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Religious Studies
Volume 22, Issue 3-4
September 1986 , pp. 387-396

Rel. Stud. **22**, pp. 387–396

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THE LITERARY AND DRAMATIC CHARACTER OF HUME'S *DIALOGUES CONCERNING NATURAL RELIGION*[1]

The purpose of this paper is to establish the importance of what is sometimes called 'the literary and dramatic character' of Hume's *Dialogues*.[2] This importance is such that not taking this specific character of the *Dialogues* into account leads to conclusions opposite to the ones Hume, in the special form he gave to his work, was trying to impart to his readers. I will offer my analysis in opposition to the one, voiced by, for instance D. W. Harward, in which 'the apparent philosophical inconsistencies in the *Dialogues* are resolved without appeal to Hume's commitment to "literary or dramatic balance," an appeal few of us find convincing or philosophically interesting' (Harward, 1976, p. 138). The last part of Harward's statement is of course only of biographical interest; however, the attempt to offer an interpretation of Hume's *Dialogues* in which the literary character of the work is wilfully set aside, comes to missing a basic understanding for the man and the work. In what follows I will make this explicit by a number of points, each of which shows the importance of this literary and dramatic character of the *Dialogues*. In each case the result could not be reached without taking this special character into account.

I. THE STRUCTURE

The participants in the discussion that takes place in the *Dialogues* are:

Demea, representative of orthodoxy. Possibly the source for his name is Terentius' comedy *Adelphi* (cf. Laird, 1932, p. 295) or, in my view less likely, 'Demea' is meant to refer to the Greek 'dèmos', the 'common people'. I consider this less likely since the other four names are traceable to real ones.

Cleanthes, defender of the argument of design as it is discussed in the *Dialogues*. Compared with Demea he is a far less dogmatic character. Very likely Hume borrowed his name from Cicero, in whose *De Natura Deorum* a

[1] This paper is based on parts of Chapter 3 and 5 of my doctorate thesis 'Philo's slotconclusie in de "Dialogues concerning natural religion" van David Hume'. I herewith express my indebtedness to Professor G. Nuchelmans of Leyden University, under whose supervision I wrote my thesis and who was kind enough to read, and comment on, this paper as well.

[2] Accepting current practice I quote from Kemp Smith's edition of the *Dialogues* (see below).

certain Balbus participates in the discussion, having as one of his teachers a certain Cleanthes.

Philo, sceptic and as such mainly, though certainly not only, criticizing Demea and Cleanthes. His name has the same source as Cleanthes': in *De Natura Deorum* we meet with a certain Cotta, who had had someone called Philo as one of his teachers.

An account of the discussion is given by Pamphilus, who witnessed it, to his friend Hermippus. Probably Pamphilus' name may also be traced to Cicero's *De Natura Deorum*. In the *Dialogues* he is Cleanthes' pupil and, as Demea says to Cleanthes, 'may indeed be regarded as your adopted son' (D130). As with Demea, it is not certain where exactly Hume found Hermippus' name, but I think it is not without significance that there was a historical Hermippus who was pupil of a certain... Philo (Pauly, 1913, p. 853; Lübker, 1891, p. 530).

On the basis of the above we can discern the following structure in the discussion in the *Dialogues*. The discussion takes place between Philo, Cleanthes and Demea, with Demea leaving the company before the discussion comes to its close. An account of the discussion is given by Pamphilus, pupil of Cleanthes, to Hermippus, 'pupil' of Philo. A final judgement is given by Pamphilus, favouring Cleanthes, which, in view of the above, will not come as a surprise. At the end of his introduction Pamphilus refers to Hermippus' opposing 'the accurate philosophical turn of Cleanthes to the careless scepticism of Philo', and his comparing both of them with the 'rigid inflexible orthodoxy of Demea'. This judgement, it should be noticed, is given on the basis of 'some imperfect account' of the discussion, which raised Hermippus' curiosity and made him ask for a more perfect account. Whether Hermippus' judgement remains the same after this second account – the one given in the *Dialogues* – is left to the reader's judgement, though the structure I have discerned does give us a clue. Perhaps the judgement Hermippus did *not* give, is the one Hume – contrary to Cicero – did not give, at least not explicitly.

II. THE DIALOGUE-FORM

What are the implications of the fact that we are dealing with a dialogue, not with a systematic exposition? In the introduction 'Pamphilus to Hermippus' we are told what to expect. When the writer, it is said, 'carries on the dispute in the natural spirit of good company, by throwing in a variety of topics, and preserving a proper balance among the speakers; he often loses so much time in preparations and transitions, that the reader will scarcely think himself compensated, by all the graces of dialogue, for the order, brevity, and precision, which are sacrificed to them' (D127). Obviously this means that the discussion takes place in 'the natural spirit of good company'.

This is of importance in view of the relations between the disputants and assumes prominence in Demea's departure and Philo's subsequent so-called 'confession'. Secondly, a 'variety of topics' is dealt with, which of course, cannot all be treated exhaustively. Furthermore, special care must be taken to secure 'a proper balance among the speakers', to avoid what Hume called 'that vulgar error... of putting nothing but Nonsense into the Mouth of the Adversary' (Letters I, p. 154). Among the means Hume uses, with excellent skill, to this purpose are the occasional coalitions between the different disputants in the *Dialogues*. One of the consequences of all this is of course that often time is lost in 'preparations and transitions', to which must be added loss of 'order, brevity, and precision'. With this in mind, what should we expect to find in the *Dialogues*?

We may expect the relations among the participants in the discussion to be of importance; a number of problems to be discussed, not all of them as thorough as perhaps should be; a certain balance among the speakers to be aimed at deliberately; some passages to function as preparations and transitions; order, brevity and precision not to be the main concern.

I would like to emphasize that the fact that all this can be found in the *Dialogues* should not, indeed may not, be used as an argument against Hume. Even less should it be neglected. On the contrary, it is a sign of Hume's literary skill, of his mastership of the dialogue as a literary form and as such should be considered in any interpretation of his *Dialogues*.

Attention to this specific character of the *Dialogues* is given by John Bricke who wants to defend 'a quite different way of approaching the *Dialogues*, one which puts proper stress on Hume's literary objectives in their composition' (Bricke, 1975, p. 3). In spite of this, however, Bricke also says 'I shall show that neither Philo nor Cleanthes... could be Hume's spokesman, for each is often unHumean in his views, and neither maintains a reasonably clear, well-argued, self-consistent position in the course of the *Dialogues*' (Bricke, 1975, p. 3). Leaving aside the question of Hume's spokesman, the argument Bricke offers us here is untenable on his own analysis of the *Dialogues* in which he states that, for literary reasons 'it should come as no surprise that the argument takes a somewhat erratic course, that issues are raised which are not treated exhaustively, that the most fundamental assumptions of the participants do not become perfectly explicit. Nor is it surprising that the characters are not wholly consistent, completely clearheaded and unmuddled throughout, always in the same frame of mind, always clear about the conclusions of their own arguments, or willing to draw those conclusions and stick to them, and so on' (Bricke, 1975, pp. 15–16). If all this is no surprise, and as I have shown above it is not, then it should not be used as an argument against any participant being Hume's spokesman. It seems as though Bricke does not see the implications of his own, correct, analysis of the literary character of the *Dialogues*.

A comparable mistake is made by Kemp Smith since he stresses 'how greatly both Demea and Cleanthes are lacking in intellectual self-consistence' and this stands in 'marked contrast with the very consistent part played by Philo...'' (Kemp Smith, 1947, pp. 62–3). In a way Kemp Smith overstresses the consistence in Philo's statements and this is unnecessary, as is shown above. If Kemp Smith were right here, Hume would after all be 'putting nothing but Nonsense into the Mouth of the Adversary'.

III. PHILO'S IRONY

To the above we should, as is well known, add the the irony which is present in a number of Philo's statements. This irony can be found throughout the *Dialogues*, though most strongly in Part XII as Mossner indicated by saying 'The vein of irony, which runs piecemeal throughout the *Dialogues*, is opened decisively in the concluding Part XII' (Mossner, 1977, p. 13). For some examples previous to Part XII, I may point to Part I where Philo is answering Demea, saying 'Are you so late...in teaching your children the principles of religion? Is there no danger of their neglecting or rejecting altogether, those opinions, of which they have heard so little during the course of their education?...Your precaution...of seasoning your children's minds with early piety, is certainly very reasonable; and no more than is requisite, in this profane and irreligious age' (D130–1). It is impossible to take these words of Philo's literally, in fact here, as early as Part I, he is beginning to create the atmosphere that will later, at the end of Part XI, cause Cleanthes to say to Demea: '...your friend Philo, from the beginning, has been amusing himself at both our expence' (D213). A smaller, though no less finer, example is to be found later in Part I where Hume has Philo mention '...David's fool, who said in his heart there is no God...' (D139). As to Part XII it may perhaps suffice to point to those passages in which Philo is speaking of a 'well-disposed mind', a 'person, seasoned with a just sense of the imperfections of natural reason' and a 'sound, believing Christian' (D227/8). None of these passages can be taken literally; the irony is clearly present, though we could quote Noxon's saying that 'Hume's chief defensive manoeuvre after demolishing arguments for a religious dogma is to issue a call to faith. It is a mocking call, no doubt; but who could prove it?' (Noxon, 1973, p. 174). Besides, these passages are examples of the absent Demea being very 'present', since, when taken literally, they are of use to Demea only, not to the empirically minded Cleanthes. I will return to this below. As to Philo's irony: I do not want to advocate a policy of explaining away every problem in Philo's statements by calling them ironical, however, not seeing Philo's irony at all means not seeing what Hume wants to say. In the end it means missing the point of the *Dialogues*.

IV. DEMEA'S DEPARTURE

We now come to a point, the importance of which I consider to be underestimated: Demea's leaving the company. When Hume has Demea leave so shortly before Philo's confession, there is reason to look for the influence of the one fact on the other. And this influence certainly exists: Demea's leaving is followed by a change in the *way* the discussion is carried on, not by a change in the points of view of the participants, though, as to this last point, appearances are to the contrary, as I think was Hume's purpose. The relationship between Philo and Cleanthes is one of friendship, they are clearly on good terms, though the presence of the orthodox Demea has had something of a distorting influence on this. Demea's leaving, then, results in a rapprochement between Philo and Cleanthes, which has its influence on the way they continue their conversation, not on their respective conclusions. If this is so, it is of course imperative to consider Demea's departure when interpreting Part XII, and more especially Philo's confession. Actually, when present Demea is of little consequence; he becomes important when absent. To give just one example: close to the end of the *Dialogues* Philo says to Cleanthes 'But believe me...the most natural sentiment, which a well-disposed mind will feel on this occasion, is a longing desire and expectation, that Heaven would be pleased to dissipate, at least alleviate, this profound ignorance, by affording some more particular revelation to mankind, and making discoveries of the nature, attributes, and operations of the divine object of our Faith' (D227). Strictly speaking it is possible to take Philo's words literally, though I consider the result very awkward. However, this passage is a nice example of the way the absent Demea continues to play his role, since Philo's 'confession' here is of no avail to Cleanthes, an empirically minded theologian, defender of the argument of design. The only one to whom this 'confession', this call to revelation, would be of any avail is absent! This, needless to say, is no coincidence.

Special attention is paid to Demea's leaving by D. Rohatyn and S. Sutherland, though both tend to consider his leaving as a separate event and therefore do not see the influence it has on the way the discussion proceeds. Rohatyn refers to it as another attempt 'to "excite a murmur among the zealots"' (Rohatyn, 1983, p. 521), since what Hume 'could not achieve in real life, he sublimated into his art, to achieve vicarious gratification' (Rohatyn, 1983, p. 529). Sutherland discerns a certain technique of Philo's a 'pattern of assent and modification', applied to Demea in Parts I–XI and, after his leaving, to Cleanthes: 'In Part XII precisely the same pattern operates. There are differences, but not significant ones' (Sutherland, 1983, pp. 182/3). In both these cases Demea's leaving is separated from the discussion and is robbed of the influence it does have. This influence is

traceable throughout Part XII, including, of course, Philo's confession, to which I will now turn.

V. PHILO'S CONFESSION

For purposes of discussion I will divide this confession into separate parts, though ultimately it should be considered as a whole. In this confession Philo seems to accept Cleanthes' argument of design, an argument he has tried to refute in the preceding discussion. He says to Cleanthes: 'I must confess... that I am less cautious on the subject of natural religion than on any other; both because I know that I can never, on that head, corrupt the principles of any man of common sense, and because no one, I am confident, in whose eyes I appear a man of common sense, will ever mistake my intentions... no one has a deeper sense of religion impressed on his mind, or pays more profound adoration to the divine Being, as he discovers himself to reason, in the inexplicable contrivance and artifice of nature. A purpose, an intention, or design strikes everywhere the most careless, the most stupid thinker... *nature does nothing in vain... nature acts by the simplest methods, and chooses the most proper means to any end*...' (D214). What are we to make of this? How serious is Philo? How literal are we to take his words?

A Man of Common Sense

When Philo speaks of a 'man of common sense', he is referring to a person whose principles he cannot corrupt. Whether he is pleased by this or not is uncertain. His sayings here have the character of a sober matter-of-fact statement. In a different way Hume made the same point in a conversation he had with Adam Smith, shortly before his death. He there describes a fictive meeting with Charon, the occasion being his reading Lucianus' *Mortuorum Dialogi*. During this meeting the following conversation takes place: '"Have a little patience, good Charon, I have been endeavouring to open the eyes of the public. If I live a few years longer, I may have the satisfaction of seeing the downfall of some of the prevailing systems of superstition". But Charon would then lose all temper and decency. "You loitering rogue, that will not happen these many hundred years. Do you fancy I will grant you a lease for so long a term? Get into the boat this instant, you lazy loitering rogue"'. (Letters, II, p. 451). Especially the fact that Hume's mentioning 'the prevailing systems of superstition' makes Charon finally lose his patience, is of significance since these 'prevailing systems of superstition' are what the *Dialogues* refer to as 'religion, as it has commonly been found in the world' (D223). This is the religion of the 'man of common sense', and his principles cannot be corrupted, as both Philo and Charon are well aware: 'that will not happen these many hundred years'. Here Hume was without false illusions.

Philo says in his confession: 'no one...in whose eyes I appear a man of common sense, will ever mistake my intentions' (D214). Were there, or are there, no doubts about Philo's common sense? The same Cleanthes to whom Philo is addressing himself here has said earlier in the discussion 'you must be sensible that common sense and reason is entirely against you...' (D181). Here Philo is not considered a man of common sense. The same happens in Part III where Cleanthes characterizes the reasonable sceptic as someone who decides 'to adhere to common sense and the plain instincts of nature' (D154), accusing Philo of not doing so. Implicitly Demea does the same when saying, in the beginning of Part II: 'No man; no man, at least, of common sense, I am persuaded, ever entertained a serious doubt with regard to a truth so certain and self-evident' (D141). This truth concerns the existence of God and Philo does have his doubts about this 'truth'; at least this much becomes clear to Demea as well. So no man of common sense after all? Did not Demea participate in the discussion, up unto the end of Part XI, in the mistaken conviction that Philo was such a man of common sense, and didn't he find out, rather late, that, if so, Philo's opinion of common sense differed rather strongly from his own? I think we can safely say that Philo did not appear a man of common sense, in the eyes of neither Cleanthes nor Demea.

The Inexplicable Contrivance

Referring to Philo's 'deeper sense of religion' and 'profound adoration to the divine Being' E. C. Mossner says: 'No. These pious feelings, or rather passions, are totally alien to the man David Hume. They derive solely from faith, and by his own avowal David Hume ever since youth was devoid of religious faith' (Mossner, 1977, p. 13). To this we may add that this 'adoration' concerns 'the divine Being, as he discovers himself to reason in the inexplicable contrivance and artifice of nature' (D214). Now, Parts I to XI have made it extremely doubtful that this Being does so discover himself, otherwise an empirical inference to his existence would be possible, an inference which Philo claims to be improbable, if not impossible, making some allowances for the consistence of his existence with the empirical facts: '...however consistent the world may be, allowing certain suppositions and conjectures, with the idea of such a Deity, it can never afford us an inference concerning his existence ' (D205). This, of course, is the reason why Philo says this 'contrivance and artifice of nature' is 'inexplicable', there is no discovering a divine Being in it.

The Most Stupid Thinker

In his confession Philo says: 'A purpose, an intention, or design strikes everywhere the most careless, the most stupid thinker' (D214). How stupid a thinker is Philo? 'Careless' he was already said to be, in the introduction. That this design did strike him, I agree, but it made him remark that 'The

whole presents nothing but the idea of a blind nature, impregnated by a great vivifying principle, and pouring forth from her lap, without discernment or parental care, her maimed and abortive children' (D211). More in tune with the way the discussion proceeds in Part XII, Philo there shows what this design entitles us to conclude at the most: '*That nature does nothing in vain*' and '*that nature acts by the simplest methods, and chooses the most proper means to any end*' (D214). As an example Philo refers to Galenus' reasonings concerning the structure of the human body. Here, again, I think Philo's words are not without irony, that is, though it may be possible to take his words literally, they have more the character of a reductio ad absurdum: '...above 600 different muscles;...in each of them at least ten different circumstances...So that, in the muscles alone, above 6000 several views and intentions must have been formed and executed. The bones he calculates to be 284: The distinct purposes, aimed at in the structure of each, above forty. What a prodigious display of artifice...' (D215). And this refers only to the muscles and bones, generously leaving out of consideration the 'skin, ligaments, vessels, glandules, humours, the several limbs and members of the body..." (D215). According to, for instance, C. W. Hendel Philo here shows himself 'a genuine lover of science' telling 'of his pleasure in listening to the argument of Galen concerning the structure of the human body' (Hendel, 1963, p. 344). In my view, however, his statements are rather ambiguous, to say the least. When Philo then asks himself 'to what pitch of pertinacious obstinacy must a philosopher in this age have attained, who can now doubt of a supreme intelligence?' (D215), he knows very well to have answered this question before, for instance in Part V, saying: '...when the bounds of nature are so infinitely enlarged, and such a magnificent scene is opened to us...It is still more unreasonable to form our idea of so unlimited a cause from our experience of the narrow productions of human design and invention' (D166). There is therefore enough reason to weigh Philo's statements carefully here too, since their meaning does not show when to take them literally.

A Dubious Invitation

Philo ends his confession by asking what a God, supposing there were one, who did not discover himself immediately to our senses, could do to convince us of his existence. The answer Philo himself supplies to this question is: to 'copy the present oeconomy of things' (D215). However, in the preceding Part XI Philo said that there are a number of circumstances to be held responsible for the existence of all or nearly all evil, none of which circumstances appears to our human reason to be in any way necessary. The invitation to 'copy the present oeconomy of things' is therefore rather dubious, also because of Philo's concluding that '...the original source of all things is entirely indifferent to all these principles, and has no more regard to good

above ill than to heat above cold, or to drought above moisture, or to light above heavy' (D212). All this sheds a peculiar light on Philo's remark about the arguments that should make us conclude to the existence of the divine Being, namely that 'no human imagination can compute their number, and no understanding estimate their cogency...' (D216). The ambiguity of these arguments is such that in fact any conclusion is untenable.

Review

Looking back at Philo's confession we have the following overall view. Demea has left the company and his departure makes itself felt in the way the discussion is continued. Philo speaks in a conciliatory voice to Cleanthes 'with whom I live in unreserved intimacy' (D214), the same Cleanthes who, already in Part II, made it clear that he did not want to lose time 'in circumlocutions...much less in replying to the pious declamations of Philo' (D143). This insight of Cleanthes' is also, perhaps especially, applicable to Part XII. The actual contents of Philo's confession is expressible in the two principles that 'nature does nothing in vain' and that 'nature acts by the simplest methods, and chooses the most proper means to any end'. These two principles, among other things, will, at the end of the discussion, cause Philo to summarize his views in saying '...*that the cause or causes of order in the universe probably bear some remote analogy to human intelligence*...' (D227). (An analysis of this final conclusion of Philo's I have given elsewhere.)

VI. CONCLUSION

The arguments given above, based on the literary and dramatic character of the *Dialogues*, may not be convincing when taken separately; considered as a whole, as they should be – from the lesser one concerning the structure of the work, to the more important ones, such as Philo's confession – their effect is cumulative. To pay attention to this literary and dramatic character is most certainly 'convincing' and 'philosophically interesting', even stronger, it is a conditio sine qua non for a correct interpretation of Hume's *Dialogues*, written after all by one of Scotland's foremost 'men of letters'.

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