An Application of Michel Meyer's Theory of Problematology to David Hume's *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*

JAMES L. GOLDEN

Department of Communication
Ohio State University
Columbus, Ohio 43210
U.S.A.

ABSTRACT: This study advances the claim that Hume's *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, which drew its inspiration and guidelines from Cicero's *De Natura Deorum*, fulfills four basic elements of Michel Meyer's theory of problematology. In doing so, it is argued, the *Dialogues* contribute importantly to our understanding of the question-answer pair, and to the notion of rhetoric as a way of knowing.

KEY WORDS: Anthropomorphic, apocritical, context, epistemic, inclination, irony, problematology, propositionalism, question-answer pair, reason, skepticism.

In the preceding essay by David Jamison, we have seen how Michel Meyer has extended our knowledge of language by focusing on the major role that questions and answers play in argumentative discourse. Because the principal theme of this issue of *Argumentation* is on questioning and answering, and since Professor Meyer has developed a theory of problematology grounded in the question-answer pair, this essay will make use of the problematological theory which he devised by applying it to a historically significant philosophical work — David Hume's *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion*.

The rationale for selecting Hume's *Dialogues* for analysis rests upon several factors. First, by use of the dialectical structure, it features the relationship between questions and answers. Secondly, it has been described as "the most searching discussion of their subject in the whole history of philosophy" (Chappell, p. xiv), and as the most "brilliant" philosophical dialogue "in the English language" (Mossner, p. 2). Thirdly, and perhaps more importantly, the *Dialogues* have produced considerable unresolved controversy during the past two centuries with respect to the specific message which Hume wished to leave as his legacy in the field of natural religion. To highlight the widespread interest that still exists in probing the meaning of the *Dialogues*, the journal *Hume Studies* published three essays on this subject in its November, 1988 issue.

The pattern to be used in the ensuing discussion is to summarize and

briefly explain the parts of Meyer's theory that have heuristic value, and then apply these elements to the *Dialogues* which sets for itself the task of answering the difficult abstract question: What is the nature of God? Before an application of Meyer's ideas is undertaken, however, it will be necessary to show how the writings of Cicero in general and his *De Natura Deorum* in particular had a profound influence on Hume's work. This approach, it is hoped, will provide additional insights both on the nature of the *Dialogues* and on how questions and answers interact with each other for the purpose of generating knowledge.

MEYER'S PROBLEMATOLOGICAL THEORY

As Professor Jamison and I have indicated in an earlier study (1988), there are four basic premises inherent in Meyer's theory of problematology. *A fundamental starting point of his theory is its emphasis on the dynamic relationship that exists between questions and answers in discourse.* A question, Meyer states, is synonymous with a problem (1981). Since it may or may not take the form of an interrogative structure, it may be expressed in a variety of ways ("Science as a Questioning Process," p. 58). But whatever its structure, a question is a statement of a problem that requires an appropriate response. Of importance here is the fact that an answer, instead of offering a final resolution to a problem, sets into motion other questions which, in turn, generate a need for more answers.

The ongoing process that characterizes the question-answer pair is a major component of problematology. Regrettably, argues Meyer, Plato, despite his fascination for dialectic, and Aristotle, notwitstanding his commitment to rhetoric, never fully understood the proper relationship between questions and answers ("Dialectic and Questioning"). Both men, he notes, gave to answers the transcendent position. In doing so, they, along with the sophists they freely criticized, debased the importance of questions. This tendency to elevate answers while denigrating the value of questions, Meyer adds, adversely influenced Descartes, the logical empiricists, and much of modern scientific inquiry because it encouraged these authors to downplay the significance of probability in discourse.

Meyer's theory of problematology, secondly, articulates the principle that problematological answers take precedence over apocritical ones as a means of scholarly inquiry. In problematological questioning, as Meyer perceives it, "the questioner proceeds from question to answer, each answer sustaining the research ... by being itself a new question, or at least by giving rise to one." Since "each answer is but a step in the whole process," it must be regarded as a "partial answer" ("Science as a Questioning Process," p. 60). A problematological question, therefore, arises from the problem that inspires it; and it produces, at best, a problematological answer. As a result, its very essence is rhetorical.

By contrast an apocritical answer is one that claims to be the resolution of a problem. Yet such an answer tends to ignore or suppress the questions that constitute a problem which requires careful exploration. The practice of employing apocritical answers that fail to "mention the questions that they solve," Meyer holds, has led to a crisis in modern philosophy (*Meaning and Reading*, p. 54).

A third essential aspect of the theory of problematology is its focus on meaning, context, and reference. Meaning is discovered when the rhetor becomes aware of a specific problem that is being answered. In other words, there is a perceived relationship between the "answer and the question it solves." ("Science as a Questioning Process," p. 70). For this perception to occur, the context in which the question-answer pair functions must be seen clearly by the audience. The fact that scientific inquiry, according to Meyer, is inclined to play down the significance of context and reference causes a loss in persuasive force as a question-answer model (1982, p. 87).

Finally, problematology, with its basic concern for the problem of questioning, utilizes an argumentation-centered theory of rhetoric that rejects the use of the propositional model, and promotes the idea of communication as an epistemic art or science. The theory of problematology suggests that human inquiry at its highest makes use of the question-answer process. Viewed from this perspective, an argument, the purpose of which is to persuade, is an expression of an opinion or a question. Thus "the essence of discourse," Meyer observes, is "to raise a question," which is another way of saying "to argue" (1982, p. 99). It follows, therefore, that since rhetoric is "the voice of the problematic," it loses its uniqueness and power when it permits propositionalism to become dominant. The propositional model, in stressing answers and devaluing questions, has been the primary historical cause, states Meyer, responsible for the inclination of critics to equate rhetoric with a form of sophistic ("Problematology and Rhetoric," p. 120).

Problematology, in short, is "a philosophy of language based on the interrogativity of the mind"; moreover, it correctly recognizes "that the essence of language is the question-answer pair, and that all discourse is a response to a problem." Problematology, therefore, contains "an element of dynamism that has the capacity to generate knowledge both for the interrogator and the respondent" (Golden and Jamison, 1988, p. 160).

CICERO'S INFLUENCE ON HUME

Although the basic elements of Meyer's theory of problematology, as he points out, differs in some respects from the teachings and practices of Plato and Aristotle with respect to the relationship between questions and answers, they seem consistent with the basic thrust of Cicero's rhetorical

essays and philosophical treatises. For this reason it is important at this juncture to see how Cicero's writings contribute significantly to our understanding of how Hume formulated and articulated his ideas on a theme which commanded his lifelong interest — the subject of natural religion.

Hume's attachment to Cicero began early in his career and continued throughout his life. At the age of fourteen, he, as noted in his *Autobiography*, was "secretly devouring" the pages of Cicero even though his parents wanted him to forsake the classics in favor of law (Greig, 1932, II, p. 297). In his strictly philosophical works, Hume quoted from or alluded to Cicero on at least thirty eight occasions. He referred approvingly to *De Oratore, De Officiis, De Divinatione, De Re Publica, De Legibus*, the *Tusculan Disputations*, and to numerous orations. He followed a similar practice in his miscellaneous essays, letters, and brief *Autobiography*. In making these allusions, Hume found it difficult to conceal his favorable sentiments. He praised the "eloquent books of *De Oratore*," the logical structure of *De Finibus*, and expressed the hope that "the beautiful presentation of virtue" contained in *De Officiis* would become meaningful for his own life (Greig, I, p. 142).

The pervasive influence which Cicero had on Hume was perhaps most evident in the area of religion. That *De Natura Deorum*, for example, was the principal inspiration for the writing of the *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion* there can be little doubt. Here are but a few of the striking similarities. Both deal with the theme of ascertaining the attributes of God; both use the dialogue from of discourse which includes three philosophical and theological perspectives that were popular at the time of publication; both make use of Greek and Roman names to designate the interlocutors; and both studiously avoid giving a clear statement of the author's own views.[1]

Three things in particular impressed Hume when he read *De Natura Deorum*. First was Cicero's use of the dialogue format as a means of presenting and refuting arguments on a delicate subject which has strong emotional overtones. He admired the fact that in Cicero's effort to use a balanced approach, he set forth the major theological positions of the three dominant philosophical schools of thought in the first century, B.C. — Epicureanism, Stoicism, and Academicism or Skepticism. To be the spokesmen of these views, he selected the Epicurean Gaius Velleius, the Stoic Lucilius Balbus, and the Academic Gaius Cotta.[2] Adopting a similar plan, Hume chose as his three primary discussants a representative of religious orthodoxy (Demea), of philosophical Christianity (Cleanthes), and of skepticism (Philo). This practice made it possible for each author to put before his readers a summary of the principal world views concerning God's nature.

Secondly, Cicero caught Hume's attention by his clear recognition of the central role of probability in the development of responses to

problems. In Cicero's prefatory remarks in *De Natura Deorum*, he reaffirmed a position he had taken in his rhetorical treatises and orations on the subject of probability. We cannot, he tells us, "hold an opinion that is not true, or to maintain with unhesitating certainty a proposition not based on adequate examination, comprehension and knowledge" (I.1.2). Later he suggested that truth can only be discovered by relying on arguments which present all sides of a question (I.v.11). To emphasize the role that argumentation must play in the creation of knowledge, he warned that although infallibility in reasoning is rarely possible, arguments, if properly developed, may exemplify such "distinctness and clearness" that they "can serve to direct the conduct of the wise man" (I.v.12).

The belief that the function of argumentation is to establish persuasive probabilities in which the audience must be involved as a participating respondent had, according to Cicero, a special relevance for the important problem of religion. For this, he said, "is a topic in which it seems proper to summon all the world to sit in judgment" and pronounce which doctrine "is the true one" (I.vi.13). In his subsequent essay *De Fato*, Cicero mentioned what his strategy had been in *De Natura Deorum*. Using essentially the same sentiment quoted above, he observed that he had set "out a continued discourse both for and against, to enable each student to accept for himself the view that seems to him the most probable" (I.1).

A third factor in *De Natura Deorum* that was to have a noticeable impact on Hume's *Dialogues* was Cicero's concluding statement indicating that the major problem of the dialogue had not been solved. On this point, he offered the following evaluation:

> Here the conversation ended, and we parted, Velleius thinking Cotta's discourse to be the truer while I felt that Balbus approximated more nearly to a semblance of the truth. (III.xi.95)

Cicero's inclination to announce a divided opinion on the outcome of the debate prepared the way for the audience to render the ultimate decision. In a subsequent section of this study, we will observe how Hume's decision to follow the practice of Cicero by concluding the *Dialogues* with a critical assessment of the outcome of the debate has generated an ongoing controversy concerning the intended meaning he wished to convey.

Cicero's influence on Hume, in sum, not only was philosophical and theological in scope but also rhetorical. Not surprisingly, therefore, Greig has noted that "in writing the *Dialogues*, Hume used "as his model Cicero's *De Natura Deorum*, and tended to follow it too closely" (1931, p. 231).[3]

But despite Hume's unusually strong dependence on Cicero in his conception and execution of the *Dialogues*, this heavy reliance in no way prevented him from putting his own original stamp on his work. Among

the important differences between the two publications are these: (1) instead of relying upon himself as a narrator, as did Cicero, Hume created the character of Pamphilus to carry out this task; (2) rather than give each speaker an opportunity to deliver lengthy uninterrupted speeches, as was the case in *De Natura Deorum*, the *Dialogues* enhanced the dramatic quality by utilizing frequent interactions among the interlocutors; and (3) the *Dialogues*, more so than was evident in *De Natura Deorum*, made use of arguments that often were at variance with influential spokesmen who came down hard on the side of traditional interpretations of religion. Thus it seems clear that Hume, while relying extensively on Cicero, nevertheless felt constrained to make those changes in his approach which might help give a more enduring philosophical and literary quality to the *Dialogues*.

A PROBLEMATOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF THE *DIALOGUES*

It is against the background of Meyer's theory of discourse and Cicero's influence on Hume that we are now ready to examine *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion*. Specifically, the questions to be explored are these: (1) do the *Dialogues* feature questions and answers that have a dynamic and ongoing relationship with each other; (2) do they show a preference for problematological answers rather than apocritical ones; (3) to what extent are the interactions among the participants influenced by context; and (4) are they designed to assert propositions based on a preconceived conclusion, or to present alternative views in order to create fresh knowledge grounded in probability?

The Relationship of Questions and Answers in the Dialogues

At the outset of the *Dialogues*, Hume, using *De Natura Deorum* as his guideline, made it clear what he thought the problem under consideration was to be. Speaking through the voice of the narrator Pamphilus, he acknowledges in the preface that the question of the being of God is an accepted truth shared both by the uneducated masses and the intellectually elite. He then has Pamphilus say: "But in the treating of this obvious and important truth; what obscure questions occur, concerning the *nature* of that divine Being; his attributes, his decrees, his plan of providence?" (Smith, 1947, p. 128).

So that there would be no misunderstanding, the statement of the crucial issue was reaffirmed throughout the *Dialogues*. In Part II, Demea, the devout adherent to orthodox faith, reminded his colleagues that they should remember that the question before them "is not concerning the *being* but the *nature* of God" (II, p. 143). This sentiment was repeated by the sceptic Philo:

> But surely, where reasonable men treat these subjects, the question can never be concerning the *being*, but only the *nature* of the Deity. The former truth ... is unquestionable and self evident. (II, p. 142)

The fact that all discussants announced as a starting point that the problem they were analyzing was limited to God's nature did not deter them from presenting arguments pertaining to his existence. This was true of each of the three major participants. Demea, for example, introduced this theme "four times," Cleanthes "seven times," and Philo "ten times" (Mossner, p. 14). With deep emotion Demea on two occasions chastized Cleanthes for his perceived failure to offer adequate proof supporting the premise that God, indeed, does exist. In Part II, for instance, he exclaimed: "What! No demonstration of the being of a God!" Shortly afterwards he again spoke feelingly as he interrupted Cleanthes: "Good God! . . . where are we? Zealous defenders of religion allow, that the proofs of a Deity fall short of perfect evidence!" (II, pp. 143, 145). During this animated exchange, Cleanthes, relying on his philosophical approach to religion, asserted that we are capable of proving "the existence of a Deity" through the use of *a posteriori* reasoning (II, p. 143).

Philo, in keeping with his image as a "careless sceptic,"[4] presents seemingly inconsistent views in his frequent allusions to the subject of the being of God. In Parts V (p. 165), VII (p. 176), and XI (p. 205), he suggests that the issue of God's existence cannot be proved by reasoning. Then in the concluding section of the *Dialogues* — Part XII (p. 217), he observes: "Here then the existence of a Deity is plainly ascertained by reason."

How may we account for the apparent discrepancy between the repeated claim that the essential problem of the *Dialogues* consists of ascertaining the nature and attributes of God, and, at the same time, the tendency of the interlocutors to attempt to prove what was supposedly a self evident premise? In speaking to this issue, Greig expressed the idea of a number of commentators when he said that "it would have been imprudent openly to acknowledge that the debate turned on God's existence . . . ." (p. 231). Mossner not only agrees with Greig's claim but goes further by asserting that the major issue of the *Dialogues* may be the problem of God's existence (p. 14).

Strong counter arguments may be made to the positions taken by Greig and Mossner. First, the allegation that Hume was motivated by the emotion of fear — an issue to be addressed in the forthcoming section on context — does not appear to be well founded. Secondly, Hume's perceived deviation from his stated purpose of focusing only on the problem of God's nature has been persuasively answered by Hurlbutt. In his essay on "The Careless Skeptic — The 'Pamphilian' Ironies in Hume's Dialogues," he contends that the issue of God's existence and his attributes

are inextricably tied together. So powerful is this associative link that one cannot with justification separate the two concepts (p. 213). This is quite clearly the case when we study later Cleanthes' argument from design. Finally, Mossner's suggestion that perhaps more attention is given to God's being than to his nature cannot be supported by a careful reading of the *Dialogues*.

We may conclude that Demea, Cleanthes, and Philo — notwithstanding their initial statements to the contrary — were never in doubt about the dual, yet unified problem they sought to resolve. In fashioning arguments to support their claims on the nature of God, they were fully aware that these premises also applied with equal force to the related question of the being of God. This awareness, which was effectively reinforced by the use of the dialogue format, was an important factor in the success of the *Dialogues* in meeting the first criterion of problematology — the development of a dynamic relationship between questions and answers.

Problematological and Apocritical Answers in Parts I—XI of the Dialogues

When we examine Parts I through XI of the *Dialogues* against the criterion of the use of problematological and apocritical answers, we find that Hume featured one participant — Demea — who, for the most part, was strongly inclined to employ the propositional model. The other two contestants — Cleanthes and Philo — as will be subsequently shown, opted for the problematological method. To a consideration of Demea's arguments in support of an orthodox religion perspective we will now center our attention.

Pamphilus, the commentator used by Hume to describe the flow of conversation in the *Dialogues* referred to "the rigid inflexible orthodoxy of Demea" (p. 129). At first glance this assessment seems to miss the mark. For Demea's three major contentions portraying the nature of God were consistent with those of a majority of the theologians in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. He called upon Malebranche, the celebrated Catholic priest and philosopher, to support his first claim that God's attributes are not comparable to those of man (II, p. 141). The anthropomorphites are wrong, he asserted, in stating that God is a "corporeal" being with "a human body." Such a "perfect, all powerful being," he further argued, could never be restricted or diminished by having the typical emotions or sentiments of man transferred to him (III, p. 156).

Nor was Demea without support in advancing his second claim that sensory experience is unreliable. "All ideas derived from the senses," he contended, "are confessedly false and illusive; and cannot . . . be supposed to have a place in a supreme intelligence" (p. 156).

Finally, his third claim that we come to know the truth about the nature

of God through *a priori* arguments was in the tradition of many distinguished ontologists who had preceded him. He thus stood on familiar ground when he said:

> Whatever exists must have a cause or reason of its existence; it being absolutely impossible for anything to produce itself, or be the cause of its own existence . . . . In the infinite chain or succession of causes and effects, each single effect is determined to exist by the power and efficacy of the cause which immediately preceded . . . . (IX: 188).[5]

Notwithstanding Demea's well developed and seemingly balanced presentation of three traditional *a priori* arguments affirmed by orthodox Christians, he weaved into his discourse telltale signs that he was, indeed, as Pamphilus had portrayed him, a "rigid" and "inflexible" propositionalist who believed that his answers were on the level of ultimate truths. First, he alluded to *a priori* reasoning as a "sublime argument" capable of "infallible demonstration" which "cuts off at once all doubt and difficulty" concerning the nature of "God's infinity" and his other "divine attributes" (IX, p. 188). Secondly, when his two opponents refused to accept the "perfect evidence" contained in his apocritical responses, he answered them by using unusually harsh associative techniques. He accused Cleanthes of taking positions shared by "the common bigots and inquisitors of the age," and which could not help but "give comfort to atheists" (IV, p. 158). Similarly, to Philo he said: "I now find you running into all the topics of the greatest libertines and infidels . . . ." (XI, pp. 212–213). Even more importantly, when Philo persisted in his spirited opposition to and censure of "established opinions," Demea was no longer content to participate in the discussion. "I could observe," said Pamphilus, "that Demea did not at all relish the latter part of the discourse; and took occasion soon after, on some pretence or other, to leave the company" (p. 213).[6]

Both Cleanthes and Philo in contrast to Demea were partial to the problematological model. The issue which apparently concerned them most was the legitimacy of the argument from design and final causes. So convinced was Cleanthes of the merits of this argument that he constructed the primary part of his case in defense of it.

Pamphilus, who was Cleanthes' student, described his teacher as an "accurate philosophical" thinker who conformed to the doctrine of theism (p. 128). Cleanthes was the kind of rhetor Hume admired because of his practice of rooting his contentions in arguments from sign and in *a posteriori* reasoning. Cleanthes' starting point was to observe and examine facts, and then to proceed to inferences based on what could be seen. This tendency led him to conclude that a persuasive probability could be established by utilizing the argument from design.

What Cleanthes saw when he observed the universe was a remarkable

order, coherence, and design that led him to an understanding and
appreciation of the nature of God. Using the metaphor of the machine, he
proclaimed:

> Look around the world. Contemplate the whole part of it; you will find it to be nothing
> but one great machine, subdivided into an infinite number of lesser machines, which
> again admits 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 of all men, who
> have ever contemplated them . . . . (II, p. 143)

Cleanthes also saw design by looking at the nature of the human
species. Their power of reason, their passions and instincts, and their
method of propagation are characteristics which God possesses, but on a
grander scale. (III, p. 154)

The analogies to the machine and to mankind, strengthened by
"millions and millions of other observable instances," notes Cleanthes,
lead us unmistakably to a compelling belief in final causes regarding an
"intelligent author" who is the basis of all reasonable religious thought.
With moving eloquence, he then added these words: "The heavens and the
earth join in the same testimony: The whole chorus of nature raises one
hymn to the praises of its Creator . . . ." (IV, p. 163)

The most important part of Cleanthes' design argument, according to
Wadia, is that it is based upon "an appeal to the notion of reasonable
man." It says in effect that a reasonable person is inclined to rely on "the
testimony of his senses in normal everyday situations, notwithstanding the
fact that they do sometimes deceive him" (Wadia, p. 283).

If such reasoning caught the fancy of Hume, so, also, did the relentless
sceptical attitude of Philo whose total comments in the *Dialogues* occu-
pied more space than the combined participations of Pamphilus, Demea,
and Cleanthes (Greig, p. 231). The refutational strategies employed by
Philo focused primarily on the vitally significant issue of design. Con-
sequently, he did not embrace the machine metaphor, arguing that
machines were mere artifacts produced by men. Then pointing out the
principle that "like effects prove like causes" (V, p. 165), he asserted that
the world cannot resemble "a watch or a knitting loom"; rather it is
likened to an "animal or vegetable" (V, p. 176) because of its generative
powers.

Philo next attacked the anthropomorphic argument which, as noted
previously, held that God partakes of many of the traits of man including
all types of emotions. To make this comparison, Philo observed, was to
imply that even the lowly passions such as "a restless appetite for
applause" conceivably would belong to God (XII, p. 226); and this
possibility is, at best, a debasement of the Deity.

Philo directed his most telling attack against Cleanthes' belief that

thought can direct a strong influence on matter. This criticism, as seen in the ensuing passage, represents Philo's main argument in the entire discussion:

> In all instances we have ever seen, ideas are copied from real objects, and are ectypal, archetypal . . . . You (Cleanthes) reverse this order, and give thought the precedence. In all instances which we have ever seen, thought has no influence upon matter, except that matter is so conjoined with it, as to have an equal reciprocal influence upon it. No animal can move immediately any thing but the members of its own body; and indeed, the equality of action and re-action seems to be an universal law of nature: But your theory implies a contradiction to experience . . . . (VII, p. 186)

With the departure of Demea at the close of Part XI, Philo and Cleanthes looked forward with anticipation to going one on one in the final section of the *Dialogues*. Up to this point the question of whether or not we could gain an understanding of god by means of the argument from design was still an unresolved problem. What did remain clear, however, was that the *a priori* reasoning based largely on apocritical responses, which Demea had used, was to be rejected outright.

As we turn to the final section of this paper, it should be noted that the third major aspect of Meyer's theory of problematology — context, reference, and meaning — will be combined with the fourth element which deals with the concept of argumentation as a way of knowing. Context, as we will observe, profoundly influenced the perceptions of critics who have discussed what they perceive to be significant problems inherent in Part XII of the *Dialogues*.

The Role of Argumentation in the Production of Knowledge in Part XII of the Dialogues

The importance of Part XII to the student of argument who wishes to gain an understanding of the nature and impact of the *Dialogues* cannot be overestimated. Every major commentator interested in Hume's work has singled out this section for special consideration because of its apparent negation of many of the refutational arguments offered by Philo in Parts I through XI. Moreover, at least one scholar (Nelson, 1988) has devoted a full essay seeking to unravel the meaning of Hume's controversial concluding chapter.

The analysis that follows will, first of all, summarize the arguments developed by Philo and Cleanthes in Part XII, and show how they led to a rapprochement between the two protagonists on the key issue in the debate. Secondly, a discussion and evaluation of the critical responses to this rapprochement will be emphasized. Thirdly, problematological implications of Part XII will be drawn — especially as they relate to the epistemic function of rhetoric.

The most telling part of the significant concluding chapter occurs in the

opening statements of Cleanthes and Philo. In each of the preceding
eleven sections, the two advocates often took opposing views on such
points as the relationship between reason and experience, on what
constitutes an appropriate analogy, on whether or not God's principal
attributes resemble those of man, and, most of all, on the efficacy of the
argument from design. Conscious of these differences, Cleanthes imme-
diately strove to establish identification with his opponent by expressing
pleasure that they could now commune freely on a "sublime" and "inter-
esting" subject since Demea, the third participant, had abruptly left the
scene. In a friendly way, he then commented on Philo's courage to speak
openly and frankly about ideas long regarded as "sacred" and "venerable"
(p. 214).

Philo responded in a similar vein. After admitting that he was "less
cautious on the subject of natural religion than on any other" theme, he
confidently asserted that this strategy would not offend a "man of common
sense." Such a reasonable person as you, Philo implied, would not
"mistake my intentions" (p. 214). With these preliminary remarks out of
the way, Philo delivered the following presentation that has become
known as his speech of confession:

> You, in particular, Cleanthes, with whom I live in unreserved intimacy; you are sensible,
> that, notwithstanding the freedom of my conversation, and my love of singular
> arguments, 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; and no one can be so
> hardened in absurd systems, as at all times to reject it . . . . And thus all the sciences
> almost lead us insensibly to acknowledge a first intelligent Author; and their authority is
> often so much the greater, as they do not directly profess their intention . . . . (pp. 214–
> 215).

Although this sudden confession of faith by Philo has puzzled and
disturbed many Humean scholars for over two hundred years, it did not
appear to surprise Cleanthes. Without hesitation, Cleanthes began to build
on Philo's statements by reaffirming his own previous arguments. No other
theory, he asserted, can match the precision and determinateness that
characterizes the argument from design (p. 216).

In a further attempt to reach common ground on the argument from
design, Philo expressed regret that many of the earlier disagreements were
due largely to the problem of semantics. "I am apt to suspect," he said,
"there enters somewhat of a dispute of words into this controversy, more
than is usually imagined." These verbal disputes, he added, are disgusting
to reasonable men, and should be eliminated by a careful definition of
terms (p. 217).

With an apparent rapprochement on the central issue of design now
reached, Philo turned to other themes in which differences of opinion still

existed. He remained unconviced, for example, that an appropriate analogy could be drawn between the emotional attributes of God and the more defective ones of man.[7] Then relying upon one of his favorite refutational strategies — the use of reductio ad absurdum — he suggested that religious bigots, motivated by their "vulgar superstitions" and intellectually limited by their closed minds, have made popular religion unacceptable to reasonable men.[8] At this point Cleanthes intervened, reminding Philo that his antagonism toward false religion prevented him from seeing that "religion, however corrupted, is still better than no religion at all" (p. 219).

If Philo failed to persuade Cleanthes that man's emotional attributes are comparable to those of God, and that the pervasive dogmatism he saw in popular religion was enough to turn thoughtful people away from the Church, he was able to achieve common ground again as he trumpeted the virtues of philosophical theism. Practitioners of this religious philosophy, he said, do not scorn skepticism; indeed, they embrace it. Because of "a natural diffidence of their own capacity," they are inclined "to suspend all judgment with regard to such sublime and such extraordinary subjects" (p. 227). Philo then concluded his discourse with one of the most celebrated and far-reaching statements in the *Dialogues*: "To be a philosophical sceptic, is in a man of letters, the first and most essential step towards being a sound, believing Christian; a proposition which I would willingly recommend to the attention of Pamphilus ... ." (p. 228) This statement doubtless struck a responsive chord in Cleanthes who Pamphilus earlier had described as an "accurate philosophical" Christian.

At the close of Philo's speech, Hume, following the example of Cicero in *De Natura Deorum*, offered a final judgment on the performances of the three protagonists. These were the words he gave to Pamphilus to end the *Dialogues*:

> Cleanthes and Philo pursued not this conversation much farther; and as nothing ever made greater impression on me, than all the reasonings of that day; so I confess, that upon a 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 to the truth. (p. 228)

As suggested previously, the foregoing discussion between Philo and Cleanthes and the concluding evaluation by Pamphilus have caused considerable difficulty for a large group of scholars who hold firmly to the notion that Hume's chief spokesman in the *Dialogues* is Philo. Thus the fact that Philo, almost without warning, drastically altered his fundamental position on the argument from design at the beginning of the final section, and then delivered a poignant testimony about his belief in God prompted these Humean critics — including Greig, Smith, Chappell, and Mossner —

to search for a cause for what they perceived to be inconsistent and unexplained actions.

In launching this search, they pointed again to the persuasive signs indicating Hume's unmistakable identity with Philo. First, they argued that the disproportionate amount of space given to Philo to develop his arguments clearly demonstrates Hume's preference for the world view he expounded. To buttress this claim they offered statistical data showing that Demea was alloted "twelve percent" of the total space. Cleanthes "twenty-one percent," and Philo "sixty-seven percent" (Mossner, p. 6).[9] These figures showing that Philo used more than three times as much space as did Cleanthes in the *Dialogues* as a whole were similarly evident in the crucial closing chapter Part XII. This reason alone, they pointed out, is enough to cast serious doubt on the reliability of the statement declaring Cleanthes the winner of the debate.

The second sign they stressed in seeking to prove their contention that Hume communicated his beliefs through Philo was the strength of the attack on the argument from design administered in the first eleven chapters of the *Dialogues*. In making this point, Smith asserts that "Hume's destructive criticism" of the argument presented by Cleanthes was "so final and complete" that it is "but seldom challenged" (p. 30).

The third sign mentioned by these critics was the consistency of Philo's arguments in Parts I through XI with those Hume had articulated both before and after he had written the first draft of the Dialogues beginning in 1750 and 1751.[0] An examination of such works as *A Treatise of Human Nature, Enquiries Concerning the Human Understanding and Concerning the Principles of Morals*, and of select letters, they observed, reveals that Hume was a genuine philosophical sceptic who not only had little sympathy for the argument from design but for religious faith in general.[11] In expressing this sentiment with telling force, Chappell observes: ". . . apart from the *Dialogues,* Hume had no religion, no faith in the Christian or in any other God, and he thought that no argument of any sort could justify or tend to justify such faith" (p. xiv).

Once they had established to their satisfaction that the real Philo was Hume, these critics were left with the challenge to remove the "stumbling block" created in Part XII.[12] They found their solution in the belief that Hume deliberately used the rhetorical device of irony as a form of dissimulation to camouflage his intentions. This strategy presumably was necessary in order for Hume to accommodate his controversial ideas to the popular prejudices existing in eighteenth-century Scotland. His earlier writings on religion and morals, particularly his discussion of miracles, "had already earned" him "a reputation as an infidel and enemy of religion . . . ." (Chappell, p. xiii). For him now to question the validity of the argument from design in the conclusion of a distinctly religious work

would be interpreted as "an assault" on "the very citadel of religion" (Mossner, p. 44).

These critics further observed that in the face of this potentially dangerous context, Hume decided in Part XII to yield to the powerful social and cultural conventions, and to the advice of his friends.[13] Out of this feeling of weakness and fear (Grieg, p. 238), he substituted ironical language for the carefully crafted arguments of scepticism that had characterized the first eleven Parts of the *Dialogues*.[14] To put it another way, Philo's confession of faith, his reversal of attitude toward the argument from design, and his rapprochement with Cleanthes were well conceived ironies created for the purpose of pleasing rather than for revealing that he had experienced a religious conversion. In sum, these critics believe strongly that a careful reading of the *Dialogues* reveals clearly and unmistakably that Philo was Hume; that Philo, not Cleanthes, won the debate; and that Hume was a brilliant ironist who could, when the context demanded it, use language both to conceal his ideas and to placate his audience.

The claims which these critics have presented in depicting Philo as Hume, and in focusing on the use of irony as the dominating rhetorical strategy used in the *Dialogues* have had a strong influence on a number of philosophers and literary critics.[15] But as convincing as this position appears to be, it misses the mark in one major respect. It overlooks Hume's influential philosophy of rhetoric, rooted in the teachings of Cicero and in human nature. A brief analysis of several key elements in his rhetorical theory, as seen in *A Treatise of Human Nature* and the *Dialogues*, will show that the rapprochement between Philo and Cleanthes, epitomized largely by Philo's confession of faith, was not a dramatic ploy designed to cover up Hume's views on religion, but a natural outgrowth of what occurred in the first eleven sections.[16]

In his *Treatise*, Hume suggested that the mind is a bundle of sense perceptions held together by association and that it is comprised of two faculties, impressions and ideas. Impressions, which constitute the cause in this relationship, have greater force than ideas which represent the effect. It was easy for Hume to move from this premise to his definition of belief as "a lively idea related to or associated with a present impression" (I, p. 396).

Since Hume held that man's emotional nature is a powerful factor in human motivation, he believed that one's will cannot be persuaded to act unless presence is created by strong appeals to the passions of pain and pleasure. These views in turn led Hume to reach his famous and provocative conclusion that "reason is and ought only to be the slave of the passions, and can never pretend to any other office than to serve and obey them" (II, p. 195). In no sense was this statement meant to imply that

reasoning and evidence are subordinate to pathetic proof. What is implied instead is Hume's strong conviction that reason and the emotions must be conjoined as partners. For to separate one from the other or to place one in opposition to the other is to produce a rhetoric without direction and power.[17]

This blending of logical and pathetic proof as a necessary component of rhetoric and/or argumentation was also evident in the *Dialogues*. In the prologue, Pamphilus set the stage for the important function that logical inquiry would serve in the discussion about to take place by saying: "Reasonable men may be allowed to differ where no one can reasonably be positive." (p. 128). Later Philo explained that reasonableness for any "inquisitive" or "contemplative" person consists of making certain that arguments in favor of a claim should be stronger than the objections leveled "against it" (XII, p. 227). Cleanthes echoed a similar sentiment when he argued that no theory should be endorsed which runs counter to effective reasoning (XII, p. 216). In short, we are told repeatedly that a discussant should use arguments that are grounded in experience and supported by strong probabilities.

But there is another equally important side to rhetoric which Cleanthes calls "irregular" reasoning.[18] In Part III, for example, he addresses Philo with these remarks:

> And if the argument for theism be, as you pretend, contradictory to the principles of logic; its universal, its irresistible influence proves clearly, that there may be arguments of a like irregular nature. (III, p. 155)

The phrase "irresistible influence" is a crucial notion if we are to gain the full import of Cleanthes' statement. It is associated with another word, this time used by Philo, called "inclination." In Part XII, Philo gives this description of the term:

> A man's natural inclination works incessantly upon him; it is for ever present to the mind; and mingles itself with every view and consideration . . . . It engages on its side all the wit and ingenuity of the mind . . . . (p. 221)

These references to "irresistible influence" and "inclination" are the driving force inherent in "irregular" reasoning; additionally, they are a reinforcement of Hume's awareness of the need to combine logos with pathos. If a rhetor forgets this principle and concentrates only on logical proof, he may, as Cleanthes warned Philo, "puzzle, but never can convince us" (VII, p. 181).

In developing a similar perspective, Hurlbutt makes the important argument that Pamphilus' description of Philo as "a careless sceptic" is an accurate portrayal of both Philo and Hume. But he does not make this claim in a disparaging way. A "careless sceptic" simply means a person who is motivated by the power of strong logical proof and of "irregular"

reasoning characterized by inner feelings, desires, and inclinations. (pp. 226–229).[19]

If we adopt the interpretation outlined here, then Part XII assumes a meaning that our earlier critics tended to ignore. It suggests clearly that Pamphilus' confession of faith and his acceptance of the argument from design are neither inconsistent nor insincere, nor are they signs that Hume used irony to dissimulate.

When the preceding discussion is considered within the framework of the notion of rhetoric as a way of knowing, two important problematological implications may be inferred. First, we have seen that Hume, unlike Descartes who used ontological reasoning to prove his thesis of God's existence, did not set out to persuade his readers to adopt a specific theological position. Instead of using the propositional model, he began the *Dialogues* holding a divided opinion on the questions under discussion, and hoping that the audience members in the end would provide their own answers. From this process, he felt, would come an enriched understanding and appreciation of the meaning of God.

Secondly, we have noted that Hume, with his adherence to a philosophy of rhetoric that sought to create a balance between reason and inclination, pulled away from the dogmatic assertions of the representative of religious orthodoxy — Demea, and gravitated toward both Philo and Cleanthes. In this sense, Hume, as Nelson correctly observes, may be given the joint names of "Hume-Philo" and "Hume-Cleanthes" (p. 366).[20] It was in this dual capacity that Hume himself was to be influenced by the arguments he developed in the *Dialogues*. Let us see how this occurred.

Hume's letters about the *Dialogues* show how reason led him to embrace the scepticism of Philo, and how, at the same time, inclination prompted him to be attracted to the religious liberalism of Cleanthes. Shortly after completing the first draft, he told Elliot: "You would perceive by the Sample I have given you, that I make Cleanthes the Hero ... ." Then, following his invitation to have Elliot do what he could to strengthen the arguments of Cleanthes, he added these words: "Had it been my good Fortune to live near you, I should have taken on me the character of Philo ... ." (Greig, I, pp. 153, 154). He next described how these counteracting appeals of Philo and Cleanthes had influenced him when he was a youth.

> ... 'tis not long ago that I burned an old Manuscript Book, wrote before I was twenty; which contained, Page after Page, the gradual Progess of my Thoughts on this head. It began with an anxious Search after arguments, to confirm the common opinion. Doubts stole in, dissipated, returned, were again dissipated, returned again; and it was a perpetual struggle of a restless imagination against Inclination, perhaps against Reason. (p. 154)

Twenty-five years later, in June 1776, Hume wrote to Strahan giving his assessment of the tenor of the manuscript on the *Dialogues*. In this work,

which "would make a small Volume in Twelves," he said, I "introduce a Sceptic" who, after delivering "very bold and free" arguments challenging prevailing popular beliefs, is eventually refuted on the argument from design (Greig, II, p. 323).

These letters when viewed in connection with the flow of the arguments in the *Dialogues* constitute proof that Hume was moved by the totality of the claims he had constructed for Philo and Cleanthes. The arguments they developed convinced him of the legitimacy of seemingly opposing concepts. On the one hand, they motivated him to conclude that philosophical scepticism is "the first and most essential step towards being a sound, believing Christian"; and that we cannot determine clearly the nature of God's moral and emotional attributes. On the other hand, they persuaded him that at some point in a person's thinking process, it is productive to begin to doubt one's doubts or, as Hurlbutt puts it, to become sceptical of scepticism.[21] This was a significant factor in his decision to have Philo ultimately accept Cleanthes' presentation on behalf of design in nature.

But Hume and the characters he created were not alone in feeling the impact of the arguments that unfolded in the *Dialogues*. Numerous scholars, as we have seen, have engaged in an ongoing discussion for the past two hundred years in an effort to ferret out the meaning inherent in this work. The fact that such divergent opinions are still being expressed in additional evidence of Hume's success in contributing to our knowledge of the nature of God and of human beings.

CONCLUSION

This study has shown that the *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, which drew its inspiration from Cicero's *De Natura Deorum*, fulfills the four major requirements of Meyer's theory of problematology. First, the discussion began with an agreement that the question to be answered was to ascertain the nature of God. But as the dialogue ensued, it became evident that the problem of God's nature and his attributes could not be disassociated from that of proving his existence. As a result, many of the arguments dealing with one aspect applied equally to the other. Thus a direct relationship between questions and answers was always present.

Secondly, with the exception of Demea's tendency to rely on apocritical responses, problematological answers, which often generated new questions, dominated the discussion. Thirdly, Hume, conscious of the historical and social context that prevailed in eighteenth-century Scotland, focused on meaning and reference as they could be seen through the eyes of representatives of the three major theological perspectives that characterized the period. In this connection, the dialogue format proved to be a useful

rhetorical instrument for making clear to the audience how the questions and answers operated within the context of the discourse.

Fourthly, and perhaps most significantly, the *Dialogues* used the argumentation-centered form of discourse designed not for the purpose of persuading the participants and the readers to accept the merits of a preconceived proposition but for the goal of modifying beliefs and attitudes and thereby producing new knowledge. In meeting these four requirements of problematology, Hume created an enduring rhetorical masterpiece that contributes importantly to our understanding of the question-answer pair.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

NOTES

[1] In his introductory remarks in *De Natura Deorum*, Cicero noted: "Those however who seek to learn my personal opinion on the various questions show an unreasonable degree of curiosity" (V. 10). In an effort to play down his own views, Hume, as observed earlier, used a narrator.

[2] By using the names of real figures who could be recognized by his readers, Cicero believed that the arguments advanced would have a stronger ethical appeal.

[3] An interesting study which shows the influence of *De Natura Deorum* on the *Dialogues* is Battersby's essay on "The Dialogues as Original Imitation: Cicero and the Nature of Hume's Skepticism," pp. 239—52. Also see Smith's comments in his edition of the *Dialogues*, pp. 60—61.

[4] This is the language used by Pamphilus in describing Philo (p. 128). This crucial description became the catalyst for Hurlbutt's important essay which will be discussed later.

[5] Of less consequence were two other contentions developed by Demea. First, he argued that many of God's attributes are incomprehensible to man. Secondly, he contended that mankind's life is characterized by misery on earth. This misery, however, may be eliminated in a future life for those who please God.

[6] Hurlbutt puts Demea's arguments in perspective in the following quotation: "Demea has the worst of philosophical worlds; he both rejects and affirms the use of reason; he is a mystic, and yet he sets out the ontological argument. He rejects the possibility of rational proofs in relation to religion and theology, and yet is uncomfortable when Philo appears to have destroyed them . . . ." (p. 246)

[7] Philo used the following poignant language to emphasize this point: "It is an absurdity to believe that the Deity has human passions, and one of the lowest of human passions, a restless appetite for applause." (XII, p. 226)

[8] In developing his feeling of impatience toward superstitious and authoritarian Christians, Philo confessed: ". . . I indulge peculiar pleasure . . . in pushing such principles, sometimes in absurdity, sometimes into impiety." (XII, p. 219)

[9] Mossner's statistical breakdown is based upon Grieg's page count (Greig, p. 236).

[10] Greig has noted that "Hume wrote Parts I—V in the winter of 1750—51, and the

remainder before the end of 1752. The whole was revised in 1761, and Part XII
drastically." Then he added that the "revision of 1776" focused on changes in style rather
than in substance (pp. 230—31). Mossner observes that "the Dialogues was composed by a
middle-aged man and was still being revised twenty-five years later by an elderly one . . . ."
(p. 1)

[11] See Mossner, pp. 3, 19; and Greig, pp. 237—38.

[12] Mossner has suggested that Hume's strategy of bowing to public pressure "remains to
this day a stumbling-block and source of misunderstanding to those readers who have
failed to recognize Hume's irony . . . ." (p. 3)

[13] Among Hume's friends who recommended that the *Dialogues* not be published, at least
until after his death, were Gilbert Elliot, Hugh Blair, and Adam Smith. Despite Blair's
reservations about publishing the manuscript, he was nevertheless enthusiastic about the
quality of the *Dialogues*. See his letters to Hume and to Strahan (Klibansky and Mossner,
p. 73n; and Greig, II, p. 454).

[14] This is the basic thrust of Mossner's article on "Hume and the Legacy of the Essays."

[15] Those who have identified Hume with Philo includes such authors as the critic for the
Monthly Review, Battersby, Penelhum, Price, and Smith. For a discussion of the literary
aspects of the *Dialogues*, see White's essay which also identifies Hume with Philo.

[16] See, in particular, the essays by Hurlbutt, Nelson, and Yandell.

[17] Hume doubtless was influenced by John Locke who argued that the mind is comprised
of two faculties — the understanding and the will; and that an idea which reaches the
understanding does not necessarily have the power to motivate the will. Thus the rhetor,
Locke held, must be aware of the mind's power both to *perceive* and to *prefer*. *An Essay
Concerning Human Understanding*, I, pp. 192, 367.

[18] The author is indebted to Hurlbutt for his insightful description of the importance of
this concept.

[19] The following quotation from one of Philo's arguments is instructive on this point: "I am
indeed persuaded . . . that the best and indeed the only method of bringing every one to a
due sense of religion is by just representations of the misery and wickedness of men. And
for that purpose a talent of eloquence and strong imagery is more requisite than that of
reasoning and argument. For is it necessary to prove what every one feels within himself?
It is only necessary to make us feel it, if possible, more intimately and sensibly." (X, p. 193)

[20] Nelson develops the following relevant point: "Now Hume-Cleanthes precedes both in
time and in the statement of positions of Hume-Philo. In Hume's system causes precede
effects. Extrapolating, one might therefore say that Cleanthes or religious liberalism is the
cause of Philo or the true religion religious moderate scepticism. And therefore in a quite
literal sense Cleanthes is the hero of the Dialogues." (p. 366)

[21] In commenting on Hume as "the implicit speaker" in the *Dialogues*, Hurlbutt argues
that from Hume's perspective "it is appropriate to be skeptical about abstruse arguments
. . . . And it is thus appropriate to be skeptical of skepticism itself." (p. 248)

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