

HUME'S LEGACY OF PHILOSOPHICAL THEOLOGY

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One of the most stunning and surprising effects of David Hume's *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* comes in recognizing the large number of powerful arguments and profound positions packed into only roughly a hundred pages. Charles W. Hendel in his study of Hume contends that Hume's friends regarded *Dialogues* to be the best thing he had ever written, a judgment in which, Hendel claims, Hume concurred.¹ There is strong reason to believe that the material in *Dialogues* began in embryonic stage in Hume's early adulthood and that the question of theism and its relationship to morality bedeviled him for at least three decades of his life.

My suggestion is that the philosophical depth and impact of Hume's *Dialogues* resulted at least in part from its significance as an artistic creation. The work can be fruitfully compared to another artistic triumph that is one of the greatest works in philosophical theology: Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*. Both *Dialogues* and *The Brothers Karamazov* deal overtly with the relationship between theistic religion and morality. *The Brothers Karamazov* is well-known for its detailed defense of the position that, without God and immortality, everything is (morally) possible. H. B. Dalrymple has argued convincingly that the primary purpose of Hume's *Dialogues* is "to place morality on a footing independent of religion."²

In Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*, the middle Karamazov son, Ivan, represents the skeptic. He takes the role played by Philo in Hume's *Dialogues* over a century earlier. Ivan gave such powerful criticisms of theism that Dostoevsky as a Russian Orthodox Christian worried that he had allowed Ivan to slip out of control and spawn arguments that Dostoevsky could not answer in his novel. Similarly, in *Dialogues* Philo exploded with devastating criticisms that seemed to drive

theism out of court. And yet at the end of *Dialogues*, the narrator of the relentless philosophical exchange concluded that, while the skeptic (Philo) carried the day against the orthodox theist (Demea), the more enlightened representative of philosophical theism (Cleanthes) came closer to the truth than did the skeptic (Philo).³

Philosophers have debated at length whether Philo represents Hume's own view or whether the honor goes to Cleanthes. It has also been argued that Hume had not settled the question of theism in his own mind. A fourth position states that while Hume had settled it for himself, he did not wish to alienate his readers by appearing in *Dialogues* to come down on one side rather than the other.⁴

It is noteworthy that, in defending theism, Dostoevsky appears to move away from orthodoxy and toward a kind of universalism in which no one will be finally damned. Similarly, even when Philo the skeptic embraces the argument from design and its accompanying theism, it is a theism that has been thoroughly qualified and chastened, so much so that some believers would regard it as theism in name only.

My thesis is that, in preparing *Dialogues* for publication, Hume had two overriding motives. First, he wished to reinforce the spirit of moderation, or the philosophic temperament, in both skeptics and theists. Since his interest in morality was no weaker than his interest in religion, he saw the possibility of strengthening the common moral ground between skeptics like Philo and theists like Cleanthes. For the sake of moral commonality, therefore, Philo gives assent to the argument from design, especially when the analogy between the human mind and the Supreme Mind is seen as weak. It is essential to see that Philo regards the analogy to be the weakest at the point of morality. In short, human morality and divine goodness are only remotely related. Although Philo yields to the argument from design, he yields nothing to those who insist on deducing moral laws from their putative knowledge of the Supreme Mind.⁵

I conjecture that Hume's second powerful motive in preparing *Dialogues* for publication was his lifelong ambition

to make a name for himself in the literary tradition. *Dialogues* is an astounding literary achievement with an educational thrust. That is, it finds its home among such literary masterpieces as Plato's dialogues, Cicero's *On the Nature of the Gods*, and Galileo's *Dialogue on the Great World Systems*. Doubtless, George Berkeley's dialogues had made a lasting impact on Hume, and Cleanthes in some ways appears to be a mutation of that esteemed bishop. The priest Nicolas Malebranche, who wrote his own dialogues on metaphysics and religion, greatly contributed to the skepticism of Hume, who came to respect believers who were not zealots or enthusiasts.

Philo makes peace with the argument from design only after taming the beast through a brilliant give-and-take battle. Few documents in the history of philosophy or theology can compare with Hume's *Dialogues* as a masterwork of educational literature. In many ways, it turns British empiricism away from the naive presumption that objective inquiry begins with a neutral tabula rasa (Locke) that is presumed to be free of all biases (Bacon). Hume understands custom and habit so well that he finds it necessary to create a new version of empirical objectivity. Instead of suppressing the rival biases, he boldly brings them into the arena, breathes the life of eloquence into them, and gives them worthy lines that are strong and powerful.

The novelist of ideas par excellence, Dostoevsky believed that as an *artist* he could do nothing less than give the embodied ideas their best representation and then subject each to rigorous criticism. Anything less was regarded as dishonest. I suggest that by placing empirical education back in the dialogic literary stream, Hume helped save empiricism from the tyranny of the presumption of the neutral starting point. *Dialogues* makes it clear that objectivity is an achievement, a goal to reach for and to approximate only when the many rival biases are both given their day in court and subjected to the severest criticism. Hume sought for education what his friend and colleague Adam Smith sought for economics, namely, a free market of open competition and free trade.

This metaphor is crucial in understanding *Dialogues* as a

literary and educational masterwork. As a masterwork, it functions as a marketplace of views, criticisms, and arguments of highest quality. The marketplace metaphor is quite similar to what Mikhail Bakhtin sees in Dostoevsky as "the carnival" where "the utterances of Dostoevsky's heroes are an arena of perpetual struggle with the other's world in all spheres of life and ideological creation."⁶

As a literary artist, Hume cannot reveal himself directly in *Dialogues*, for strictly speaking it is a polyphonic work revealing the story of the conflict of ideas. Philosophers have understandably tried to find Hume on stage, as it were, in *Dialogues*; but he is not there to be found. Or, more accurately, he is in the actors but cannot be reduced to any one of them. Nor is he to be wholly identified with any one set of arguments in the tale. He is busy developing the position of naturalism. He is also busy writing lines for the theist. Ideas march brilliantly on stage, polytheism clashing with monotheism, ancient Epicureanism with the new deism, and naturalism with the Brahmin's view of an infinite spider who, having spun the world from its entrails, annihilated it by absorbing it into its own essence.⁷

In addition to summoning many of the great philosophies of the past, *Dialogues* has proved itself to be a seedbed of ideas developed by philosophers coming after him. Most fruitful is the position of a God who is "finitely perfect,"⁸ a position with roots in Plato's *Timaeus* but developed by J. S. Mill in *Theism* and later by the American philosophers William James and E. S. Brightman. Almost all of Mill's case for finite theism can be found in Hume's *Dialogues*.

It is also clear that Hume had lasting influence on Charles Darwin through William Paley (whose argument from design became widely read by Darwin and the educated in England) and through Thomas Malthus. Indeed, Hume in *Dialogues* sometimes sounds almost like Darwin or Huxley:

And why should man . . . pretend to be an exemption from the lot of all other animals? . . . A perpetual war is kindled amongst all living creatures . . .

The stronger prey upon the weaker to keep them in perpetual terror and anxiety. The weaker, too, in their turn, often prey upon the stronger Consider the innumerable race of insects, which either are bred on the body of each animal or, flying about, infix their stings in him. The insects have others still less than themselves which torment them. And thus on each hand, before and behind, above and below, every animal is surrounded with enemies which incessantly seek his misery and destruction.⁹

Like Hume and Darwin, Dostoevsky in his four great novels wrestles with the grisly thought that the world operates by a cannibalistic or reptilian principle. Hume would have quickly understood Dostoevsky's fear expressed in *The Idiot* by Ippolit, according to whom:

All that's needed is my worthless life, the life of an atom, to complete some universal harmony; for some sort of plus and minus, for the sake of some sort of contrast, and so on, just as the life of millions of creatures is needed every day as a sacrifice, as without their death, the rest of the world couldn't go on But so be it! I admit that otherwise, that is without the continual devouring of one another, it would have been impossible to arrange the world.¹⁰

Hume, no less graphic in his literary style than the Russian novelist, speaks in *Dialogues* of the universe passing "through innumerable revolutions" of trial and error, earlier stages serving as "the feeble embryo of a world," with unguided matter bungling its way out of chaos into a kind of proto-natural selection process until "some regular form" lays claim to "their corrupted matter."¹¹

Indeed, *Dialogues* cannot be summarized because it is already a digest of arguments and theories whirling around the

key question: Is the universe purposive and under the care of Providence, or is the whole so aimless and void of moral distinction that cosmically the distinction between Caligula and Socrates is meaningless and pointless?

The conflicts and agonies of mind suffered by such articulate Victorians as Tennyson, Arnold, Eliot, and Darwin had already been given voice in the eighteenth-century literary triumph and philosophical volcano innocently titled *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*. Also in it are prefigured William James's distinction between the tough-minded and the tender-minded philosopher¹² and James's essay "The Will to Believe."¹³ There is even a strong foreshadowing of process cosmology, especially Samuel Alexander's doctrine of the *nisus*¹⁴ and Karl Popper's rejection of idealism and acceptance of cosmic novelty.¹⁵ Most conspicuously, as Dalrymple notes, Hume's attempt to cut away the net that theology has cast over morality and ethics anticipates Kant's attempt to subdue theology in the interest of morality, social grace, and good will.

Hume's *Dialogues* is one of the richest and most compact cornucopias in the history of philosophy of religion. But it is also a literary masterpiece.

NOTES

¹Charles W. Hendel, *Studies in the Philosophy of David Hume* (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1963) 372.

²Houghton B. Dalrymple, "Philo on the God of Religion," unpublished manuscript provided by the author.

³David Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, ed. Henry D. Aikin (New York: Hafner, 1951), XII, 95.

⁴Favoring Philo as Hume's representative are F. Paulsen, L. Stephensen, and H. D. Aikin; favoring Cleanthes are Dugald Stewart, A. C. Fraser, and B. McEwen; and thinking that Hume intended to be noncommittal in *Dialogues* are H. Höffding,

R. Falckenburg, and W. Windelband.

⁵Hume, *Dialogues* X, 70; XI, 71; XII, 88.

⁶Christopher R. Pike, "Formalist and Structuralist Approaches to Dostoevsky," in *New Essays on Dostoevsky*, ed. Malcolm V. Jones and Gaith M. Terry (New York: Cambridge UP, 1983) 198.

⁷Hume, *Dialogues* VII, 51.

⁸Hume, *Dialogues* XI, 71.

⁹Hume, *Dialogues* X, 62-63.

¹⁰Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Idiot*, trans. Constance Garnett (New York: Modern Library, 1983) 393-94.

¹¹Hume, *Dialogues* VIII, 53-55. Joseph D. Stamey is doubtless correct in arguing that Demea represents the rationalistic tradition that depended heavily on the argument from perfection. In a devastating passage, Philo undermines that tradition by simply noting that "all perfection is entirely relative" (II, 16). Demea's insistence (against Cleanthes) that the Supreme Mind is incomprehensible appears to be a way to avoid making clear (i.e., explicit) the idea of perfection, lest its relativity and lack of logical necessity be exposed.

¹²Hume, *Dialogues* XII, 87n.

¹³Hume, *Dialogues* XII, 84.

¹⁴Hume, *Dialogues* VIII, 54.

¹⁵Hume, *Dialogues* II, 22.