humean views as instances of irony in the text should be resisted. For me they are playing quite a different role, that of rendering the author irrecoverable. I reserve for the Appendix to this paper my reasons for thinking that the text of the *Dialogues* is so constructed as to resist any firm interpretation. Everyone admits, I think, that it is impossible to find one consistent and coherent message in the *Dialogues*. The only question is one's attitude to and explanation of this fact. See it as the prevalence of Humean irony, and you are all ready to leave out any bits that don't fit your favoured interpretation. Recognise that for there to be irony, there must be an authorial voice, and you have to award the vagaries and inconsistences a more central place in your interpretation.

The suggestion that Hume has vanished without trace behind the text of his *Dialogues* is remarkably similar to one that can

be found in Shaftesbury, who wrote, of the sort of dialogue we
have been discussing:

> An author who writes in his own person has the advantage of being
> who or what he pleases. He . . . suits himself on every occasion to
> the fancy of his reader, whom, as the fashion is nowadays, he
> constantly caresses and cajoles. All turns upon their two
> persons. . . . Though in the real memoirs of the ancients, even
> when they writ at any time concerning themselves, there was
> neither the *I* nor *thou* throughout the whole work. So that all this
> pretty amour and intercourse of caresses between the author and
> reader was thus entirely taken away.

> Much more is this the case in dialogue. For here the author is
> annihilated, and the reader, being no way applied to, stands for
> nobody. The self-interesting parties both vanish at once.[23]

It can be seen, however, that Shaftesbury's point is not quite
the same as mine, despite the fact that I have stolen one of his
phrases for my title.[24] His point is quite general, whereas mine
depends on the particular features of Hume's *Dialogues* for its
force. Shaftesbury suggests only that in formal dialogue the
author disappears, and the protagonists take up the whole stage.
This does not mean that the author must be irrecoverable. It only
means that such a thing is possible, with suitable art. So if we
find that it does indeed happen this time, that will depend on the
addition of art to form — on the twists and turns that Hume
gives the course of his dialogue. Other dialogues may be different.

To sum up, thoughts about shimmering offer an account of
how Hume can solve the problem of how to make a dent in our
natural religious inclinations without appealing to the results of

[23] Shaftesbury, *Characteristics*, loc. cit., 1, 132.
[24] Bruce Redford has pointed out to me that the title does not precisely fit the
main theme of this paper, for the reason that according to me the author is
being more hidden and destabilised than annihilated. A more apt title would
have spoken of Hume (and, by analogy, of God) as *auctor absconditus*. He is
right about this, although the context shows that when Shaftesbury speaks of
annihilation he conceives of this as quite compatible with the possibility
of reconstitution. But I have been unable to resist retaining the original title,
largely because it is so redolent of recent trends in literary theory.

rational argument. Within this account, there is an easy explanation of Philo's supposed recantation. It puts in centre stage the standard Humean contrast between reason and feeling. Thereafter, if the picture I am offering is anything like correct, it is important that the main protagonist should not occupy an easily interpretable position.

In general, once one bears in mind Hume's official views about the relation between the effects of reasoning and the tenacity of what we have been calling 'natural' belief, one should look for an interpretation of the *Dialogues* which sees them as an attempt to undermine a natural tendency rather than as an attempt to set something up against that tendency. If this is right, neither the balance nor the oscillation interpretations will do, and we need to look elsewhere. The dialogue form is important in that search, but it is not the whole answer. The extra bit is the art with which Hume renders his own voice undiscoverable.[25]

I end with some more general reflections on the interpretation I have been suggesting and the answer it gives to the three questions with which I started.[26] These reflections try to place the *Dialogues* in their literary context as much as in their philosophical one; though that contrast is itself suspect, if my interpretation is anywhere near correct. My first point is that the *Dialogues* represent what is probably the moment at which the metaphor of the world as text ceases to play a role in the self-consciousness of authors. What I have here called a metaphor was originally, of course, not that at all, but a supposedly literal description of the world and its relationship to its creator. The life of that description ended with the onrush of Enlightenment science, though in my heretical opinion Berkeley did his best to revive it; thereafter it only existed as metaphor. Hume is playing his part in driving that metaphor to extinction, in a way that involves using it against itself.

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[25] A quick and easy way of contrasting the four interpretations that I have been dealing with is to say that the first finds one voice in the *Dialogues*, the second many, the third two and the last, in a way, none.

[26] Here I am particularly indebted to Bruce Redford.

Second, we should not forget that Hume's choice of the dia-
logue form inevitably raised expectations in the minds of contem-
porary readers. As I mentioned earlier, that form was not unusual
in the time. But Hume's use of it was unusual; he made use of
the expectations that his readers would have to make his point.
The standard expectation would be that there should be different
characters on the stage, behind whose views they could ultimately
discern the author, in a way which required the author's views
to be identical with the views which emerged dominant in the
discussion. I have suggested that all these expectations fail in
the case of the *Dialogues*. But we should remember that the
Dialogues depend for their effect on the presence of those expec-
tations in the reader. It is just because the reader expects to be
able to find the author that the failure to do so is so striking, and
so may be able to create the effect that I see Hume as striving
for. Hume is here playing with the reader, using the reader's
expectations against themselves.

In the *Dialogues*, art is serving reason and reason is serving
art.[27]

APPENDIX

In this appendix I argue for my claim that Part XII renders the
Dialogues uninterpretable.

It is hard enough to sort Demea out. Early on he announces
that 'the question is not concerning the *being* but the *nature* of
God'; later on he fails to see that in his adherence to an *a
priori* argument rather than an *a posteriori* one he has simply
abandoned this distinction altogether.[28] He also seems to want to
add an appeal to the misery of the human condition to the *a
priori* argument, in a way that is hopelessly opaque. I just don't

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[27] Many thanks to Derek Parfit and to David Simpson; to those who joined in
the discussion at the British Academy meeting; and especially to Bruce Redford
for advice and constructive criticism.
[28] *DNR*, pp. 141 and 188–9.

see how to put together any kind of use of the *a priori* argument
with the suggestion that:

> each man feels, in a manner, the truth of religion within his own
> breast; and from a consciousness of his imbecility and misery,
> rather than from any reasoning, is led to seek protection from
> that Being, on whom he and all nature is dependent.[29]

At this point Philo, under the guise of disagreeing with this claim
of Demea's, eventually announces that:

> When religion stood entirely upon temper and education, it was
> thought proper to encourage melancholy; as indeed, mankind
> never have recourse to superior powers so readily as in that dispo-
> sition. But as men have now learned to form principles, and to
> draw consequences, it is necessary to change the batteries, and
> to make use of such arguments as will endure, at least some
> scrutiny and examination.[30]

It is at this point that Demea stomps off in dudgeon. But in fact
he has no reason to do so. Quite apart from the fact that the line
Philo has been pursuing is compatible with his earlier suggestion
(quoted above), the only other overt cause of his displeasure is
a misunderstanding of Philo's argument that, for anthropomor-
phists like Cleanthes, any vice in the world has eventually to be
laid at the door of the first cause. Demea takes that argument as
showing that the existence of moral evil is actually to be ascribed
to the first cause, i.e. to the deity; whereas Philo is only saying
that Cleanthes is committed to that ascription.

These, however, are minor matters. If the *Dialogues* are genu-
inely uninterpretable, this fact will hinge on what goes on in Part
XII. Philo, having pursued the argument from design to the death,
seems then to announce that he is convinced by something like
it. To say the least, this is very difficult to cope with. We are not
to suppose that Philo has simply abandoned his previous
onslaught as due merely to his 'love of singular arguments';[31] if

[29] *DNR*, p. 193.
[30] *DNR*, p. 213.
[31] *DNR*, p. 214.

he had done so, he would have lost all credibility and the *Dialogues* would be destroyed.

There are two ways out here. The first is to say that Philo's apparent recantation is not serious, but ironical. This is strongly urged by Isabel Rivers, who claims that it is nothing but a joke. She points out that the peculiar long passage at the beginning of XII about Galen's views of human anatomy is in fact merely another instance of a standard trope of religious argument, of which the best example is in John Wilkins' *The Principles and Duties of Natural Religion*.[32] She allows that any irony or playfulness with which Hume is reworking this material need not in itself deprive it of the point that it would appear to be playing at this stage in the *Dialogues*. But she suggests that nonetheless it unsettles the passage as something to be taken straightforwardly, and urges a further reason for taking it as a joke. This is that the Galen material is normally supported by further argumentation which one would expect to be present in the *Dialogues* if Hume were really wanting to make serious use of it, and which is notable for its absence. This point, however, does not seem to me to be relevant to the point at issue, once one sees that the supposed recantation amounts not to the recognition of a stronger *argument* on the other side, but the recognition that there is something here to be put against *any* result of reason, namely a feeling or natural propensity. Given that recognition, it would not be in point to continue with argumentation, since Hume has already made it clear that as far as argument goes the argument from design is a loser. The feeling or propensity that is now to be set up against that result does not need the support of argument to play the role which Hume is here assigning to it.

Equally, the fact that the associated example is standard, and clearly intended to be recognised as such, does nothing to undermine the point that Hume is here using it to make. It is

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[32] Originally published in 1675. Rivers' argument is in her 'Galen's Muscles': Wilkins, Hume, and the Educational Use of the Argument from Design', *The Historical Journal* 36:3 (1993), 577–97. The relevant passage from Wilkins is quoted in this article, together with the original from Galen.

even a part of that point, since it *should* be recognised by the really careful reader that Hume's use of the standard point is not standard. The reader's expectations, aroused by the use of the example, are used to point up more sharply how different the point that Hume is using the example to make (which is about a natural propensity) is from the one it is normally used for.

The second response to the recantation, the one I have been urging, takes it as serious, but not as a rejection of earlier argumentation. Philo allows his own arguments to stand, but accepts the justice of Cleanthes' earlier expostulation:

> tell me, from your own feeling, if the idea of a contriver does not immediately flow in upon you with a force like that of sensation?[33]

In so doing, he puts something up against argumentation, namely the natural propensity of which I have been making so much. This means that the supposed recantation is not exactly that, but something less alarming. Whether the *Dialogues* as a whole have a coherent message will now depend on what happens in the remainder of Part XII. So what is the position that Philo eventually ends up with? Part XII is running several contrasts at once. The distinctions which are in play are those between natural and revealed religion, between vulgar superstition and philosophical or rational religion, between philosophical religion and faith, and between scepticism and faith. Philosophical religion is informed by the sense that reason can only take us so far. Philo comments:

> But believe, me, Cleanthes, 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. A person, seasoned with a just sense of the imperfections of natural reason, will fly to revealed truth with the greatest avidity.[34]

Philosophical religion, then, which is sometimes called true

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[33] *DNR*, p. 154.
[34] *DNR*, p. 227.

or genuine religion, takes us some of the way to a full belief in
a Christian God, with the rest of the job being done by something
else. The first question is what else. One answer, most consistent
with Philo's earlier remarks about faith, takes faith as the revealer
of the extra truth. But the normal way to take the notion of
revealed truth in the quotation above would be to take it as
referring to the revelation of truth in the Gospels. If so, it is
revealed religion that supplements philosophical religion.

The question I want to press here concerns the nature of what
is being called 'philosophical religion'. It seems to me that it has
too many natures, i.e. inconsistent accounts are given of it, and
as a result all the contrasts I have listed above are unstable.
Given the earlier discussion in Part XII, we would expect the
notion of 'philosophical religion' to include the results which at
this stage are argeed between Philo and Cleanthes. But those
results are hard to pin down. There are three candidates:

1 The sense that the cause or causes of order in the universe
probably bear some remote analogy to human intelligence.

2 the much beefier claims that there is an infinite and mor-
ally perfect creator, expressed by Cleanthes and described as
'genuine theism' (p. 224), and accepted by Philo when he says
that 'with regard to the true philosopher, they are more than
appearances'.

3 the awkward claim that what is at issue between theist
and atheist is 'merely verbal'.

No attempt is made to help us make this choice. But how we
make it matters very much to how we understand the other
contrasts. That between natural and revealed religion is depen-
dent on the first, since philosophical religion is now covering all
the ground admitted to natural religion. Philosophical religion is
at one point distinguished from scepticism, when it is held that
the deity will give all his approval to philosophical theists rather
to the peddlers of vulgar superstition, and extend tolerance and
forgiveness to the sceptics who are oppressed by the inadequacy
of their own faculties. But at another point it seems to be identical
with scepticism, when we are told that scepticism is the 'first and

most essential step towards being a sound, believing Christian'. Finally the accounts of how philosophical religion is related to faith, and of how scepticism is related to faith, will be obviously affected by how much conceptual room the notion of philosophical religion is taken to cover.

What I take all this to mean is that the crucial notion of philosophical or true religion, which is intended to be that on which Philo and Cleanthes have come to agree, is in fact left in such a state that no one notion could play all the roles assigned to it. It has got to be so minimal that it can somehow be the content of a natural propensity, but at the same time it has to be only verbally distinguishable from its opposite. It also has to be something which the deity could approve of us for accepting. How could something only verbally distinguishable from its opposite be a ground for such approval? I forbear to make the obvious point that nothing in Part XII justifies Cleanthes' beefier claims; they seem to be merely another instance of Cleanthes having paid no attention whatever to the mauling he received in Parts I-VII.[35] The only awkward thing is that Philo endorses them. I can make no sense of this, which is flatly at odds with the initial hypothesis that his recantation is not what it seems.

This should not be taken to mean that Cleanthes' position makes more sense than Philo's. We should remember that from the beginning of Part XII onwards he associates himself with Philo, so that Philo effectively speaks for them both. There is only one point on which they disagree, which is the moral importance of the doctrine of a future state. For the rest, the point that the position the pair eventually reach in Part XII is inherently unstable is as good for the one as for the other.

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[35] See also *DNR*, p. 216.