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## PIETY WITHOUT METAPHYSICS

### The Moral Pedagogy of Hume's *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*

1. Introduction: Giving Hume's *Dialogues* their due – 2. Three unstable interpretations of the *Dialogues*; 2.1 The first interpretation; 2.2 The instability of the first interpretation; 2.3 The second interpretation; 2.4 The instability of the second interpretation; 2.5 Toward a third interpretation; 2.6 A (comic) Thomist interpretation? – 3. A stable interpretation, by analogy with the *Summa* – 4. Hume vs. Aquinas on piety and religion – 5. Conclusion: piety without metaphysics and the failure of Hume's *Dialogues*

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#### 1. Introduction: Giving Hume's *Dialogues* their due

Hume's *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* are often taken to be a reflection on philosophical knowledge of God. But what can we make of what is, supposedly, a detailed, carefully crafted critique of natural theology, from someone famous for his general critique of knowledge in general? The *Dialogues*' Philo, a skeptical character sometimes voicing Humean views, describes philosophy as the rationalization of practical necessity, never reaching beyond experience, whose exactitude leads to «greater stability, if not greater truth»<sup>1</sup>. Reason might not achieve knowledge, but it can be directed toward a functional end. Whether or not Hume would embrace as a compliment Anscombe's famous charge that he was «a mere – brilliant – sophist»<sup>2</sup>, it seems reasonable to assume that Hume intended this work not primarily to display abstract argument (even negatively), but to achieve some pedagogical purpose.

<sup>1</sup> D. HUME, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, Part I, paragraph 8 [hereafter cited I.8, with quotations and paragraph numberings according to the edition D. COLEMAN (ed.), Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2007]. Cf. the remarks of Cleanthes at I.15, suggesting that skeptics are not philosophers.

<sup>2</sup> G.E.M ANSCOMBE, *Modern Moral Philosophy*, "Philosophy" XXXIII, 124, (1958), 3.

A reading of Hume's *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* thus needs to be open to the possibility – and, as I will argue, a close reading requires us to notice – that the work is not designed primarily to address knowledge of God, but something else more practical, an attitude or disposition apart from knowledge. Especially given Hume's particular care in crafting the *Dialogues*, we can only do justice to the work if we pay close attention to the demands it places on the reader.

The first part of the paper will highlight some of the hermeneutic challenges of the *Dialogues*. Rather than review competing scholarly interpretations, I will offer an idealized, simplified progression of interpretations, such as would, I think, occur naturally to readers who come to Hume without any specific scholarly background. Each interpretation is inviting and initially plausible but, upon closer inspection, inherently unstable. (For readers not familiar with the text, reviewing a series of tempting but unsustainable interpretations also serves to summarize the *Dialogues* and some of its key moves and peculiarities; for readers more familiar with the *Dialogues* and scholarly debates about them, this procedure indirectly serves to make sense of some of the known hermeneutic challenges and address some of the controversies of the text.)

After considering three progressively more sophisticated but still unstable interpretations, we will see that the last and most stable of these interpretations invites a comparison with St. Thomas's *Summa Theologiae*, although perhaps not in ways that would initially be expected. The second part of the paper will explore this comparison and the fourth (and most stable) interpretation it suggests, in order better to characterize the strengths and weaknesses of the *Dialogues* and foster a greater appreciation of what it tries to accomplish in and for the reader, whether it succeeds, and why or why not.

## 2. Three Unstable Interpretations of the *Dialogues*

New readers of Hume's *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* often find it disorienting. Even bringing along some general knowledge of Hume and of the history of philosophy, it is challenging to discern the purpose and achievement of the text. A coherent interpretation is difficult to pin down: the *Dialogues* seem designed to invite one interpretation, only to challenge that interpretation on closer inspection. Thus a reader might be drawn to

three natural interpretations which I will describe in a logical progression, although a given reader of the *Dialogues* might experience these interpretations competing with each other simultaneously.

## 2.1 The First Interpretation

In the first, let us call naïve, reading, the text is what it appears to be: a philosophical dialogue about rational basis for belief in God. There are three main characters, representing three different positions, and Hume puts them in conversation with each other to test their views; by the end, there is an apparent victor, who presumably represents Hume's view.

The surface structure of the text and key parts of dialogue strongly invite this interpretation. After a framing conversation between two (otherwise apparently extraneous) characters about the appropriate uses of the dialogue form, three main characters are introduced and they spend the rest of the dialogue arguing about how and what we can know about God. Part I begins with the characters laying out their general perspectives. Demea, who had been introduced as representing “rigid and inflexible orthodoxy”, describes the role of philosophy in theological education, to emphasize intellectual humility. Philo, who had been introduced as representing “careless skepticism”, appears to agree, only wanting to emphasize even more than Demea the limits of reason. This prompts Cleanthes, who had been introduced as having an “accurate philosophical turn”, to defend the power of reason, leading to a general discussion of skepticism, and then, in Part II, Cleanthes offers a “design” argument as an *a posteriori* argument that establishes knowledge of the existence and nature of God.

The bulk of the *Dialogues* consists in the two other characters criticizing this argument, through Part VIII. Then, in Part IX, Demea, offers an *a priori* argument for the existence of God, which is criticized more quickly by both Cleanthes and Philo. Parts X and XI take up the problem of evil, and then in Part XII there appears to be a friendly resolution between Philo and Cleanthes. The opening frame is closed with a verdict that Cleanthes is the victor.

Taken at face value, then, it appears that the dialogue allows for a very limited natural theology, in which some inference to the existence of God is warranted, so long as it is duly chastened by skepticism to withhold strong claims about the nature of God.

## 2.2 The instability of the first interpretation

It does not take much to discern that this interpretation is unstable. It may appear unstable even before getting to Part I, for the prefatory framing conversation plants doubts about the reliability of the characterizations of Philo, Cleanthes, and Demea. The character giving those characterizations is Pamphilus, about whom we know very little except that he is a pupil of, and like an “adopted son” to, Cleanthes, since Cleanthes was an “intimate friend” of Pamphilus’ father. Why would Hume invent those details except to undermine the objectivity of Pamphilus as the umpire for the entire conversation?

Pamphilus is not a main figure in the dialogues themselves, but we are trusting him as narrator retelling the conversation, and he serves as a framing character not only at the beginning, where the characterizations (“rigid and inflexible orthodoxy”, “careless skepticism”, “accurate philosophical turn”) are his; he also renders the final judgment. His natural sympathy for Cleanthes should weaken his claim that Cleanthes is the victor, but so does the way he phrases that claim: “upon serious review of the whole, I cannot but think, that Philo’s principles are more probable than Demea’s; but that those of Cleanthes approach still nearer the truth”. Without realizing it, with this evaluation Pamphilus has rejected the confident terms of Cleanthes and adopted the skepticism of Philo: one thinker’s views are “more probable” than the other, and the winner hasn’t demonstrated a conclusion, but has only “approached still nearer the truth”. Philo (or Hume) could not have asked for a more fitting embodiment of the rules of skeptical evaluation.

Other doubts are planted early on about how seriously to take the theological arguments of the dialogues. In the prefatory epistle, Pamphilus acknowledges the awkwardness and limits of the dialogue form, but says that it is appropriate for matters that are *obvious but important* (to give new life to things that we may take for granted), as well as for matters that are *obscure and uncertain* (since no definitive treatment can be given). These sets of qualities seem in tension. Which is relevant to “natural religion”? Both: according to Pamphilus, the being of God is obvious and important, but the nature of God is obscure and uncertain. Even here, Pamphilus is taking a position closer to Philo’s than to Cleanthes’ – the latter, for much of the dialogue, defends an argument meant to reveal something of God’s nature; the former is willing to acknowledge that God’s existence is “obvious” so long

as it is construed as an inescapable opinion, and not the conclusion of theoretical reasoning.

This brings us to the slipperiness of Philo, however – another feature of the *Dialogues* that makes a stable interpretation difficult. Throughout the work, Philo seems to play the other characters off each other, strategically aligning with one in order to criticize another, but then changing alliances.

In Part I, Philo objects to Demea teaching theology so late in a child's education, and gets Cleanthes to argue about the philosophical significance of skepticism. In Part II, Philo allies with Demea to provoke Cleanthes to argue for God's nature; for much of what follows, this sets Demea against Cleanthes, until, in Part IX, Demea attempts to defend an *a priori* argument, which Philo attacks with Cleanthes. By Part XI, Demea is frustrated by the changing alliances, and Cleanthes too feels played (11.14 -15); Demea, feeling more betrayed, extracts himself, while Cleanthes, who has all along been more friendly with and understanding of Philo, had an inkling about the sceptic's strategy, making him susceptible to a strategic reconciliation with Philo in Part XII. Even in this reconciliation, Philo is slippery. He acts most pious and concerned to promote religion, and appears to accept a limited version of the design argument<sup>3</sup> – but it is only as a belief, impressing itself with necessity on the mind, not as an argument that conforms to the canons of sound reasoning<sup>4</sup>.

This conviction about the nature of belief in God leads to something even more surprising, the claim from Philo that the dispute between theism and atheism is only a semantic disagreement: atheists and theists really believe the same thing, but their different dispositions lead them to give it different names<sup>5</sup>! This position, voiced by Philo in attempt to find common ground with Cleanthes, is reinforced in the strongest way possible, with one of Hume's few footnotes:

<sup>3</sup> Given Philo's remarks about how unavoidable it is to believe in a first cause of the universe, at II.3, his so-called "reversal" in Part XII is not so dramatic as some commentators treat it.

<sup>4</sup> Alfred Freddoso describes Philo as vacillating between optimistic pragmatism and pessimistic Nietzscheanism; A.J. FREDDOSO, *Fides et Ratio: A 'Radical' Vision of Intellectual Inquiry*, in A. RAMOS – M.I. GEORGE (eds.), *Faith, Scholarship and Culture in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, Catholic University of America Press, Washington, DC 2002, 28.

<sup>5</sup> Here too, we should not be surprised that this is offered as conciliatory to Cleanthes, given that Cleanthes had previously equated mysticism with atheism, at IV.3.

It seems evident that the dispute between the skeptics and dogmatists is entirely verbal, or, at least, regards only degrees of doubt and assurance which we ought to indulge with regard to all reasoning: and such disputes are commonly, at the bottom, verbal and admit not of any precise determination. No philosophical dogmatist denies that there are difficulties both with regard to the senses and to all science, and that these difficulties are, in a regular, logical method, absolutely insolvable. No skeptic denies that we lie under an absolute necessity, not withstanding these difficulties, of thinking, and believing, and reasoning, with regard to all kinds of subjects, and even of frequently assenting with confidence and security. The only difference, then, between these sects, if they merit that name, is that the skeptic, from habit, caprice, or inclination, insists most on the difficulties; the dogmatist, for like reasons, on the necessity (XII.8, footnote).

Skeptics and dogmatists, atheists and theists, these are different names for the same view!

The inescapable interpretive question of “who speaks for Hume” in the *Dialogues* arises from the instabilities of this naïve interpretation, and those instabilities lead to the most common answer: that it is Philo, not Cleanthes, who mostly or entirely represents Hume’s position on what reason can know about God. Philo’s answer is: not very much, and even what we “know” is not the result of reasoning so much as of inescapable impressions.

### 2.3 The second interpretation

By exploring the instabilities of the naïve interpretation, we have thus come to a more advanced interpretation, according to which the *Dialogues* still constitute a philosophical examination of rational basis for belief in God, but this time they are a thinly disguised skeptic’s attack on natural theology. This reading has the advantage of bringing the *Dialogues* closer to what we would *expect* from Hume – it is skeptical about knowledge of causality, uses the *a priori* and *a posteriori* distinction to undermine any possibility of gaining necessary knowledge about the world, and it treats beliefs about God as a matter of impressions rather than intellectual apprehension. This is the Hume that may be an “atheist” but resists even that title as implying the same kind of dogmatism that he rejects in Christian or other theist forms. On this reading, Hume has staged an argument about natural theology and

Philo is the victor, successfully persuading Cleanthes (without Cleanthes or his student Pamphilus even realizing it!) that the skeptical position is the only tenable one. Philo's slipperiness isn't inconsistency so much as rhetorical mastery, pacing his interlocutors, playing them off each other, even (in the political terminology of today) "trolling" them. This makes sense as the safest way for Hume to be both persuasive and dangerously subversive, thoroughly undermining natural theology, while preserving some plausible deniability through appearing to offer it modest support.

#### 2.4 The instability of the second interpretation

But this also is an unstable interpretation. For skepticism to emerge victorious in the realm of natural theology, Hume needs it to appear as if the different characters make a variety of worthy arguments, representing the diversity of available views about knowledge of God. And yet the three main characters are remarkably similar philosophically. They are each some kind of empiricist. They all accept a simplistic distinction between *a priori* and *a posteriori* reasoning. The differences between the supposed non-skeptics, Demea and Cleanthes, are characterized in ways that only an empiricist skeptic should accept: Demea, supposedly the dogmatist and rationalist, emphasizes the uncertainty of every science (I.2); and Cleanthes, supposedly confident in his *a posteriori* reasoning, clearly frames his argument in terms of weak analogical reasoning (II.5), describes reason as a species of experience (II.25), and treats convincing arguments not as rational proofs or demonstrations but as articulations of strong feelings or forceful impressions (III.7).

If the general philosophical dispositions of the characters are not representative of actual philosophical diversity, even more glaring is that the particular arguments they advance are not recognizable as representative of the philosophical tradition of natural theology Hume is supposedly attacking. While superficially familiar, the two main arguments that Hume contrives, one from Cleanthes and one from Demea, are upon closer inspection very unlike any that were defended in the longer Christian tradition of natural theology<sup>6</sup>. This is deeply problematic for this second interpretation of the

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<sup>6</sup> It is well-known that the *Dialogues*' characters present arguments derived from some of Hume's near contemporaries, but this makes it all the more conspicuous that they do *not* present views from the longer tradition of natural theology.

*Dialogues*, according to which rigorous thinkers can detect the subversively skeptical, esoteric message, while more naïve thinkers can't penetrate the protective exoteric layer of unthreatening conventionality. The subversively skeptical esoteric analysis, whereby natural theology is supposedly defeated, just doesn't stand up to philosophical criticism.

Let us take Cleanthes' argument first. It begins conventionally enough, by inviting us to notice features of the natural world, suggesting organization or design: «Look round the world: contemplate the whole and every part of it: you will find it to be nothing but one great machine, subdivided into an infinite number of lesser machines, which again admit of subdivisions to a degree beyond what human senses and faculties can trace and explain. All these various machines, and even their most minute parts, are adjusted to each other with an accuracy which ravishes into admiration all men who have ever contemplated them». Perhaps we might think the premise is too strong – all we need to notice is *some* regularity or intention in nature, not a perfect, machine-like hierarchy in all the universe. But then Cleanthes says this: «The curious adapting of means to ends, throughout all nature, resembles exactly, though it much exceeds, the productions of human contrivance; of human designs, thought, wisdom, and intelligence». What does it mean to say something *exactly resembles*, but is *different in degree*? This sounds like Hume planting an inconsistency right in the heart of the argument. Further: why is Cleanthes here insisting on the connection to *human* intelligence, instead of starting with a more general notion that intention implies action for an end? We see the significance as he continues: «Since, therefore, the effects resemble each other, we are led to infer, by all the rules of analogy, that the causes also resemble; and that the Author of Nature is somewhat similar to the mind of man, though possessed of much larger faculties, proportioned to the grandeur of the work which he has executed». So the claim is not that order in nature directly points to a designer, but that the analogy between nature and a machine points to an analogy between the cause of nature and human intelligence. The emphasis must be on experience, and we know that Hume (and Cleanthes) do not believe that knowledge of causality is possible, but is only inferred by the assumption of analogy – between like things, between past and future. Thus, Cleanthes claims – but we know Hume cannot possibly believe – that, «By this argument *a posteriori*, and by this argument alone, do we prove at once the existence of a Deity, and his similarity to human mind and intelligence» (II.5).



Compare this to, say, Aquinas's fifth way. There, a key premise is that «whatever lacks intelligence cannot move towards an end, unless it be directed by some being endowed with knowledge and intelligence; as the arrow is shot to its mark by the archer» (*ST* I.2.3 corp.). Is Aquinas here making an analogy between an arrow and the world, on the basis of which he infers an analogy between the archer and God? No, he is invoking a principle – that intelligence is the power to order and direct things to an end – and then illustrating it with an example – the archer and the arrow. (At II.14, Philo explicitly denies that this principle can be known with certainty, only probabilistically inferred from experience; Cleanthes concurs at II.15-16.) Does Aquinas have to say of the intelligent being that is the cause of the universe that it somewhat resembles, though is vastly different from, human intelligence? No, he can simply insist that the world is governed by intelligence. Would Aquinas allow that the intelligence of God is analogous to human intelligence? Certainly, but Hume is not merely claiming an analogy between God and human intelligence<sup>7</sup>, he is describing the reasoning to God as an inference based on analogical comparison – a weak inference, but the only one available if one denies the possibility of knowing a general principle about causality and intelligence.

It is not as if Hume is unaware of the violence he has done to the traditional structure of a design argument. A stronger, non-Humean notion of causality would draw on the Aristotelian idea of agency in terms of formal and final causality, but Hume has Philo criticize these Aristotelian notions explicitly: «It was usual with the Peripatetics, you know, Cleanthes, when the cause of any phenomenon was demanded, to have recourse to their faculties or occult qualities, and to say, for instance, that bread nourished by its nutritive faculty, and senna purged by its purgative». This isn't an argument so much as mockery; of course it is in a venerable line of mockery (which we can trace through Rabelais, Luther, Calvin, Bacon, Galileo, Hobbes, Molière and others), but it is mockery, not argument – and it is difficult to imagine that Hume did not recognize that what he was mocking was

<sup>7</sup> There is evidence that Hume believes he is joining a traditional conversation about analogical or proportional relationships between creatures and God, yet without understanding the original conceptual framework of that conversation. A similar critique with respect to another early modern dialogue about religion, George Berkeley's *Alciphron, or The Minute Philosopher*, can be found in J.P. HOCHSCHILD, *George Berkeley and a Theory of Analogy*, "Downside Review" CXXII (2004), 157-168.

the idea of causality central to the most robust and long-lasting tradition of natural theology<sup>8</sup>.

The lack of any traditional conception of causality is all the more apparent in the long consideration of “alternative cosmogonies” that extends the critique of Cleanthes’ design argument (Parts V-VIII). Reaching a kind of crescendo of absurdity, Philo argues that the analogy between the world and a machine is not as strong as the analogy between the world and an animal, in which case it could just be birthed by an unintelligent cause rather than designed by an intelligent God. «Why an orderly system may not be spun from the belly as well as from the brain, it will be difficult for [Cleanthes] to give a satisfactory reason» (VII.17). Philo even tries to attribute this view to Plato (VII.16). An intelligent reader cannot fail to notice that this is far from a Platonic notion, and that the belly hypothesis is itself far from a “satisfactory reason” for the existence of the universe. Philo has not proposed an origin of the universe, only pushed back the question of its causal origin, like someone explaining life on earth by positing life elsewhere in the universe.

So Cleanthes’ design argument is peculiar, and the critiques of it are weak; and both the argument and the critiques expose the lack of serious consideration of causality. But Demea’s argument (at IX.3) is even more peculiar, and the argument and the responses to it further expose a lack of serious consideration of traditional arguments about God’s existence. Crucially framed as an *a priori* argument (so that it can be more certain than Cleanthes’ *a posteriori* argument), Demea claims it is “the common one”. He sets it up first as a choice between a first cause and an infinite chain of causes:

Whatever exists must have a cause or reason of its existence; it being absolutely impossible for any thing to produce itself, or be the cause of its own existence. In mounting up, therefore, from effects to causes, we must either go on in tracing an infinite succession, without any ultimate cause at all; or must at last have recourse to some ultimate cause, that is necessarily existent.

After almost two-hundred words arguing against the possibility of an infinite succession, Demea concludes:

<sup>8</sup> We must acknowledge, as often noted, that Hume did not *study* the scholastic tradition, but he knew it *existed*, and knew its reputation for distinctive resources for natural theology, which he did not think it was important to engage in the *Dialogues*.

We must, therefore, have recourse to a necessarily existent Being, who carries the REASON of his existence in himself, and who cannot be supposed not to exist, without an express contradiction. There is, consequently, such a Being; that is, there is a Deity.

Much commentary on Demea's argument focuses on his reasoning against an infinite succession, which I have omitted here. Philo and Cleanthes make short work of Demea's argument, in large part by attacking that reasoning (imagining the possibility of an infinite succession of causes, or that the universe itself contains its own intrinsic «reason for existence»). I want to focus on the structure of the argument itself. It has the form of a fairly standard argument for a first cause: most things can't account for their own existence, we can't posit an infinite chain of contingent beings, so there must be a first, necessary being which accounts for the existence of everything else. As a result, many commentators treat Demea's argument as a standard "cosmological" argument, comparable perhaps to Aquinas's second way (proof of a first efficient cause) or third way (proof of a being existing by necessity).

But if we treat this as a cosmological argument, we find strange elements to Demea's phrasing: it is not enough to refer to «the ultimate cause» which *exists*, Demea must say further of it that it «is *necessarily* existent». Demea speaks of a «reason or cause» as if these are interchangeable terms. And of course the description of what this argument proves: «a *necessarily* existent Being, who *carries the REASON of his existence* in himself, and *who cannot be supposed not to exist, without an express contradiction*». All of these features remind us that Hume is not only hybridizing the second and third ways, he is also hybridizing *a posteriori* and *a priori* reasoning<sup>9</sup>. Demea is not intending to make a classical cosmological argument, despite the misleading language of reasoning from effects to causes; he is trying to make an *a priori* argument, whose force rests on *relations of ideas alone*: he wants to show that we must believe in a *necessarily existent* being because it would be a contradiction of reason (not of observable phenomena) to suppose that God doesn't exist. What Demea intends is less a cosmological argument than what we now call an "ontological" argument (such as is often attributed

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<sup>9</sup> The common historical observation that Hume had immediately in mind, as his object of criticism, Samuel Clarke's argument in *Demonstration of the Being and Attributes of God* (1705), does not undermine the philosophical observation that the argument does not fit, and strangely conflates, classical philosophical arguments.

to Anselm), or an explication of the *self-evidence* of God's existence (which is treated as something *other than* an argument for God's existence by Aquinas, in *ST* I.2.1)<sup>10</sup>.

Hume probably knew his Demea was hybridizing arguments<sup>11</sup>. Perhaps he thought that by combining elements of different arguments, he made his skeptical attacks more comprehensive. More likely, I think, is that Hume knew that his non-standard argument was weaker, and easier to attack, than actual arguments from the tradition of natural theology. To an uninformed reader, it might appear that natural theology has been defeated, but if, as I suppose, Hume knew he wasn't actually representing traditional arguments of natural theology, while claiming to do so, it is difficult to interpret the *Dialogues* as intended to convince its readers – especially its more intellectual, philosophically sophisticated readers – that reason cannot discover truths about God. It is too easy to detect the failures of Philo and Cleanthes.

After reading Cleanthes' and Demea's arguments, it becomes clear to any informed reader of the *Dialogues* – indeed, to any undergraduate who has been competently led through one or more of the five ways – that there is nothing approaching an Aristotelian or Thomistic voice in Hume's *Dialogues*. There is no serious consideration of Aristotle's argument for a first mover in *Physics*, or for pure actuality in the *Metaphysics*; there is no consideration of Plato's argument for an absolute exemplar of being or goodness; there is no consideration of an Augustinian argument from conscience. What appear, superficially, to correspond to two or three of Aquinas's five ways, turn out to do so in such highly adulterated and weakened form as to be different types of argument. If Hume meant his *Dialogues* as a skeptical overthrow of the tradition of natural theology, he used glaringly inadequate strawmen to do so.

We have seen that Hume isn't exactly ignorant of what he so systematically excluded. He knew – even if he did not understand what this meant – that Aristotelian efficient causality was essentially connected to formal

<sup>10</sup> Philo's first objection to Demea's argument is that it is not possible to prove any matter of fact, including the existence of something, by *a priori* reasoning. This is a centrally Humean position, and in this very limited respect, Philo's critique of Demea's argument is similar to Aquinas's position on the self-evidence of God's existence.

<sup>11</sup> Again granting that Demea's argument can be traced to Samuel Clarke, the fact that Hume tailors the argument for the rationalist Demea, thus exploiting the very conflation in Clarke's argument, suggests that Hume was aware of the conflation.

and final causality. He has Demea refer to the Platonists, and Plotinus by name. There are other references to ancient philosophy and Church Fathers, and Cleanthes offers a strangely inadequate history of the development of Christian attitudes towards reason (I.17)<sup>12</sup>. That Hume systematically excluded some voices, and that the voices that remain are somewhat ridiculous caricatures, whose apparent diversity hides a common empiricist epistemology, must have been something Hume knew his more perceptive readers would discern.

## 2.5 Toward a third interpretation

Where does this leave a careful, conscientious reader of the *Dialogues*? If Hume's "attacks" on natural theology are so obviously feeble, what were his intentions? This is related to a deeper question about Hume's critiques of religious belief. Other interpreters have noticed that Hume's criticism of religious belief leaves room for, or even indirectly supports, Christian faith. Charles De Koninck, for instance, believed that a close reading of David Hume's critique of miracles could help people appreciate the mystery of the Eucharist<sup>13</sup>. Noting that the second part of Hume's *Enquiry* (section 10) «is directed against the Catholic faith»<sup>14</sup>, De Koninck found it peculiar that Hume's attack on miracles should focus on the Catholic doctrine of the real presence. While some miracles are indeed appealed to as "evidence" for the faith, De Koninck finds Hume making a mistake by treating the Eucharist as a miracle by which the truth of Christian faith is proved. Hume mistakenly thinks it could count as a criticism of Eucharistic doctrine – as opposed to one of its defining features – that belief in real presence is contrary to the evidence of the senses. Supposedly trying to *show* that faith is

<sup>12</sup> Hume may have been at least passingly familiar with some epistemological views of Aquinas, even if he did not understand them. J.K. RYAN, *Aquinas and Hume on the Laws of Association*, "The New Scholasticism" XII (1938), 4, 366-377, takes up a suggestion from Coleridge that Hume was influenced by passages in Aquinas's commentary on Aristotle's *De Memoria et Remiscentia*, and finds it plausible that Hume's account of association drew on that work.

<sup>13</sup> C. DE KONINCK, *This Is a Hard Saying*, in R. MCINERNEY (ed. and transl.), *The Writings of Charles De Koninck*, University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame, IN 2009, vol. 2, 393-398. Originally published as *Cette parole est dure*, "Revue Dominicaine" L (1945), 1, 65-73.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 395.

unreasonable because unfounded on sense experience, Hume «chose the instance where the divine truth is most obviously beyond the knowledge of reason founded on the senses».

De Koninck was not sure whether Hume's mistake is "by ignorance or design". «Notice the shrewdness, conscious or unconscious, of Hume's procedure»<sup>15</sup>. Given the obviousness of this mistake, De Koninck cannot rule out that Hume's attack on the Eucharist is an intentional confusion, in which Hume might have himself been aware of – but hoping to distract from – how weak was the assumption of a connection between knowledge and sensation. Hume's skepticism, powerful as it was, was unable actually to undermine Christian faith, and it is not difficult to imagine that Hume was perfectly aware of this.

Frederick Crosson also found weakness in Hume's philosophical attacks on Christian faith<sup>16</sup>. Reviewing the argument of the *Dialogues* (and parallel arguments in the *Natural History of Religion*), Crosson found Hume arguing for a suspension of judgment, with Philo, speaking for Hume, showing great rhetorical adaptability but philosophical consistency in defending agnosticism. Philo (and through him Hume) wants to argue that Religion is unnatural both as a natural desire or inclination, and also as contrary to reason<sup>17</sup>. Like De Koninck, Crosson finds Hume being very intentional about what he excludes, not only about what he includes: even if Hume could bring an end to confidence in philosophy's ability to prove the existence of God, his critique of religious belief actually leaves untouched the theological virtue of faith<sup>18</sup>.

This idea that Hume's philosophical attacks on knowledge of God still leave room for Christian faith allows to stand the longtime consensus that Hume had some success in arguing against traditional natural theology. But what I've been trying to show is that Hume did not have success in arguing against traditional natural theology – indeed, that he assiduously avoided

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.* 396.

<sup>16</sup> F. CROSSON, *Hume's Unnatural Religion (Some Humean Footnotes)*, in ID. (ed.), *Ten Philosophical Essays in the Christian Tradition*, University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame, IN 2015, 160-77. Originally in J.C. MCCARTHY (ed.), *Modern Enlightenment and the Rule of Reason*, (Studies in Philosophy and the History of Philosophy 32), Catholic University of America Press, Washington, DC 1998, 168-86.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 174.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 175-177.

taking on traditional natural theology – in which case Hume’s attack on natural religion doesn’t only leave room for faith, it also leaves room for reason. Hume’s supposed attack on natural theology leaves actual natural theology, as historically practiced, perfectly intact. It is implausible to think that Hume even believed he undermined natural theology; his “attack” on it is at best rhetorically brilliant sleight-of-hand, perhaps enough to wear one down lesser minds, but hardly rising to an actual engagement with the tradition of natural theological argument.

## 2.6 A (Comic) Thomist Interpretation?

Thus, if we read Hume as attempting to weigh in on natural theology, it is not outrageous to posit what would sound like a Straussian-Thomist interpretation according to which, what Hume actually does is ironically highlight and implicitly defend traditional natural theology by its systematic absence from the *Dialogues*.

If this sounds far-fetched, it is essentially the interpretation Gene Fendt gave in analyzing the difficult Part IX in which Demea offers his supposedly *a priori* argument for the existence of God<sup>19</sup>. With some playfulness of his own, Fendt finds the presentation and critique of Demea’s argument a “comedy”, in which “the traditional arguments (of Aristotle or Aquinas) seem sawn and joined about as strangely by the characters of part nine as Peter Quince and his crew’s carpentering of the traditional tale of *Pyramus and Thisbe*” (in Shakespeare’s *Midsummer Night’s Dream*). Fendt draws out the analogy: a Thomistic argument from effects to causes is the *traditional Pyramus*. *Thisbe* would be an *a priori* argument for the self-evident existence of God. So Demea wears the *cloak* of *Thisbe* (claiming to give an *a priori* argument) while actually being a more traditional *Pyramus* (relying on more traditional Thomistic reasoning about a chain of cause and effect). Cleanthes is a *modern Pyramus*, that is, a simplified, and vulgarized, version of the Thomistic position – who does grasp the cloak of *Thisbe* (Aquinas’s view that the existence of something can’t be proven *a priori*) while missing the traditional Thomistic reasoning from effects to causes.

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<sup>19</sup> G. FENDT, *Number, Form, Content: Hume’s Dialogues, Number Nine*, “Philosophy” LXXXIV (2009), 393-412. In the body of the paper (397), Fendt playfully proposes an alternative, more descriptive title: «‘A (Would-be) Thomist Reads (the Argument of!) a Fideist in the Book of a (Probable?) Sceptic: The Comedy of Part Nine of Hume’s *Dialogues*’».

The threatening Lion (who bloodies the cloak of Thisbe, thus leading Pyramus to think Thisbe has been killed) would be the skeptic Philo – but also (following the Shakespeare analogy) is Cleanthes, the modern Pyramus, in another costume, whose own skeptical arguments against the need for causes would also be suicide for his own *a posteriori* arguments<sup>20</sup>! Fendt concludes,

We can see that section nine [of the *Dialogues*], to this point, has a certain comic *adequatio* to the traditional Thomist ideas about the proofs; Demea speaks of the glories of the *a priori* argument, which *never appears to us here* – exactly as Aquinas said it could not; Cleanthes attacks the idea of the *a priori* argument exactly as Aquinas attacked it, which attack touches Demea’s actual argument at no certain point.

Most importantly, Fendt finds, «Cleanthes then destroys his own earlier anthropomorphic arguments» by *failing* to notice the distinction between *eternally existing* and *necessarily existing*. Hume (the “*deus absconditus*”) *could have* known, by logic or historical literacy or both, that it is possible to imagine an eternal but contingent world (such as Aristotle believed in, and Aquinas thought philosophical plausible), and in fact Hume *did* know that – since his Demea articulates precisely that distinction!

In other words, Hume points to the *Thomistic distinction between the necessity in something that actually exists and the cause of its actual existence* – not only through the character of Demea, but also through the weak responses of Cleanthes (supposedly believing that there is no need to posit a cause of necessity if the world is eternal) and of Philo (suggesting that the world contains an intrinsic necessity akin to mathematical patterns). Thus, Fendt finds, Hume has in fact made evident the need for a cause for actuality, a preeminent Thomistic piece of natural theology, although, «Like Shakespeare, Hume has reached this sublime result in an utterly ridiculous manner»<sup>21</sup>.

<sup>20</sup> This is my very short summary of an analysis that Fendt develops carefully and cleverly in *ibid.*, 401-405.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 409. Separately, Fendt also offers a “comic” interpretation of Philo’s arguments about evil in Part XI, finding there an indirect exhibition of “divine wit”, in G. FENDT, *Empiricism or Dialectical Destruction Thereof? Reading Hume’s Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion on Evil*, “International Philosophical Quarterly” (forthcoming).



One could easily extend this (Straussian? ironic? comic?) interpretation of Part IX to Cleanthes' so-called design argument in Parts II-VIII, in which, as we have already seen, the actual Thomistic fifth way is systematically excluded, and the objections to design and the alternative cosmogonies only highlight the absence of an Aristotelian notion of causality. On this interpretation, Hume's *Dialogues*, far from undermining natural theology, only reduces *empiricist* natural theology to absurdity but clearly points the way back to a more traditional *Aristotelian* natural theology. As Fendt is aware, it is impossible to know if Hume intended this. But it is hard to believe that he did not at least have an inkling of it. In any case, if we insist on interpreting the *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* as a work of or about natural theology, and if we are reluctant to embrace Hume as a secret Thomist, then the work has to be judged an utter failure – either sloppily and superficially attempting to critique natural theology, or, if expertly crafted, then misleadingly ignoring and causing confusion about what is so obviously missing, namely traditional natural theology.

### 3. A stable interpretation, by analogy with the *Summa*

We have advanced through three interpretations of the *Dialogues*, progressively more sophisticated but not necessarily more satisfying: the naïve (in which it advances a chastened natural theology), the skeptical (in which it undermines all natural theology), and the comic-Thomist (in which, intentionally or not, its absurdities point to the need for a classical natural theology). What all of these interpretations have in common is that they treat the *Dialogues* as a work of or about natural theology. And so the way is clear for us to consider a fourth interpretation, according to which the *Dialogues* are really about something other than natural theology. This last interpretation can not only help make the most sense of Hume's *Dialogues*, but it should also come naturally to Thomists, who have their own experience with the misreading of challenging texts.

Let us recall some features of Hume's work that make it so difficult to read. It seems undoubtedly brilliant and carefully crafted. Given the circumstances of its writing and publishing, we expect to find in it the definitive form of its author's views on important matters. Yet the text is difficult to master, not least because of an uncommon, overtly dialectical structure which resists the more straightforward hermeneutic one could bring to a

proper treatise. Still, despite these challenges – and even perhaps contributing to them – in recent generations freshman undergraduates have been subjected to decontextualized selections, especially arguments about the existence of God, treated always in an introductory philosophy class, not a theology class.

This description of the *Dialogues* could apply as well to Aquinas's *Summa Theologiae*. And with that in mind, let us press the comparison further: although each text makes use of philosophical arguments, they are not primarily works of philosophy. And despite titles that imply *theological* motivation, it would be reasonable to describe the authors' intent more properly in terms of *moral pedagogy*, with the relationship between philosophy and theology serving a practical purpose for a particular historically situated community – a purpose that it may have actually failed to achieve even for its intended readership and is rarely appreciated by readers in the modern university.

Regarding the *Summa Theologiae*, these last points have been made forcefully by Mark Jordan, whose emphasis on the moral pedagogy of the *Summa*, and the role of natural theology in that moral pedagogy, helps to make sense of misreadings not only by modern academic philosophers but also by various “Thomisms” in the neo-scholastic movement and even within the late medieval Dominican order<sup>22</sup>. According to Jordan, it is a mistake to treat Aquinas's philosophical or natural theological arguments outside of the context of «the *Summa*'s own project of curricular and community reform»<sup>23</sup>.

The *Summa* was written to correct and rebuild certain sorts of community – to correct a community that segregated moral instruction as merely practical, to rebuild it as a community in which moral instruction was central to the whole of theology. An integral reading of the *Summa* cannot be divorced from the making of community<sup>24</sup>.

<sup>22</sup> M.D. JORDAN, *The Summa's Reform of Moral Teaching – and Its Failures*, in F. KERR (ed.), *Contemplating Aquinas: On the Varieties of Interpretation*, SCM Press – University of Notre Dame Press, London – Notre Dame, IN 2003 – 2006, 39-54. See also M.D. JORDAN, *Rewritten Theology: Aquinas and His Readers*, Blackwell Publishing, Oxford 2006, especially chapters 1 (“St Thomas and the Police”), 6 (“The *Summa of Theology* as Moral Formation”) and Conclusion (“Writing Theology after Thomas – and His Readers”).

<sup>23</sup> ID, *The Summa's Reform of Moral Teaching*, 42.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 52.

It is remarkable how much this sounds like one strain of interpretation of Hume's *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, suggested both by external considerations and by the text's internal logic<sup>25</sup>. According to this interpretation, Hume's primary concern is to address the notion of *natural religion* or *piety*; theological argument (like revealed religion) is considered only in relation to that primary concern. In other words, the intellectual exercise of theological reasoning is secondary to the evaluation of the nature and practical worth (personally and socially) of religion as a disposition<sup>26</sup>. Thus, in William Lad Session's compelling, holistic reading of the *Dialogues*, we can retain an appreciation for Hume's artful design and irony, while finding consistent attention to "true religion" and "natural piety" in every part of the *Dialogues*. Indeed, what seems to unify the conversation, more than anything else, is disagreement over how best to inspire piety – a quality which is always taken for granted as a virtue and a goal of education<sup>27</sup>.

<sup>25</sup> With a view to external considerations, see T. PENELHUM, *Hume's Views on Religion: Intellectual and Cultural Influences*, in E.S. RADCLIFFE (ed.), *A Companion to Hume*, Wiley-Blackwell, Chichester 2011, 323-337. For an intentionally internal focus, see W.L. SESSIONS, *Reading Hume's Dialogues: A Veneration for True Religion*, Indiana University Press Bloomington, IN 2002. See also T. BLACK – R. GRESSIS, *True Religion in Hume's Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, "British Journal for the History of Philosophy" XXV (2017), 2, 244-246. For a general study of Hume's understanding of "religion" and his indebtedness to a practical, and Ciceronian, perspective, see A.C. WILLIS, *Toward a Humean True Religion: Genuine Theism, Moderate Hope, and Practical Morality*, Penn State University Press, University Park, PA 2015.

<sup>26</sup> Dennis C. Rasmussen has noted that the main elements and arguments of the *Dialogues* can be found elsewhere, which makes Hume's friends' hesitation to publish it all the more interesting, yet: «What is new in the *Dialogues* is the combination of all these issues into a single devastating – and entertaining – package», one aimed particularly at "the pious reader", D.C. RASMUSSEN, *The Infidel and the Professor: David Hume, Adam Smith and the Friendship That Shaped Modern Thought*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ 2017, 188.

<sup>27</sup> This "moral" reading is thus compatible with explicitly "political" readings of Hume's *Dialogues*. J.W. DANFORD, 'The Surest Foundation of Morality': *The Political Teaching of Hume's Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, "The Western Political Quarterly" XXXV (1982), 2, 137-60, argues that Hume's political agenda in the *Dialogues* is to re-establish rhetoric (or "pre-scientific" philosophy) as the basis for civilized social life. S. CLARK, *No Abiding City: Hume, Naturalism, and Toleration*, "Philosophy: The Journal of the British Institute of Philosophical Studies" LXXXIV (2009), 75-94, interprets Hume's *Dialogues* as a "political drama" offering a naturalistic defense of tolerance. For a focus on the role of Pamphilus, the question of the education of youth, and the political implications thereof, see J.H. KRAUSE, *The Political Lessons of Hume's Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, "Hume Studies" XLII (2016), 1-2, 187-211.

To gain a sense of how this insight restores the *Dialogues* to some sort of coherent (not to say successful) whole, consider how it illuminates the main sections not pre-occupied with arguments of natural theology, parts less commonly treated by philosophers:

- The opening letter – especially its focus on two great moral goods, “study and society” (which we might take as loose translations of two great Aristotelian goods, contemplation and friendship).
- The discussion of Part I which launches the dialogues, about how and when to teach children about religion.
- The long discussion of evil (Parts X-XI), which is only incidentally framed as the theological objection of the *problem* of evil (at the end of Part X), and has more resemblance to the tradition of reflection on “the misery of the human condition”, a moral meditation on what we should learn from evil about human nature, our place in the universe, and the role of religion in human life<sup>28</sup>.
- The famous “reversal” of Part XII, where the actual beliefs about God and even what we call them seem to be made secondary to the cultivation of a certain attitude or disposition toward God and other men.
- Finally, the narrator of the whole *Dialogues*, Pamphilus. What we primarily know about him – his quasi-sonship to Cleanthes – seems designed to emphasize an attitude of filial piety.

#### 4. Hume vs. Aquinas on piety and religion

If we turn to the *Dialogues* for a lesson about piety or “true religion”, what do we find? Hume (and his characters) take it for granted that piety is a virtue, but on empiricist principles must describe it as a feeling or disposition of reverence, rooted in a sense of dependence or contingency; it is re-

<sup>28</sup> On this tradition see for instance LOTHARIO DEI SEGNI (POPE INNOCENT III), *On the Misery of the Human Condition (De miseria humane conditionis)*, trans. M.M. DIETZ, ed. D.R. HOWARD, The Library of the Liberal Arts – Bobbs-Merrill Company, Indianapolis, IN – New York, NY 1969. The editor’s introduction describes the influence of this book and its genre (*de contemptu mundi*), including in Renaissance and modern England (esp. pp. xiv-xv, xxxi-xxxiii). The clever interpretation of Part XI of the *Dialogues* in FENDT, *Empiricism or Dialectical Destruction Thereof?*, reveals a significant and appropriate dialectical performance behind Hume’s overt philosophical argument: «we can understand Hume, then, as writing these *Dialogues* not to prove any empirical truth about God or the goodness of the world, but in the joyful exercise of an Aristotelian *energeia* and virtue: wit», 9.

lated to reason only insofar as reason is chastened not to claim more than it should, and piety is increased and supported neither by dogmatic, revealed religion, nor by rational demonstrations of natural theology. Piety is a manifestation of true or natural religion, conceived as no more than a motive to live virtuously, rooted in a natural motive of justice – itself, apparently, not at all supported by metaphysical speculation and rational demonstration, much less by revealed dogma<sup>29</sup>. Here is Cleanthes, in Part XII, summarizing a view that makes it possible for him and Philo to appear to have common ground for the resolution of the *Dialogues*:

The proper office of religion is to regulate the heart of men, humanize their conduct, infuse the spirit of temperance, order, and obedience; and as its operation is silent, and only enforces the motives of morality and justice, it is in danger of being overlooked, and confounded with these other motives. When it distinguishes itself, and acts as a separate principle over men, it has departed from its proper sphere, and has become only a cover to faction and ambition (XII.12).

We have reason to think that here, at least, Philo would agree (and that Hume would as well<sup>30</sup>) that “true religion” is a psychological force that is useful as an inspiration for morality. The skeptical arguments of the bulk of the *Dialogues* are then not meant to make positive claims in or about natural theology, so much as to warn against the dangers of relying on natural theology and habituate the mind to a docile or chastened disposition. In this sense, Hume’s *Dialogues* emerges even more clearly as an homage to Cicero’s *De Natura Deorum*, which places piety in the context of right knowledge of the gods – but in a way that limits theological knowledge and pragmatically subordinates it to ethics<sup>31</sup>.

<sup>29</sup> Cf. SESSIONS, *Reading Hume’s Dialogues*, 216-225.

<sup>30</sup> The passage seems to be adapted from a very similar one that Hume included in a draft introduction to Volume II of his *History of England*: «The proper Office of Religion is to reform Men’s Lives, to purify their Hearts, to inforce all moral Duties, & to secure Obedience to the Laws and civil Magistrate. While it pursues these useful purposes, its Operations, tho’ infinitely valuable, are secret & silent; [...] That principle is always the more pure & genuine, the less figure it makes in those Annals of Wars, & Politics, Intrigues, & Revolutions, Quarrels & Convulsions, which it is the Business of an Historian to record & transmit to Posterity», see p. 333 of J. IMMERWAHR, *Hume’s Atheistic Theism*, “Hume Studies” XXII (1996), 2, 225-338.

<sup>31</sup> For Hume’s debt to Cicero, see WILLIS, *Toward a Humean True Religion*.

Here it will be useful to compare Aquinas who, like Hume, pays deference to Cicero in his reflections on piety and the natural virtue of religion. Cicero identified religion and piety as the first two of several virtues annexed to justice, and we find Aquinas citing Cicero's authority as he introduces these two virtues in the middle of the *Secunda Secundae* (ST II-II, 80.1, obj. 1 and corpus)<sup>32</sup>.

On the virtue of religion, Aquinas cites Cicero: «religion consists in offering service and ceremonial rites to a superior nature that men call divine» (81.1, *sed contra*). The body of 81.1 gives three plausible etymologies for “religio”: to read again (ponder over), to seek again, or to be bound together. Aquinas concludes that whatever it takes its name from, religion «denotes properly a relation to God». Specifically, as Cicero indicated, it means giving due honor to God through worship. Why does God deserve this honor? «It belongs to religion to show reverence to one God under one aspect, namely, as the first principle of the creation and government of things» (81.3, *corpus*). This virtue is not a properly theological virtue but a moral one, since it directs man to God *as man's end* (81.5, *corpus* and *ad 2*); indeed, the virtue of religion is not for God's sake but for our sake (81.7, *corpus*). So the virtue of religion, recognized by Cicero, is described by Aquinas as a good for man insofar as it is a matter of justice for us to be rightly ordered to the first and final cause of creation.

In describing the virtue of religion, Aquinas cites Malachi 1:6, «If... I be a father, where is My honor», in order to characterize God as begetting and governing father, and therefore as due honor. This suggests a link to the virtue of piety. Aquinas accepts Cicero's view that piety is primarily about right relation to parents and country, but he insists that for that reason it belongs by extension to our relationship to God, «as the summit of excellence and causality» (101.3, *ad 2*, citing Ps. Dionysius, *Div. Nom.* 1). So Aquinas can argue that piety orders us to God, even by Cicero's definition (101.1, *sed contra*, quoting Cicero on piety as duty to kin and country), thus: «Man becomes a debtor to other men in various ways, according to their various excellence and the various benefits received from them. On both counts God holds first place, for He is supremely excellent, and is for us the first principle of being and government» (101.1, *corpus*).

<sup>32</sup> Question 81 is on religion; questions 82-100 are on the acts and vices of religion; question 101 is on piety. These come in the middle of the so-called “Treatise on Prudence and Justice”, questions 47-122.

So for Aquinas, as for Hume, piety and (the natural virtue of) religion are moral virtues rooted in awareness of our dependence or contingency, and are clarified by right knowledge of God. But whereas Hume finds in Cicero the grounds for agnostic pragmatism, Aquinas finds essential connections to confident theological knowledge. Notice what, within the Thomistic conceptual framework, Cicero's definitions of piety and religion suggest. First, as virtues, they require a conception of human nature and its perfection; and second, as specifically connected to justice, they require the general notion of what is owed, even as debt. Third, as pertaining to our relationship to God, they require cognition of causality in general – including efficient and formal (as a father) and final causality (as a governor); and fourth, in particular they relate us to God as first or ultimate efficient and final cause of all of creation. We have just listed some of the major elements of the *Summa* within which Aquinas's reflections on piety and religion are embedded; and at the same time, we have listed things that Hume, as a skeptical empiricist, could not consistently accept: a teleological conception of human nature, a moral law rooted in that nature, knowledge of causality in general, and specifically knowledge of a God as the ultimate origin and end of our nature. In fact, to the extent that the *Dialogues* has a moral pedagogy, it is one that requires Hume, in the name of Ciceronian piety, to undermine all knowledge of causes, of human nature, and of God.

Given Hume's critique of knowledge of causes and of the facticity of duty, it is actually quite fascinating that he should have devoted a dialogue to re-describing the virtues of religion and piety in his own terms: of ignorance, of probabilities, of feelings and impressions. At best, he could attempt a subjectivist or phenomenological account of piety and religion; but without metaphysics, he could not actually explain what these things are. And if he really meant to instill or advance piety and religion – an open question to be sure – he could only do so by claiming that they were natural and universal dispositions, likely to flourish once the distractions of dogmatism and rationalism, of revealed and natural theology, had been cleared away. (In this respect Hume's views of piety and religion represent an empirical hypothesis which has, it seems, been disproven by subsequent historical developments)<sup>33</sup>.

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<sup>33</sup> «Hume's claims about the universality of the moral sentiments, as he understands them, are undermined by the findings of historians and this in a way that suggests that moral theorizing may be a less innocent activity than it is usually taken to be [...]», A.

## 5. Conclusion: piety without metaphysics and the failure of Hume's Dialogues

Interpreting the *Dialogues* as oriented toward a moral pedagogy does not settle all interpretive questions. One can still argue about precisely what views and versions of religion and piety Hume wanted to encourage. Was he trying to undermine Christianity altogether, or accommodate liberal Protestantism? Is Hume motivated by a compromising optimism or a subversive despair<sup>34</sup>? Was Hume actually concerned with cultivating piety, or is even this moral concern only cynically or ironically invoked? If we read the *Dialogues* for Hume's views on religion and piety, these are open questions, worth pursuing because we can learn from pursuing them; and disagreements about what lessons to draw from this interpretation may not be resolvable, but they do not render this interpretation unstable.

Still, keeping in mind the comparison with Aquinas's *Summa Theologiae*, on this interpretation we have reason to find the *Dialogues* a failure – and not only for the reasons that Mark Jordan judges the *Summa* a failure. For historically contingent reasons, the *Summa*'s intended audience failed to adopt and follow St. Thomas's moral pedagogy. Hume's *Dialogues* may have failed on this count as well – like the *Summa*, it seems to have been misread by communities it's author did not anticipate, and it would be hard to claim that the text found and helped form an intended community (although in general, through positivism, fideism, pragmatism, and expressivism, Hume has had a powerful legacy on modern views of religion).

But if the *Summa*'s moral pedagogy happened to fail, as a sociological fact, we can still allow that, in principle, it offers a pedagogically compelling case for understanding and practicing moral virtue – at least, one as compelling as the Christian story that moves the soul to pursue these virtues: a story of creation, fall, and redemption, under the Providence of a knowing and loving personal God, who invites us into His life by appealing to our intellect and will. The Christian story that structures the *Summa* inspires its moral pedagogy. By contrast, it is hard to see what overarching story Hume can appeal to, or how it could have an appeal except to histor-

MACINTYRE, *Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity: An Essay on Desire, Practical Reasoning, and Narrative*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2016, 85.

<sup>34</sup> See W. LEMMENS, *The 'True Religion' of the Sceptic: Penelhum Reading Hume's Dialogues*, "Canadian Journal of Philosophy" XLII (2012), 183-197.



ically contingent prejudices; in comparison with the philosophical ambition and Christian eschatological scope of the *Summa*, the *Dialogues* are no more than the story of clever empiricist Englishmen engaged in a weekend conversation<sup>35</sup>.

One reason Hume's moral pedagogy has to fail, then, is that no matter how artfully it is composed, and however much it may have enchanted generations of scholars, its story is an irrelevant fiction, one which prescind from, and systematically denies, natural longings of the human heart and revealed realities of human nature and human destiny. Even if he hadn't rejected Christianity, Hume's account of piety would have to fail because he also rejected philosophy, in the form of a metaphysics capable of sustaining natural theology and, by extension, ethics. Hume's "sophistry" – as a pragmatic application of reason that repudiates metaphysics – both animates and vitiates the *Dialogues*.

As we have seen, at the heart of the *Summa* is a metaphysical account of religion and piety, which, as natural virtues of justice, are intrinsically linked to a conception of human nature and of reason's ability to know God. Aquinas's account of piety and religion is thus situated in a conceptual framework which makes it possible not only to explain why religion and piety *are* virtues, but also to account for why so many people, in particular circumstances, may fail to embody them and even fail to appreciate them as virtues.

In comparison, it seems that Hume's *Dialogues* attempt to convey a conception of piety without metaphysics, a program of moral formation without knowledge of God. Hume's *Dialogues* are not so much a skeptical attack on arguments for religion, but an attempt to position skepticism as a pious disposition about religion. This emerges as the most compelling, and the only stable, interpretation, superseding the unstable, but more common, interpretations of the *Dialogues* focusing on the arguments of natural theology. If we take Hume seriously as repositioning piety within skeptical empiricist epistemology, we have to note that with his anti-metaphysical conceptual framework Hume cannot motivate people to *seek* piety, cannot offer an account of why piety and religion *are* in fact virtues, and cannot explain why

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<sup>35</sup> For fruitful readings of the *Dialogues* as a dramatic portrayal of philosophical friendship, its virtues, and limits, see W.B. CARNOCHAN, *The Comic Plot of Hume's Dialogues*, "Modern Philology" LXXXV (1988), 4, 514-522, and S. CLARK, *Hume's Uses of Dialogue*, "Hume Studies" XXXIX (2013), 1, 61-76.

so many people might fail to recognize piety and religion *as* virtues<sup>36</sup>. (Nor, for that matter, can we even be certain that Hume thinks piety and religion actually are virtues at all!) But we can acknowledge a debt of gratitude to Hume for the opportunity to reflect on these questions, and to realize we may have to turn to reason beyond our experience if seek to answer them<sup>37</sup>.

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<sup>36</sup> Compare Alasdair MacIntyre's suggestion that any plausible theory of natural law must include «an adequate explanation the failure of the natural law to secure widespread assent [...] especially in the cultures of advanced modernity», and «that it must identify the grounds for assent to the precepts of the natural law, which are in fact available to all rational persons, even in our culture, even if those grounds are in very large part either flouted or ignored», A. MACINTYRE, *Natural Law and Advanced Modernity*, in E.B. MCLEAN (ed.), *Common Truths: New Perspectives on Natural Law*, Intercollegiate Studies Institute, Wilmington, DE 2000, 91-115; the quotation is from pp. 104-105. MacIntyre argues that Thomistic natural law theory includes such an explanation, while the New Natural Law theory – itself somewhat indebted to Hume – does not.

<sup>37</sup> Thanks to Christopher Blum, Nick Capaldi, John Danford, Gene Fendt, Mark Jordan, Jonathan Krauss, Mark Talbot, Luca Tuninetti, Jeffrey Wilson, participants in the 2017 Symposium Thomisticum in Porto, and several anonymous blind-review readers for commenting on earlier drafts. The author has learned from, and revised in light of (though does not presume to have satisfied), some generous thoughtful critics.

**ABSTRACT**

**PIETY WITHOUT METAPHYSICS**

**The Moral Pedagogy of Hume's *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion***

A close reading of Hume's *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* reveals that it is not what it appears. Rather than a work of natural theology, meant to show something about arguments concerning the existence and nature of God, the *Dialogues* turn out to embody a moral pedagogy exemplifying and attempting to instill a conception of piety and religion as virtues. This paper defends this interpretation by reviewing three alternative, but ultimately inadequate, interpretations of the text, and then compares Hume's moral pedagogy with that of Aquinas in the *Summa Theologiae* to highlight the ambition, and the limitation, of Hume's attempt to characterize piety without metaphysics.

**PIETÀ SENZA METAFISICA**

**La pedagogia morale dei *Dialoghi sulla religione naturale* di Hume**

Una lettura attenta dei *Dialoghi sulla religione naturale* di Hume rivela che il testo non è quel che appare. Piuttosto che un'opera di teologia naturale pensata per dire qualcosa sugli argomenti volti a dimostrare l'esistenza e la natura di Dio, i *Dialoghi* presentano in realtà una pedagogia morale che esemplifica e cerca di promuovere una concezione della pietà e della religione come virtù. L'articolo difende questa linea interpretativa esaminando tre interpretazioni del testo alternative, ma in ultima analisi inadeguate, e infine mette a confronto la pedagogia morale di Hume con quella della *Summa Theologiae* dell'Aquinate così da mettere in luce l'ambizione, ma anche il limite del tentativo di Hume di definire la pietà senza la metafisica.

**Parole chiave:** David Hume; religione naturale; pietà; Tommaso d'Aquino; Cicerone