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Introduction

“Some years ago, I composed a piece, which would make a small Volume in Twelves. I call it *Dialogues on natural Religion*: Some of my Friends flatter me, that it is the best thing I ever wrote…”

- David Hume

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Hume’s *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion* was published posthumously in 1779, three years after he died. It was published without a publisher’s name on its title page, a clear sign that it contained controversial material that could have serious “consequences” for all those involved. Various obstacles to the publication of this work had been in play for a number of years. Much of the *Dialogues* was written and completed around 1751-2, when Hume was just forty years old. Almost three decades would pass before it was eventually published. Following the advice of his friends, Hume decided not to publish his *Dialogues* when they were first written. Publishing the *Dialogues* was, nevertheless, important enough to Hume that in the final months of his life he asked his close friend Adam Smith to see to it that the *Dialogues* were published. Smith, however, expressed strong reservations about this and refused to do it.[[1]](#footnote-1) Clearly disappointed by Smith’s refusal, Hume wrote to his long-time publisher William Strathan in the hope of persuading him to publish the *Dialogues*. “Some of my Friends”, Hume tells Strahan, “flatter me, that it is the best thing I ever wrote.”[[2]](#footnote-2) Strahan, however, after hesitating for a period, also decided against publishing the *Dialogues.* Fortunately, Hume, in a codicil to his will, anticipated these difficulties and made alternative arrangements for the publication of the *Dialogues*.

These considerations relating to the difficulties that Hume faced regarding the publication of the *Dialogues* present contemporary readers of Hume with a significant problem of interpretation. How, given these conditions of repression and coercion, should we interpret Hume’s work (e.g. the *Dialogues*), given that “prudence” and care was obviously required by any author who hoped to advance views of the kind that Hume presents?

In the *Dialogues* Hume presents and examines two arguments for the existence of God and his particular attributes. They are the argument from design (or the argument *a posteriori*) and the cosmological argument (or argument *a priori*). Both these arguments were widely accepted and defended by theologians and philosophers in Hume’s context, and they continue to command support among theists.[[3]](#footnote-3) The *Dialogues* pays particular attention to the design argument (or argument *a posteriori*), which is presented and defended by ‘Cleanthes’ in Part II, and goes on to occupy the *Dialogues* until the end of Part VIII.[[4]](#footnote-4) Although Hume regards the argument from design as the principal argument for “divine existence”, he also devotes all of Part IX to an examination of the cosmological argument. In the context of the *Dialogues* the proponent and defender of this argument is ‘Demea’. The cosmological argument, or what Hume and his contemporaries refer to as the argument *a priori*, continued to enjoy considerable prestige and support well into the second half of the 18th century.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Having considered, and criticized, the argument from design and the cosmological argument, the *Dialogues* turns its attention to the problem of evil (Parts X and XI). The problem of evil, as presented primarily by ‘Philo’, lays the foundation for an argument *against* the existence of God, at least any God with an orthodox set of attributes. The fourth and final argument that the *Dialogues* takes up concerns the relationship between religion and morality. By the time this issue arises, Demea has departed, which leaves the discussion between Cleanthes and Philo. The positions that they defend are directly opposed. Cleanthes defends the view that religion and, in particular, the doctrine of a future state, is a necessary “security to morals”. “Religion, however corrupted”, Cleanthes maintains, “is still better than no religion at all” (D, 12.10/219; EU, 11.28-9/147; EM, 9.14/279). Against this Philo argues that religion, at best, provides unsteady and unreliable support for morality and, more commonly, it has a corrupting and pernicious influence on human conduct (D, 12.11-32/220-7).

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One question that may be asked is why Hume uses the dialogue format to consider and assess these arguments and positions? A few points may be noted in relation to this matter. First, Hume’s use of the dialogue format follows established practice.[[6]](#footnote-6) It is widely recognized, for example, that Hume’s *Dialogues* is modelled after Cicero’s *De Natura Decorum* in a number of respects.[[7]](#footnote-7) Beyond this, the dialogue format was also adopted by a number of modern philosophers who presented their views on religion in this form, in works that Hume was almost certainly entirely familiar with.[[8]](#footnote-8) Second, the dialogues format allowed Hume to camouflage and conceal, to some extent, his own identity and commitments. This provides a certain degree of protection given the climate that his work was published in. More importantly, however, one of Hume’s fundamental concerns in the *Dialogues* is to give a fair and accurate account of the various views and arguments under consideration. Whatever side of this debate Hume may have been partial to, he was anxious to allow the reader to arrive at her own conclusion on the basis of a fair, accurate, and impartial presentation of the relevant arguments.[[9]](#footnote-9)

An obvious upshot of these conflicting considerations is that Hume’s own commitments are not always easy to discern or decide. One way to approach this is to ask: Who speaks for Hume in the *Dialogues*? There are any number of responses to this question, but the two most convincing discussions are provided by Kemp Smith and Gaskin. Although their answer to this question is qualified in various ways, both agree “that Philo, from start to finish represents Hume”.[[10]](#footnote-10) Nevertheless, even if we agree with Kemp Smith and Gaskin that Philo serves as Hume’s principal spokesperson in the *Dialogues*, this still leaves us with a large problem that has also been widely debated. That is, what is Philo’s final view about this matter? In regard to this issue, there is no obvious or uncontroversial answer to be given. For our present purposes what can be said, which might command wide but not universal agreement, is that Philo’s views are consistently and firmly irreligious.[[11]](#footnote-11) It remains unclear, however, what exactly this commits Philo (and/or Hume) to. There are three basic options available to us, all of which can be provided with considerable support (and all of which have been defended by various eminent Hume scholars). Described in succinct terms the relevant options are: some form of attenuated theism or deism; or agnosticism; or atheism. Each one of these options is itself open to variable accounts and interpretation and allow for some overlap. What they all share, nevertheless, is a systematic scepticism (and hostility) to orthodox religion or “superstition” of any kind.

Finally, two further questions may also be briefly considered. The first is how does Hume’s *Dialogues* relate to his other writings and are his other writings of any relevance when interpreting the *Dialogues*? It is evident that Hume’s concerns in the *Dialogues* are intimately linked with his other writings, since many of the arguments in the *Dialogues* are drawn from or elaborate upon arguments presented in his earlier works. This is, perhaps, most apparent in the discussions presented in EU, 10 and 11, as well as in his *Natural History of Religion*. About this there is little disagreement among Hume scholars. There remain, nevertheless, some matters of significant - if not fundamental - disagreement. Briefly stated, there are two quite different understandings of how Hume’s interest in religion emerges and develops in his philosophy considered as a whole. The first view, which was dominant until recently, is that Hume’s *Treatise* has little or nothing to say about religion.[[12]](#footnote-12) What brief remarks Hume did have on this subject, it was argued, had been removed (i.e. “castrated”) from the *Treatise* and only later inserted into the works that followed.[[13]](#footnote-13) In opposition to this account, the alternative view, which is increasingly accepted, is that the *Treatise* is deeply and systematically concerned with matters and problems of religion - as was obvious to Hume’s own contemporaries.[[14]](#footnote-14) According to this “irreligious” interpretation, Hume’s *Treatise* lays the foundation for much of Hume’s subsequent philosophical trajectory in his later works. There is, on this view, no radical discontinuity between the *Treatise* and Hume’s later writings in respect of his irreligious concerns and objectives. On the contrary, Hume’s concerns with problems of religion *begin* with the *Treatise* and carry on through his entire philosophy, running from the *Enquiries* to the *Natural History of Religion*, and finishing with the (posthumously published) *Dialogues*.

The second question, which is closely related to the first, concerns the relevant background historical context in which these arguments and debates should be understood? The relevant background debate concerning the existence of God and related religious doctrines (e.g. immortality of the soul and a future state) could be described as the “main debate” among 17th and 18th century philosophers. That debate centred heavily around the “atheistic” philosophies of Hobbes and Spinoza, and the various responses that this generated. Until recently the significance of Hobbes and Spinoza for Hume’s philosophy was largely overlooked or ignored (as per the orthodox or established interpretation of Hume belonging to the “British Empiricist” tradition).[[15]](#footnote-15) This includes their relevance for Hume’s philosophy of religion and for his *Dialogues* in particular.[[16]](#footnote-16) This situation has changed substantially over the past decade or so. As noted, the irreligious interpretation emphasizes the importance of both Hobbes and Spinoza, not only for Hume’s philosophy in the *Treatise*, but for his philosophy as a whole, including the *Dialogues*. A number of recent studies have emphasized this aspect of Hume’s philosophy of religion, particularly as it concerns the *Dialogues*.[[17]](#footnote-17) Although these studies vary in detail and in emphasis, they are all broadly consistent with the irreligious interpretation of Hume’s philosophy, at least as it concerns the *Dialogues*, and accept that Hobbes, Spinoza, and the atheistic tradition lie at the heart of much of Hume’s thought on this subject.

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The papers in this collection do not require any summary account. The authors and titles speak well for themselves. However, a brief overview of the structure of this collection may be of some help for the reader. This collection is divided into two Parts. Part One is focused on the *Dialogues* and, consistent with the text, pays particular attention to the design argument. The contributions by Daniel O’Brien, Graham Oppy, and Thomas Holden address various aspects of Hume’s critique of the design argument. The two essays that follow both consider Hume’s arguments in the *Dialogues* in relation to two other thinkers of historical significance. Kelly Clark considers Hume’s philosophy of religion in relation to Thomas Reid (one of Hume’s most eminent critics among his own contemporaries and a significant philosopher in his own right), while John Beatty considers in what way Charles Darwin was influenced by his reading of Hume’s *Dialogues*. The next contribution, by Angela Coventry, takes up Hume’s critique of the cosmological argument in D, 9. Following it, Robin Le Poidevin offers an analysis of Hume’s discussion of the problem of evil as found in D, 10 and 11. The last three essays in Part One are all concerned, in different ways, with a range of issues, rather than any of the specific arguments that we have described. Kevin Meeker examines the relationship between sceptical attitudes and religious belief in the *Dialogues*. After that, Andre Willis offers an interpretation of Hume’s *Dialogues* as viewed via the lens of literary theory. In the last contribution of Part One Paul Russell considers the question of “atheism” as it arises in Hume’s *Dialogues*.

Part Two of this collection is composed of four additional essays that delve into Hume’s other writings on religion. The works primarily concerned here are: the first *Enquiry* (1748), the *Natural History of Religion* (1757); and Hume’s two “suppressed” essays on suicide and the immortality of the soul. Jennifer Marušić examines Hume’s discussion in EU, 11 which, she argues, is an attempt to sketch a method for natural theology and show the limits of what natural theology can establish. Following this, Peter Millican’s essay assesses the cogency of Hume’s famous argument against testimony for miracles (EU, 10). In his contribution Amyas Merivale considers Hume’s views in his *Natural History of Religion* and, in the final essay, Willem Lemmens reconstructs the argument of Hume’s two suppressed essays, on suicide and the immortality of the soul.

1. For a lively account of Smith’s refusal to publish the *Dialogues* see Rasmussen, *The Infidel and the Professor*, Chap 10. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Hume, LET, II, 323/ #525. (Dated June 8, 1776.) [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. For an illuminating account of the background debate that Hume was engaged in see Hurlbutt, *Hume, Netwon & the Design Argument*, esp. Chps. 2 and 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Many of the most important statements of the design argument that Hume was responding to came from figures who were closely associated with latitudinarian and “Newtonian” theology and science (e.g., Henry More, Ralph Cudworth, John Ray, Richard Bentley, George Cheyne, William Derham, and Colin Maclaurin). The fundamental task that they all shared was to show that science *supported* religion and was not antagonistic to its doctrines and assumptions. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. The most prominent and notable champions of the cosmological argument were John Locke and Samuel Clarke – both of whom were hugely influential figures at this time. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Hume had already employed the dialogue format in the first *Enquiry,* where the topic of the credibility and value of religion is considered, with particular reference to the design argument and the doctrine of a future state (EU, 11.6-30/ 134-48). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Thus Kemp Smith says: “Many of the main features in the outward structure of the *Dialogues* were suggested to Hume by Cicero’s *De Natura Decorum*. He borrowed much more from it than merely the dialogue form.” [“Introduction”, 60]. In a similar vein Gaskin suggests that *De Natura Decorum* “is Hume’s philosophical model” (“Introduction”, xx-xxi). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. This includes, among others, works by Henry More [*Divine Dialogues*, 1668], Nicholas Malebranche’s [*Dialogues on Metaphysics and Religion*, 1688], and George Berkeley [*Three Dialogues*, 1713; and *Alciphron* , 1732]. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Related to this, see Hume’s letter to his friend Gilbert Elliot, where he remarks that the sceptical views of Philo are more “natural” to him and that it is Cleanthes’ defence of the design argument that he needs help with (LET, I, 153-7/ #72). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Kemp Smith, “Introduction”, 59. Gaskin reviews the evidence that Kemp Smith provides in support of this claim, followed by an account of some of Kemp Smith’s critics. Gaskin concludes that he finds it “difficult to see that Kemp Smith’s position has been disturbed in any serious way” (*Hume’s Philosophy of Religion*, 209-18). Mossner also endorses this view: “Religion of Hume”, 653. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. My own contribution (Chp. 10) elaborates on and defends this claim. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. See, e.g., Gaskin, *Hume’s Philosophy of Religion*, where it is argued that Hume’s *Treatise* “is not overtly concerned with religion’ (p. 1). In a similar vein, David Norton remarks: “Hume’s trenchant critique of religion is found principally in his *Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*, *Natural History of Religion*, and *Dialogues*...” (*David Hume*, 15). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Hume’s most influential biographer, E.C. Mossner, has claimed, for example, that Hume was careful to purge the *Treatise* of anything that could be taken as a contribution to the theological debates that were raging at this time (i.e. the 1730s). According to Mossner, Hume did not “apply his philosophical tenets to religion” until he published the first *Enquiry* in 1748 (Mossner, *Life of Hume*, 112-3, 319). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. This view is defended, at length, in Russell, *Riddle*; and also in Russell, “Hume’s Philosophy of Irreligion”. It should be noted that Hume’s irreligious intentions in the *Treatise* were obvious to his own contemporaries well before any of his later works were published. This is particularly apparent both in the early reviews of the *Treatise* and in the controversy that erupted when Hume (unsuccessfully) applied for the Chair of Philosophy at Edinburgh University in 1745 (i.e. three years before his first *Enquiry* was published). [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. On the importance of Hobbes, Spinoza, and the atheistic tradition for understanding Hume’s fundamental irreligious intentions see Russell, *Riddle*, Chps. 3,5,8,18 (esp. pp. 52-7, 86-8, 92-8, 275-8, 288-9); also, Russell, “Hume’s Philosophy of Irreligion”, esp. pp. 458-64. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. We find, for example, that Hobbes and Spinoza, and the debates associated with them, go almost entirely unnoticed in Gaskin’s *Hume’s Philosophy of Religion*. Hobbes is not mentioned by Kemp Smith and Spinoza is mentioned once, with reference to Bayle (“Introduction”, 80). [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Apart from the works by Russell (as cited in note 15 above), the importance of Hobbes and Spinoza for Hume’s philosophy of religion is also touched on in Bailey and O’Brien, *Hume’s Critique of Religion* (esp. Chp. 3). More recently, Kraal defends the view “that the end result of Hume’s thought is some form of Hobbesian theism”, which was widely regarded by Hume’s contemporaries as paradigmatic “atheism” (*Problem of God in David Hume*, 45-50). Along similar lines, Thomas Holden suggests that in the *Dialogues* Hume (Philo) arrived at an “exclusively expressivist understanding of talk about the divine attributes” which is modelled after Hobbes (“Philo’s Reversal”, 224-6). With regard to Spinoza’s relevance to Hume’s *Dialogues*, Kenneth Williford has recently argued “that Hume’s Philo sympathetically articulates and conditionally defends views that are clearly ‘Spinozistic’” (“Philo, Strato, and Spinoza”, 306). [↑](#footnote-ref-17)