

Kenneth Williford (Ed.). *Hume's Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion: A Philosophical Appraisal*. Routledge 2023. 444 pp. \$190.00 USD (Hardcover 9781138087071); \$54.00 USD (Paperback 9781032594286).

“It is utterly impossible to give a fair analysis of this book,” wrote a reviewer of David Hume’s *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* in 1779, “and those who do not wish to disturb their reason and endanger their peace of mind are advised not to go through the drudgery of the whole.” The reviewer’s verdict is not shared by today’s philosophers, of course: the *Dialogues* are generally regarded as a philosophical as well as a literary masterpiece. The enduring philosophical interest of the work is plausibly owing to its argumentative complexity—what Kenneth Williford describes in his introduction to his collection of essays on the *Dialogues* as “the criss-crossing three-way dialectic, involving several dimensions, that entangles its interlocutors in rapidly shifting alliances” (3)—as well to the complicated background of early modern philosophy against which it takes place, not always familiar to the modern reader.

Williford’s introduction and the first two essays, by Simon Blackburn and Clark Glymour, are prefatory in nature. The introduction explains the goals of the book and provides “idiosyncratic summaries” of each chapter—the adjective ‘idiosyncratic’ is Williford’s, and it aptly describes, for example, his comment that Alvin Plantinga’s “Reformed Epistemology” is “highly objectionable ... a thinly-veiled confusion of causation and justification” (9) while describing Todd Ryan’s chapter, in which Plantinga is not mentioned. Blackburn’s essay is a polished and readable introduction to the *Dialogues* in general, which focuses on the historical more than the philosophical, while Glymour’s contribution not only discusses the humor of the *Dialogues* but also claims, plausibly, that Hume sought to provide “a model, not a survey ... a recipe book” (38) for defeating the claims of natural religion.

Of the remaining chapters, only one—Elliott Sober’s “A Bayesian Double Negative” (chapter 3)—really fulfills the promise of the book’s subtitle by offering a philosophical appraisal of the *Dialogues*. In a string of articles, chapters, reviews, and his monograph *The Design Argument* (Cambridge University Press, 2018), Sober previously addressed the arguments of the *Dialogues* piecemeal, but here he focuses exclusively on them, to good effect. His treatment uses the modern conception of probability, which Hume was aching close to encountering. But Cleanthes’s argument for design involves arguing from analogy, so Philo generally responds in kind (with the exception of *Dialogues* II.24, where he takes Cleanthes to use inductive sampling), offering rival



analogies to undermine the argument. Philo's final position, though, is that the argument collapses because degrees of similarity are inscrutable.

What happens when the arguments are reconstructed in Bayesian terms? Sober cogently argues that Cleanthes would not be able to justify the assumptions necessary for concluding either that the design hypothesis is probable, given the evidence, or that the evidence favors the design hypothesis over any of its competitors. But Philo would not be able to justify the assumptions necessary for concluding that the rival analogies he offers are on a par with Cleanthes's. Thus, what Sober offers is not a doubly negated verdict on a single argument but two negative verdicts on separate arguments. "Bayesianism leaves the design argument in tatters," he summarizes, "but it has the same impact on Philo's critique of that argument" (64). Yet the Bayesian problems for the design argument that he identified are, he plausibly suggests, in the spirit of Philo's arguments in *Dialogues* XII.

In his essay (chapter 4), Todd Ryan considers the supposed 'irregular' argument from design that Cleanthes is sometimes taken as offering in *Dialogues* III, convincingly arguing (partly by way of a clever appeal to Hume's essay "Of the Standard of Taste") that Cleanthes is not offering a new argument. In her contribution (chapter 5), Annemarie Butler defends the claim "that in Demea's argument, we can discern features of John Locke's views about the demonstrability of God's existence" (91). Andrew Pyle argues in his contribution (chapter 6) that the *Dialogues* overall are offering a case for atheism — or, at least, a position that "is perfectly compatible with atheism as we understand the term today" (134). Among the interesting features in Pyle's contribution is the comparison of a draft of *Dialogues* IV.14 with the improved final version.

Evan Fales (chapter 7) suggests that *Dialogues* I attempts to insulate common sense and science from the same skeptical critique to which Philo subjects natural religion. Philo and Cleanthes agree that common sense and science depend on the same sources of knowledge; that their conclusions are legitimate, skepticism aside; and that theism, to be legitimate, must also depend on the same sources of knowledge. Endorsing these views, he considers a variety of metaphysical and epistemological arguments for the illegitimacy of theism — surprisingly without citing his own *Divine Intervention: Metaphysical and Epistemological Puzzles* (Routledge, 2010). Although Fales identifies certain approaches as failed, he offers no definitive verdict, instead suggesting only that "science and theism will require a great deal of marriage counseling before they can live together in happy harmony" (152).

Lorne Falkenstein devotes his chapter 8 to carefully considering possible explanations of Demea's departure in *Dialogues* XII, eventually concluding that he was worried about the likely prospect of Philo's claiming that God is indifferent to virtue and vice. In their aptly titled "Hume's Palimpsest" (chapter 9), Emilio Mazzo and Gianluca Mori meticulously and illuminatingly discuss the development of the conclusion of the *Dialogues*: from a consistent Baylean atheism through a feigned Human theism, later softened, to the final version's attempt to deflate the conflict between atheism and theism. Particularly interesting is their suggestion that Philo's reference to the views held by 'some people' in *Dialogues* XII.33 alludes to Bolingbroke, whose posthumous works were published, and read by Hume, not long before Hume added the reference.

In chapter 10, David O'Connor claims that Hume argued that natural religion threatens theism and that "skepticism is the best antidote, whether as prevention or as defense" (201), suggesting that he largely succeeded in doing so. In chapter 11, John P. Wright informatively addresses "Reason and Passion in Hume's Philosophy of Religion," considering Hume's corpus in general. In chapter 12, entitled "Philo's Two Designers and Humean Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone," Charles Nussbaum offers to clarify various puzzles in the *Dialogues* through two distinctions: "between intelligent design and moral design ... and between the intelligent designer of natural theology and the perfect deity of the Christian religion" (233): the case for finding the former distinction in the *Dialogues* seems inadequate, however, and the relevance of much of the chapter to the *Dialogues* is diminished as a result.

In his contribution (chapter 14), John Reiss, a zoologist by trade, considers the question of whom to credit with the demise of the argument from design, Hume or Darwin, concluding that not only Hume but also Epicurus and the ancient Greek atomists should be credited. Yet Darwin deserves credit for transforming the study of life into a science. Of particular interest is the discussion of the principle of superabundant provision, as in John Ray's *Wisdom of God Manifested in the Works of Creation* (which Hume may well have read): "it is," Reiss writes, "the only thing that justifies any continued confidence in the inference to design, and the inference not just that God exists, and is a skilled mechanic, but also that He is a caring one" (264). And it's deployed in the *Dialogues*: Cleanthes, as Reiss and Sober note, challenges Philo to explain the "conveniences and advantages humans find in nature" (*Dialogues* VIII.10).

Pete LeGrant argues in his contribution (chapter 14) that the idea that "[t]he world ... is an animal, and the Deity is the SOUL of the world" (*Dialogues* VI.3), advanced by Philo as a rival to

Cleanthes's design hypothesis, is distinctively connected to a necessitarianism like Spinoza's, while Williford similarly argues in chapter 15—which occupies a whopping 110 pages, including the notes, some of which occupy more than a page—for a broader thesis that Philo is defending a naturalistic necessitarianism that Hume's readers would have associated with the ancient philosopher Strato and thus with Spinoza. A section of Williford's chapter documents and attempts to explain the failure of commentators to explore the possible connections between Spinoza and Hume; between them, LeGrant and Williford provide ample evidence that such exploration is worthwhile.

Hume's Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion is certainly not for the lay reader, although a handful of the chapters—Blackburn's, Glymour's, Sober's, Pyle's, and Reiss's—would be both comprehensible by and of interest to a motivated undergraduate student. Clearly the readers who will benefit the most from the book will be professional philosophers specializing in early modern philosophy, both for their teaching and for their own work—it would be a valuable source of secondary readings for a course on Hume's philosophy of religion, and Sober's chapter should be a baseline for any future work attempting to assess the central arguments of the *Dialogues*. Williford is to be commended for assembling such a wide-ranging and interesting collection of essays. (But the compositor is to be condemned for the annoying missing spaces—e.g., 'Demea'spronouncements' (157)—scattered throughout the volume!)

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