Skepticism in Hume’s *Dialogues*

**Abstract:** In this paper, I examine the epistemological positions of Philo and Cleanthes in the *Dialogues*. I find that Philo’s attitude towards skepticism mirrors that of the first *Enquiry*, most notably in its endorsement of mitigated skepticism, and its treatment of religious reasoning as distinctly discontinuous with science and philosophy. Meanwhile, Cleanthes’ epistemological framework corresponds to that of the *Treatise*, most notably in its adoption of something like the Title Principle, and its treatment of some forms of religious reasoning as broadly continuous with science and philosophy. It is not merely that the epistemological systems of the *Treatise* and *Enquiry* are echoed in Cleanthes’ and Philo’s positions respectively; these frameworks seem to clarify, provide a substantive basis for, and render more complete their somewhat piecemeal statements on this topic in the *Dialogues*. Thus, Philo’s and Cleanthes’ dispute is not limited to the theological, but extends to the epistemological.

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1. Introduction

In this paper, I will examine the underlying epistemological positions of Philo and Cleanthes in the *Dialogues*, which are primarily expressed in part 1 of the *Dialogues*.[[1]](#endnote-1) I find that Philo’s attitude towards skepticism clearly mirrors that of the first *Enquiry*, most notably in its endorsement of mitigated skepticism, and its resulting treatment of religious reasoning as epistemically discontinuous with science and philosophy. Meanwhile, Cleanthes’ considered epistemological framework seems to correspond to that of the *Treatise*, most notably in its adoption of something like the Title Principle, and its consequent treatment of some forms of religious reasoning as epistemically continuous with science and philosophy.[[2]](#endnote-2) It is not merely that the epistemological systems of the *Treatise* and *Enquiry* are echoed in Cleanthes’ and Philo’s positions respectively; it is also that these frameworks seem to clarify, provide a substantive basis for, and render more complete their somewhat piecemeal statements on this topic in the *Dialogues*. In making this case, I highlight some differences between Philo and Cleanthes, and correspondingly the *Enquiry* and the *Treatise*, on skepticism.[[3]](#endnote-3)

This result bears significantly on the question of who speaks for Hume in the *Dialogues*. Hume worked on the *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* shortly after the publication of the first edition of the *Enquiry*, and roughly contemporaneously with his editing and publishing later editions. Hume initially published the first *Enquiry* in 1748, and continued publishing later editions until 1753. Meanwhile, in a letter to Sir Gilbert Elliot of Minto dated 10 March 1751, Hume refers to a draft of the *Dialogues* on which he was actively working. Given this timeline, it seems that Hume’s endorsed position in the *Dialogues* would be most closely aligned with the character whose underlying epistemology corresponds to that of the *Enquiry*.[[4]](#endnote-4) If I am right that this character is Philo, then we have the result that Philo is the character who generally represents Hume in the dialogue (which is not to say that Hume would endorse everything Philo says). Granted, according to my reading, Cleanthes’ epistemology too corresponds to Hume’s pre-*Dialogues* epistemological views. Yet if I am also right that these views differ markedly from Hume’s epistemological views at the time he wrote the *Dialogues*, Cleanthes cannot be said to be the character who generally represents Hume in the dialogue (which is not to say that Hume would not endorse anything Cleanthes says).

Although I am hardly the first commentator to argue that Philo speaks for Hume in the *Dialogues*,[[5]](#endnote-5) I aim to contribute to this debate in a number of respects. First, generally speaking, the literature has not examined the epistemological frameworks of the *Dialogues* in great depth; most discussions are cursory at best.[[6]](#endnote-6) In particular, while Philo’s brand of skepticism has at least been briefly discussed by a number of commentators, Cleanthes’ epistemological position has not received much attention.

Second, both Philo and Cleanthes make various claims that echo a variety of Hume’s positions.[[7]](#endnote-7) An account of Hume’s view in the *Dialogues* should ideally provide a systematic basis for making sense of this. At least with respect to the epistemology, I argue that where Cleanthes echoes Hume, he echoes the *Treatise*, whereas when Philo echoes Hume, he echoes the *Enquiry*.[[8]](#endnote-8)

Third, I diagnose the disagreement between Philo and Cleanthes in the *Dialogues* as primarily stemming from their differing epistemic frameworks. They disagree in virtue of substantive differences between the underlying frameworks that govern their reasoning. Thus, Philo’s and Cleanthes’ dispute is not limited to the theological, but extends to the epistemological—and indeed, we might see their theological disputes as stemming from their epistemological disagreements.

1. The Discontinuity of Theology and Philosophy

After the introductory words of Pamphilus, the substance of the *Dialogues* commences with a discussion of skepticism in part 1. Here the main disputants are Philo and Cleanthes, who disagree considerably about the topic of skepticism, in particular its implications for the prospects of a natural religion.

Demea opens the discussion by remarking on the “uncertainty of each part [of every other science], the eternal disputations of men, the obscurity of all philosophy, and the strange, ridiculous conclusions, which some of the greatest geniuses have derived from the principles of mere human reason”; he concludes on this basis that “the greatest mysteries of religion” are under no threat from “that assuming arrogance of philosophy” (DNR 1.2, 32–33).

Philo seizes on this opening. He begins by noting that “the vulgar… who are unacquainted with science and profound enquiry” develop “a thorough contempt for Philosophy”, which allows for them to “rivet themselves the faster… in the great points of Theology” (DNR 1.3, 33). It is difficult not to see an edge in Philo’s opening salvo, particularly in the light of Hume’s claim in the *Enquiry* that “the mere ignorant” are “despised” in being “entirely destitute of all relish for those noble [intellectual] entertainments” (EHU 1.5).

On the other hand, Philo remarks that those who engage in a modicum of study are prone to intellectual arrogance in thinking “nothing too difficult for human reason”, and thus “profane the inmost sanctuaries of the temple” (DNR 1.3, 33). This seems a reference to “the learned” prone “to haughtiness and obstinacy”, who would benefit from “a small tincture of PYRRHONISM”, which “might abate their pride”, and induce “a degree of doubt, and caution, and modesty, which, in all kinds of scrutiny and decision, ought for ever to accompany a just reasoner” (EHU 12.24).

Philo’s epistemological framework emerges in his emphasising the limitations of our faculties. He notes that we should “become thoroughly sensible of the weakness, blindness, and narrow limits of human reason” (DNR 1.3, 33). This “uncertainty and endless contrarieties” of reason are prominent “even in subjects of common life and practice” (*ibid*.). What more, then, when this “frail faculty of reason” is applied to “points so sublime, so abstruse, so remote from common life and experience” (*ibid*.)? Simple reflection on the limitations of our faculties suffices to deter one from theological reasonings, which seek to advance beyond the scope of common life.

This is unmistakably an endorsement of the mitigated skepticism that Hume endorses in the *Enquiry*.[[9]](#endnote-9) Mitigated skepticism has two aspects: first, a general lowering of our degrees of confidence across the board (EHU 12.24); second, a limitation of the scope of our enquiries on the basis that the excluded areas of enquiry lie beyond the reach of our faculties (EHU 12.25). Philo does not say much about the first aspect of mitigated skepticism, but he clearly endorses the second.[[10]](#endnote-10)

Like Hume in the *Enquiry*,Philo leverages on “the imperfection of those faculties… their narrow reach, and their inaccurate operations” in order to advocate a limitation of the scope of our reasoning, “avoiding all distant and high enquiries” (EHU 12.25). Any doubts that Hume means for Philo to echo his own mitigated skepticism can be dismissed by a side-by-side comparison of the following two passages:

When the coherence of the parts of a stone, or even that composition of parts, which renders it extended; when these familiar objects, I say, are so inexplicable, and contain circumstances so repugnant and contradictory; with what assurance can we decide concerning the origin of worlds, or trace their history from eternity to eternity? (DNR 1.3, 33–34)

While we cannot give a satisfactory reason, why we believe, after a thousand experiments, that a stone will fall, or fire burn; can we ever satisfy ourselves concerning any determination, which we may form, with regard to the origin of worlds, and the situation of nature, from, and to eternity? (EHU 12.26)

Philo’s statement of his epistemological position so closely mirrors Hume’s presentation of his mitigated skepticism that the reference seems decidedly intentional.

At this point, Cleanthes enters the fray, sensing (to Pamphilus’ eyes) “some raillery or artificial malice in the reasonings of Philo” (DNR 1.4, 34). He queries Philo’s sincerity in respect of his skepticism (DNR 1.5, 34), and criticises what he takes to be Philo’s position on two grounds. First, such skepticism is unsustainable: “it is impossible” for the skeptic “to persevere in this total scepticism” (DNR 1.6. 34). Second, such skepticism serves no practical purposes:[[11]](#endnote-11)

And for what reason impose on himself such a violence? This is a point, in which it will be impossible for him ever to satisfy himself, consistently with his sceptical principles: So that upon the whole nothing could be more ridiculous than the principles of the ancient Pyrrhonians... (DNR 1.6, 34–35)

Cleanthes’ criticisms here exactly mirror Hume’s grounds in the *Enquiry* for dismissing Pyrrhonian skepticism, which is an extreme and excessive form of skepticism ultimately rejected in favour of the more moderate mitigated skepticism. There, Hume first notes that such scepticism cannot have “any constant influence on the mind”, and is thus unsustainable (EHU 12.23). Second, he makes the point that such skepticism is pointless: the Pyrrhonian’s “objections are mere amusement”, and are not “beneficial to society” (EHU 12.23).

Of course, as mentioned above, Philo’s endorsed position is not that of a Pyrrhonian but rather a mitigated skeptic. In this, Cleanthes’ attempted rebuttal against Philo seems to miss the mark.[[12]](#endnote-12) Philo endorses only a limitation of the scope of our enquiries (as per mitigated skepticism), and not a full-blown rejection of all beliefs (as the Pyrrhonian attempts to do), and so to attack Philo on the basis of his purported Pyrrhonism seems to be focusing fire on a straw man.

In this, it is interesting to contrast Philo and Cleanthes on their respective comparisons between Pyrrhonism and Stoicism. Cleanthes argues that the sects of Pyrrhonism and Stoicism both “seem founded on this erroneous maxim, That what a man can perform sometimes, and in some dispositions, he can perform always, and in every disposition” (DNR 1.7, 35). In short, like Pyrrhonism, Stoicism is unable to have a durable influence on our dispositions. But this seems to contradict Hume’s position in the *Enquiry*:

A Stoic or Epicurean displays principles, which may not only be durable, but which have an effect on conduct and behaviour. (EHU 12.23)

In response to Cleanthes, Philo allows the “comparison between the Stoics and Sceptics”, but qualifies Cleanthes’ claim: he points out that Stoicism, although unsustainable in its “highest flights”, nevertheless “retains somewhat of its former disposition…in common life” (DNR 1.8, 35).[[13]](#endnote-13) Similarly, “sceptical considerations on the uncertainty and narrow limits of reason” will not be entirely forgotten when one turns their “reflection on other subjects” (DNR 1.8, 36).

This response of Philo’s is worth examining closely, and reveals how forgiving an interlocutor he is. Not wanting to embarrass his friend Cleanthes by directly calling him out for misrepresenting his view as Pyrrhonian, Philo instead artfully tries to redress his misconceptions in two ways. First, while Cleanthes compares the Stoics and Pyrrhonians, Philo seamlessly segues into a comparison of the “Stoics and *Sceptics*” (DNR 1.8, 35, emphasis added); “Sceptic” is an umbrella that includes his own academical skepticism, as well as Pyrrhonism. Second, in noting that extreme skepticism retains in small part its effects even after episodes of severe skepticism have passed, Philo subtly indicates that his position is not one of straightforward Pyrrhonism, but is rather a mitigated skepticism that is the product ‘of a small tincture of Pyrrhonism’ (EHU 12.24)—exposure to the extremes of Pyrrhonian skepticism is a preparative for adopting the doxastic humility that is fundamental to the academical philosophy. Philo’s comment about Stoicism and skepticism retaining somewhat of their former disposition is a call-back to the point raised in EHU 12 that although Pyrrhonian skepticism turned up to eleven is unsustainable, a small dosage of it can be maintained, and is conducive to the mitigated skepticism that Philo actually adopts.

Philo then proceeds to agree with Cleanthes that the skeptic, by an “absolute necessity”, “must act…and live, and converse like other men” (DNR 1.9, 36). We are licensed to exceed the bounds of this necessity by the “certain pleasure and satisfaction” that comes with philosophy (DNR 1.9, 36). This echoes Hume’s offered justification for his return to philosophy in the *Treatise*, where “the origin of [Hume’s] philosophy” is his fear of being “a loser in point of pleasure” (T 1.4.7.12). It is also reminiscent of Hume’s defence of abstruse philosophy in the *Enquiry* on the basis of “the gratification of an innocent curiosity”, which is one of “those few safe and harmless pleasures” (EHU 1.10). (Note that Hume, and the characters of the *Dialogues*, use the term ‘philosophy’ more broadly than we do today, as encompassing the natural and social sciences, among others.)

Philo goes on to note that philosophical reasoning is continuous with everyday reasoning: “what we call philosophy is nothing but a more regular and methodical operation of the same kind” as reasoning concerning common life (DNR 1.9, 36). He goes on to claim that “to philosophise on such subjects is nothing essentially different from reasoning on common life’, albeit the former is ‘exacter and more scrupulous” (*ibid*.). Call the claim that philosophy differs from the reasonings of common life only in virtue of being more methodical and exact the *Philosophical Continuity Thesis*. The parallels between Philo’s defence of philosophy in DNR 1.9 (36) and Hume’s discussion of mitigated skepticism in EHU 12.25 are striking. Philo begins by noting the pleasure that attends philosophy, and then endorses the Philosophical Continuity Thesis. This is exactly the same progression that we see in Hume’s discussion of mitigated skepticism:

Those who have a propensity to philosophy, will still continue their researches; because they reflect, that, besides the immediate pleasure, attending such an occupation, philosophical decisions are nothing but the reflections of common life, methodized and corrected. (EHU 12.25)

Again, Philo’s position so closely echoes this discussion both in terms of presentation and content that it would be difficult to deny that Hume means Philo to hold any other epistemological position.

Philo points out that even abstruse speculations which are “very subtile and refined” can stand on firm footing, so long as they are confined to enquiries such as “trade, or morals, or politics, or criticism”; this is because with regard to such topics, we can “make appeals, every moment, to common sense and experience, which strengthen our philosophical conclusions” (DNR 1.10, 37). That is to say, the Philosophical Continuity Thesis ensures that philosophical reasonings are not unduly culled by mitigated skepticism. Mitigated skepticism exhorts us to limit ourselves to enquiries within the scope of our faculties. Common life falls within this scope. Philosophy is continuous with common life, and therefore also falls within this scope.

However, “theological reasonings” lack “this advantage”, since they concern “objects… too large for our grasp” (DNR 1.10, 37). To engage in such reasoning would be akin to being “foreigners in a strange country”; we would not know “how far we ought to trust our vulgar methods of reasoning in such a subject” (*ibid*.). In short, because theological reasonings are not continuous with the reasonings of common life, Philo, as a good mitigated skeptic, makes the case that we cannot justifiably engage in such reasoning. Here Philo endorses what we can call the *Theological Discontinuity Thesis*: the thesis that theological reasonings are *epistemically discontinuous* with the reasonings of philosophy and common life.

In virtue of these theses, we are licensed to accept the reasonings of philosophy and common life, while consistently rejecting theological reasonings. In short, both Philo’s endorsements of philosophy and his rejection of theology stem from his epistemological framework of mitigated skepticism, which rules in reasonings our faculties are adapted to handle and rules out those that are not. Philosophy is accepted *because* it is epistemically continuous with the reasonings of common life: since our faculties are adapted to handle the latter, they can likewise handle the former. Meanwhile, theological reasonings are rejected *because* they are epistemically discontinuous with the reasonings of philosophy and common life: unlike the latter domains of reasoning, our faculties *are not* adapted to handle theological speculation.

Philo also notes that “sceptics pretend” that “if reason be considered in an abstract view, it furnishes invincible arguments against itself” (DNR 1.11, 37). It has been thought that this references Hume’s skepticism with regard to reason in the *Treatise* (T 1.4.1).[[14]](#endnote-14) However, given that Philo does not enter into the details of the skeptical argument in question, it is plausible that he instead references Hume’s adduced arguments against reason in EHU 12, whereby skeptics attempt to “destroy *reason* by argument and ratiocination” (EHU 12.17).[[15]](#endnote-15)

In any case, the details of the skeptical argument against reason need not concern us here, as they seemingly do not concern Philo. The point is that excessive skepticism regarding topics of common life is averted because it is counterbalanced by the “more solid and more natural arguments, derived from the senses and experience” (DNR 1.11, 37). However, skepticism regarding topics that “run wide of common life” (such as theological reasonings) remains in full force, because it lacks the counterweight of common life:

…whenever our arguments lose this advantage, and run wide of common life… the most refined scepticism comes to be upon a footing with them, and is able to oppose and counterbalance them’ (DNR 1.11, 37).

Again, the Philosophical Continuity Thesis does heavy lifting: philosophy should be retained, because it survives the skeptical barrage in virtue of being reinforced by the epistemic force of the natural arguments that reinforce the reasonings common life. At work also is the Theological Discontinuity Thesis: theological reasonings should be dismissed, because being discontinuous with the reasonings of common life, they lack such resources to counterbalance the skeptical considerations raised against them. These two theses give Philo a systematic epistemological basis for differentiating philosophy from theology.

Cleanthes objects to the Theological Discontinuity Thesis.[[16]](#endnote-16) Importantly, according to Cleanthes, not all forms of theological reasoning are discontinuous with those of philosophy and common life. For our purposes, we might distinguish natural religion, which Cleanthes champions, from both Demea’s mysticism and revealed religion. Revealed religion concerns the religious doctrines that are explicitly given (e.g. via prophets and religious texts), with miraculous acts performed in conjunction with revelation as to ratify their divine providence.[[17]](#endnote-17) Meanwhile, mysticism views the nature of God as beyond human comprehension altogether—while *a priori* reasoning might lead us to believe in the *existence* of God, no human reasoning is capable of discerning the *nature* of God. Cleanthes’ own natural religion, unlike mysticism, is founded on the ability of human reason to discern the nature as well as the existence of God. And unlike revealed religion, natural religion does not depend on explicit revelation or miraculous acts but rather infers religious truths from the ordinary workings of nature. Cleanthes endorses a close analogy between human creations and nature, and consequently between their creators—that is, between humans and God. As Philo remarks, and Cleanthes quickly agrees, “the liker the better” (DNR 5.4, 68); Cleanthes believes that probable reasoning licenses anthropomorphism (to Demea’s chagrin).

Thus, while Cleanthes might have sympathy for Philo’s view that mysticism and revealed religion are discontinuous from science and philosophy, the same cannot be said of natural religion. He argues that much of abstract science is not dissimilar in kind from natural religion. This is meant as a *reductio* of Philo’s position that we should dismiss natural religion on the basis that it runs wide of common life: Cleanthes’ claim is that if Philo is right, then we should correspondingly dismiss much of science as well, which is clearly incorrect. Cleanthes argues that, by Philo’s lights, Newton’s explanation of the rainbow, in appealing to “a minute anatomy of the rays of light”, should be dismissed as venturing into “a subject…too refined for human comprehension” (DNR 1.12, 38). And he notes that the Copernican and Galilean explanation of the motion of the earth would similarly be rejected on the basis of being “too magnificent and remote to be explained by the narrow and fallacious reason of mankind” (DNR 1.12, 38).

In this vein, Cleanthes criticises the “inconsistence” of “refined and philosophical sceptics”, who, with regard to “natural, mathematical, moral, and political science”, “consider each particular evidence apart, and proportion their assent to the precise degree of evidence” (DNR 1.13, 38). In doing so, they can accept explanations of heavenly bodies and light despite maintaining that subjects such as the “nourishment of bodies by food” and “the cohesion of the parts of matter” are “incomprehensible” (DNR 1.13, 39). Nevertheless, they are inconsistent insofar as they do not extend the same courtesy to natural religion, but rather antecedently reject all such enquiries “on the general presumption of the insufficiency of human reason, without any particular discussion of the evidence” (DNR 1.13, 39). Cleanthes does not pretend to have an answer to the skeptical worries regarding the fallaciousness of our faculties: he openly admits that he has “not capacity for so great an understanding”, nor has he “leisure for it” (DNR 1.14, 39). However, he takes such a project to be “superfluous”: if the skeptic accepts the reasonings of science and philosophy as surviving contact with skepticism, then she must extend the same courtesy to natural religion (DNR 1.14, 39).

Cleanthes goes on to explicitly affirm the Philosophical Continuity Thesis, while denying the Theological Discontinuity Thesis:

In vain would the sceptic make a distinction between science and common life, or between one science and another. The arguments, employed in all, if just, are of a similar nature, and contain the same force and evidence. Or if there be any difference among them, the advantage lies entirely on the side of theology and natural religion. (DNR 1.16, 39–40)

Cleanthes agrees with Philo that science and common life are continuous. However, he argues that we cannot discriminate against natural religion, which he counts as a science. Indeed, if anything, natural religion has epistemic advantages over the other sciences in respect of its proximity to common life. This is because, contrasted with the abstruseness of much of natural science, natural religion “is founded on the simplest and most obvious arguments, and, unless it meets with artificial obstacles, has such easy access and admission into the mind of man” (DNR 1.16, 40). Cleanthes goes on to endorse Locke as championing the position

that *faith* was nothing but a species of *reason*, that religion was only a branch of philosophy, and that a chain of arguments, similar to that which established any truth in morals, politics, or physics, was always employed in discovering all the principles of theology, natural and revealed. (DNR 1.17, 40–41)

Importantly, the disagreement between Philo and Cleanthes on the Theological Discontinuity Thesis corresponds to a crucial point of difference between the *Treatise* and the *Enquiry*. While the *Treatise* does not recognise a meaningful epistemological difference between theological reasoning and philosophy, the *Enquiry* does. In these texts, we can also find more comprehensive grounds for Cleanthes’ and Philo’s positions respectively.

Philo briefly explains his exclusion of theological reasonings from the scope of human knowledge in part 2 of the *Dialogues*. The basis for this epistemological move is the fact that any purported knowledge of God’s nature lacks basis in experience:

Our ideas reach no farther than our experience: We have no experience of divine attributes and operations: I need not conclude my syllogism: You can draw the inference yourself… just reasoning and sound piety…. establish the adorably mysterious and incomprehensible nature of the Supreme Being. (DNR 2.4, 44–45)

While Cleanthes would nevertheless hope to be able to establish conclusions regarding the nature of God on the basis of analogy, if not strict similarity, Philo thinks the analogy stretched too thin:

But where-ever you depart, in the least, from the similarity of the cases, you diminish proportionably the evidence; and may at last bring it to a very weak *analogy*, which is confessedly liable to error and uncertainty. (DNR 2.7, 46)

Lacking adequate foundation from experience, the arguments of natural religion cannot establish their conclusions. Natural religion is thus no exception to Philo’s preclusion of theology from the bounds of human knowledge: the supposed analogy between the natural and the divine is too weak to ground any meaningful inference about the divine creator.

Philo’s epistemological boundaries can be situated in the more comprehensive epistemological framework found in the *Enquiry*. Having recommended in general terms the “narrow limitation… of our enquiries”, Hume goes on to set himself the task of finding “what are the proper subjects of science and enquiry” (EHU 12.26). He explains that abstract sciences should be limited to those concerning “quantity and number”; merely verbal debates concerning definition do not violate the limitations of human knowledge, but neither are they particularly illuminating (EHU 12.27). Importantly, when it comes to questions of “matter of fact and existence”, such issues are “incapable of demonstration” (EHU 12.28) and must be “founded entirely on experience” (EHU 12.29). Essentially, the boundaries of human reason are those set out by Hume’s Fork:

ALL the objects of human reason or enquiry may naturally be divided into two kinds, to wit, Relations of Ideas, and Matters of Fact. (EHU 4.1)

Those reasonings that fall foul of Hume’s Fork should be dismissed—and it is Hume’s Fork that rules in favour of common life and philosophy while rejecting theology.

Famously, Hume recommends immolating “divinity or school metaphysics”, as it falls foul of the fork (EHU 12.34). Probable reasoning about the divine being would have to be founded on experience. But, as Philo notes, experience cannot provide an adequate foundation for such reasoning, and so natural religion fails to make the cut, and is carved off by Hume’s Fork. Meanwhile, philosophical enquiries (broadly construed), such as moral philosophy (EHU 7.2),[[18]](#endnote-18) or the natural sciences (EHU 12.31), fall within the proper domain of human enquiry insofar as they concern matters of fact that are founded on experience. As we have seen above, mitigated skepticism dismisses speculations regarding “the origin of worlds, and the situation of nature, from, and to eternity” (EHU 12.25). Such speculations, which are the province of theological reasonings, concern matters of fact rather than relations of ideas. Given Hume’s general framework as spelt out above, the reason that Hume dismisses such enquiries in the *Enquiry* can only be that they cannot be properly founded on experience.

This position is contested by Todd Ryan, who reads the *Enquiry* as claiming that theology can be founded on reason:[[19]](#endnote-19)

Divinity or Theology, as it proves the existence of a Deity, and the immortality of souls, is composed partly of reasonings concerning particular, partly concerning general facts. It has a foundation in *reason*, so far as it is supported by experience. But its best and most solid foundation is *faith* and divine revelation. (EHU 12.32)

While Hume does say that theology can be founded on reason to the extent that it is supported by experience, this does not entail that theology can be founded on either reason or experience. Hume’s claim is perfectly consistent with rejecting that theology can have any foundation in reason, if one denies that theological reasoning can be adequately supported by experience. And indeed, it is notable that much of Philo’s work in the *Dialogues* is dedicated precisely to refuting Cleanthes’ attempts to establish the existence of the traditional creator God on the basis of experience; Philo’s general strategy is to argue that the evidence of experience does not license Cleanthes’ notion of a benevolent and all-powerful God.[[20]](#endnote-20) What is left of natural religion after Philo’s barrage of attacks—that is, all that can be said to be truly supported by experience and reason—is something so thin as to be unworthy of serious challenge, and which scarcely deserves the name of theology. This much is clear from the following important passage, which is worth quoting in its entirety:

If the whole of Natural Theology, as some people seem to maintain, resolves itself into one simple, though somewhat ambiguous, at least undefined proposition, *That the cause or causes of order in the universe probably bear some remote analogy to human intelligence:* If this proposition be not capable of extension, variation, or more particular explication: If it affords no inference that affects human life, or can be the source of any action or forbearance: And if the analogy, imperfect as it is, can be carried no farther than to the human intelligence; and cannot be transferred, with any appearance of probability, to the other qualities of the mind: If this really be the case, what can the most inquisitive, contemplative, and religious man do more than give a plain, philosophical assent to the proposition, as often as it occurs; and believe that the arguments, on which it is established, exceed the objections, which lie against it? (DNR 12.33, 129)

This concession, which is a central part of what has come to be known as ‘Philo’s Reversal’, is barely any concession at all.[[21]](#endnote-21) First, it should be noted that Philo does not himself endorse the proposition that “the cause or causes of order in the universe probably bear some remote analogy to human intelligence”, but only goes so far as to say that an “inquisitive, contemplative, and religious” person must assent to it. Philo is certainly inquisitive and contemplative, but it is of course the very point in question is whether he is genuinely religious or not. Moreover, that the cause of the universe bears some remote analogy to human intelligence is a very weak claim. For instance, the actions of evolution might fairly be said to bear some remote analogy to human intelligence, insofar as these natural forces act in ways that an intelligent designer might. The phrase “some remote analogy” is doing heavy lifting here. A sufficiently remote analogy would leave any notion of the cause of the universe to be virtually empty.[[22]](#endnote-22)

All in all, Philo does not think that a substantial conception of God can be supported by experience; insofar as this is true, theological reasonings that seek to establish such a being lack foundation in reason. In this, it is notable that Hume does not think that theology can indeed substantially lean on reason; he is quick to note in EHU 12.32 that “its best and most solid foundation is *faith* and divine revelation” instead. In short, theology’s best bet is revealed religion rather than natural religion. More direct is Hume’s claim in EHU 10: “Our most holy religion is founded on *Faith*, not on reason” (EHU 10.40). Here Hume is much less ambiguous about the extent to which the Christian religion at least has any foundation in reason—that is, none at all. This indicates a dim view for the prospects of a natural religion founded on probable reason.

Indeed, there is reason to be somewhat suspicious of the sincerity of Hume’s suggestion in EHU 12.32 that theology has any sort of foundation at all, even a weak one. Not a few paragraphs earlier he insists that “the existence, therefore, of any being can only be proved by arguments… founded *entirely on experience*” (EHU 12.29, emphasis added). Importantly, Hume does not use “proved” here to mean *demonstratively* proved; questions of existence can never admit of demonstration. Thus, he means here that questions of existence can only receive adequate support on the basis of experience. And yet he says that religion, which concerns the existence of God, is to be founded on faith rather than reason, which of course excludes a foundation on experience via probable reasoning (EHU 10.32; EHU 10.40). Reading between the lines, the natural conclusion is that natural religion cannot adequately establish the existence of God.

Thus, in the *Enquiry*, there is a distinct discontinuity between philosophy, which is founded on reason and experience, and theology, which is best founded on faith (to whatever extent faith can be a meaningful foundation at all). In short, the *Enquiry* endorses the Theological Discontinuity Thesis.

The picture seems somewhat different in the *Treatise*, however. In the Introduction to the *Treatise*, Hume justifies the importance of his project on the basis that “*Mathematics*, *Natural Philosophy*, *and Natural Religion* are in some measure dependent on the science of Man”, and he notes that improvements are indeed “the more to be hoped for in natural religion” once suitably grounded on this science of man (T Intro 4). Hume goes on to note that “Natural Religion” has “such a dependence on the knowledge of man” (T Intro 5). In short, philosophy—indeed, Hume’s own philosophy—grounds natural religion. Natural religion is continuous with philosophy, and indeed is intimately bound with it.

In this, Hume’s stance in the *Treatise* seems more closely aligned with Cleanthes’ rather than Philo’s. Philo proposes a systematic difference between theology and philosophy: the former exceeds the boundaries of our faculties, while the latter respects them. However, Hume in the *Treatise*, like Cleanthes, rejects the Theological Discontinuity Thesis: he views natural religion as grounded on his own science of man.

1. Cleanthes’ Positive Epistemology

We have seen that Cleanthes rejects Philo’s claim that there is a systematic discontinuity between theology and philosophy. In part 2, Philo attacks the strength of the analogy between any design in human artifacts and design in nature, and thus between a divine creator and human beings. How does Cleanthes respond and defend the validity of this analogy against Philo’s offensive? Cleanthes’ clearest statement in this regard comes in part 3 of the *Dialogues*, as Hume himself recognises. As Black and Gressis have pointed out, Hume notes in his letter to Gilbert Elliot: “If you’ll be persuaded to assist me in supporting Cleanthes, I fancy you need not take Matters any higher than Part 3” (HL i.157).[[23]](#endnote-23)

What is crucial about part 3 of the *Dialogues* is that here Cleanthes seems to offer what has been described as an ‘irregular’ argument for God.[[24]](#endnote-24) Cleanthes argues that there may be some arguments of an “irregular nature” that, despite falling short of the rigourous standards of philosophical argumentation, nevertheless may succeed in establishing Theism:

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. (DNR 3.8, 57)

This comes after his “regular” argument for an intelligent designer (on the basis of the principle that like effects prove like causes, along with the claim that nature resembles the works of man) is savaged by Philo in part 2, who points out a wide range of possibilities that are equally consonant with such a thin analogical basis.[[25]](#endnote-25) Cleanthes then retreats to irregular arguments for God’s existence to buttress the analogy. That is, while in part 2 Cleanthes largely shares Philo’s broad views on the underlying principles governing analogical reasoning (while disagreeing with Philo about the strength of the evidence and the closeness of the analogy), part 3 marks a distinct departure on Cleanthes’ part from this shared position in viewing the analogical reasoning involved in natural religion as best supported not by regular arguments, but irregular ones. This is likely why Hume is careful to mark out part 3 as crucial to understanding Cleanthes’ position.

How exactly are irregular arguments meant to work, if not in accordance with “the principles of logic” (DNR 3.8, 57)? Cleanthes suggest that to be a “reasonable sceptic” is to “reject abstruse, remote and refined arguments”, while assenting “where-ever any reasons strike… with so full a force” that one “cannot, without the greatest violence, prevent it” (DNR 3.7, 56). He takes it that “the arguments for Natural Religion are plainly of this kind; and nothing but the most perverse, obstinate metaphysics can reject them” (*ibid*.). To illustrate this, he adduces the anatomy of an eye:

Consider, anatomize the eye: Survey its structure and contrivance; and tell me, from your own feeling, if the idea of a contriver does not immediately flow in upon you with a force like that of sensation… To what degree, therefore, of blind dogmatism must one have attained, to reject such natural and convincing arguments? (DNR 3.7, 56)

The force of this example rests not on argument, but rather on “feeling”. Just as one finds it nigh impossible to disbelieve something presented to us in sensation, such as the fact that it is raining, Cleanthes maintains that Philo cannot but submit to a belief in an intelligent designer when confronted with the intricacy of the eye. And Cleanthes claims that this argument is not only psychologically compelling but also epistemically sound: it is not only “natural” but also “convincing”, such that only a “blind dogmatism” could move one to reject it. Cleanthes takes the example of the eye to illustrate perfectly his general epistemological principle stated just prior: reject those enquiries that, being “remote” and “refined”, fail to strike us with “force”, and accept those that do.

In short, irregular arguments lack a rational basis, but are rather founded in feeling.[[26]](#endnote-26) As Beryl Logan puts it, “rather than appealing to reason, they appeal to the affections and stimulate the imagination”.[[27]](#endnote-27) David O’Connor points out that such arguments rest on “the *involuntariness* of a feeling that sometimes comes over us when we have certain experiences of order in nature”.[[28]](#endnote-28) Tim Black and Robert Gressis emphasise the direct nature of such arguments: “there is no intervening step that is meant to explain why those experiences count as supports for that belief”;[[29]](#endnote-29) they also emphasise that such arguments immediately compel or determine our belief in their conclusions.[[30]](#endnote-30)

It is exactly an irregular argument that Cleanthes sees as supporting his analogy between human and divine design, and thus between human beings and a divine creator—rather than enumerate respects of resemblance in response to Philo’s attacks, Cleanthes instead appeals to the force of feeling that necessitates the analogical conclusion. As forceful as Philo’s attacks are in part 2, Cleanthes seeks to circumnavigate them by means of irregular rather than strictly logical arguments.

Notably, Cleanthes continues to bet his chips on such an irregular argument throughout the rest of the *Dialogues*. In part 10, Philo describes Cleanthes’ position as resting on the irresistible felt force of irregular arguments, and indeed seems to concede the merit of this position to some extent:

In many views of the universe, and of its parts, particularly the latter, the beauty and fitness of final causes strike us with such irresistible force, that all objections appear (what I believe they really are) mere cavils and sophisms; nor can we then imagine how it was ever possible for us to repose any weight on them. (DNR 10.36, 103–104)

And in part 12, Cleanthes again emphasises the natural and immediate nature of his irregular argument:

The comparison of the universe to a machine of human contrivance is so obvious and natural, and is justified by so many instances of order and design in Nature, that it must immediately strike all unprejudiced apprehensions, and procure universal approbation. (DNR 12.5, 118)

Cleanthes goes on to say that any skeptical doubts against such an argument “can never be steadily maintained against such striking appearances” (*ibid*.).

In this regard, Cleanthes’ epistemological position strongly resembles the Title Principle proposed in the *Treatise*:[[31]](#endnote-31)

Where reason is lively, and mixes itself with some propensity, it ought to be assented to. Where it does not, it never can have any title to operate upon us. (T 1.4.7.11)

Here, Hume suggests accepting reasoning that is lively and mixes with our propensities, and rejecting those that do not. This is essentially the principle that Cleanthes proposes in his endorsement of irregular arguments. In characterising such as “arguments” (DNR 3.7, 56), Cleanthes takes them to involve reasoning. As we have seen, he advocates that they derive their merit from their “force”, and recommends rejecting reasoning that lacks this quality (*ibid*.). It is worth noting that Hume uses both “force” and “liveliness” to refer to the vivacity of our perceptions (e.g. T 1.1.1.1, 1.1.1.8, 1.3.5.7), and the two notions seem interchangeable in Hume’s vocabulary. Thus, Cleanthes’ epistemology is closely aligned with the Title Principle proposed in the *Treatise*: accept vivacious reasoning, and reject non-vivacious reasoning.[[32]](#endnote-32)

It is upon his recognition of the Title Principle that Hume is licensed to return to philosophy, having struggled with the depths of skeptical melancholy and despair (T 1.4.7.8) and having resolved to reject philosophical reasoning in submission to his spleen and indolence (T 1.4.7.9–11). The chief problem confounding Hume in the *Treatise* is

that the understanding, when it acts alone, and according to its most general principles, entirely subverts itself, and leaves not the lowest degree of evidence in any proposition, either in philosophy or common life. (T 1.4.7.7)

This is the result of the argument in ‘Of Scepticism with regard to Reason’ (T 1.4.1), examined earlier. Hume’s solution to avoiding this brand of skepticism is to reject abstruse and refined reasoning that is “faint and obscure” (T 1.4.1.10) and “cold and general” (T 1.4.7.13), in line with the Title Principle. Similarly, Cleanthes proposes his epistemological principle as a means of rescuing the skeptic from excluding “all argument or reasoning of every kind” (DNR 3.7, 56). A footnote to part 12 of the *Dialogues* seems to acknowledge that regular arguments cannot defeat some problematic forms of skepticism:

No philosophical Dogmatist denies, that there are difficulties both with regard to the senses and to all science; and that these difficulties are in a regular, logical method, absolutely insolveable. (DNR 12.8n, 121)

This footnote represents Hume’s voice, and notably, he falls short of recommending that we appeal to *irregular* arguments as a way out of the skeptical difficulties. But certainly, this is the implication that Cleanthes would draw: we should appeal to the force of various beliefs in the face of doubt, in line with how the *Treatise* appeals to the Title Principle in order to resolve the skeptical difficulties of T 1.4.7.[[33]](#endnote-33) Just as the Title Principle offers Hume a means of rescuing philosophy from skepticism, so too does Cleanthes’ epistemological principle purport to salvage philosophical enquiry from the spectre of skepticism.

It is worth briefly contrasting my view here with ‘natural belief’ readings of Cleanthes that see him as treating belief in a divine creator (as founded on irregular arguments) as a natural belief much like our belief in the uniformity of nature and our belief in external objects. Such beliefs are thought to be epistemically privileged in virtue of their universality, indispensability, and irresistibility.[[34]](#endnote-34)

Such ‘natural belief’ readings differ from my own, insofar as I read Cleanthes and the *Treatise* as taking justification to derive from the Title Principle, rather than irresistibility or universality *per se*—many beliefs that are neither universal nor irresistible will nevertheless be lively and mix with our propensities. However, in seeing a parallel between Cleanthes’ treatment of belief in a divine creator and the *Treatise*’s treatment of certain key beliefs, they agree with my interpretation that Cleanthes’ epistemology mirrors that of the *Treatise*.

For my part, I find ‘natural beliefs’ readings of Cleanthes’ position implausible. It does not seem that a belief in a divine creator is universal or irresistible (there are, after all, atheists), nor is it indispensable (these atheists can by and large get by).[[35]](#endnote-35) Thus, even if there were an epistemically privileged class of natural beliefs, it hardly seems like a belief in a divine creator founded on an irregular argument would qualify. And for reasons I cannot enter into in this paper, I am not convinced by ‘natural belief’ readings of the *Treatise* either.[[36]](#endnote-36)

In sum, we see that Cleanthes seems to advocate the Title Principle, or something very much like it, echoing the response to skepticism contained in the *Treatise*. And yet this principle is entirely absent from the *Enquiry*.[[37]](#endnote-37) What is more, the *Enquiry* seems actively to disavow it.[[38]](#endnote-38) Consider the following passage:

There is, however, one species of philosophy, which seems little liable to this inconvenience [of pushing the mind to the biass and propensity of the natural temper], and that because it strikes in with no disorderly passion of the human mind, nor can mingle itself with any natural affection or propensity; and that is the ACADEMIC or SCEPTICAL philosophy. (EHU 5.1)

As mentioned earlier, the academic philosophy, also known as mitigated skepticism (EHU 12.24), is Hume’s own position in the *Enquiry*. In EHU 5.1 Hume endorses the academic philosophy precisely because it does not “mingle itself with any natural affection or propensity”. The language here so closely mirrors—in the sense that it is an exactly reversed image of—that of the Title Principle, which recall goes as follows:

Where reason is lively, and mixes itself with some propensity, it ought to be assented to. Where it does not, it never can have any title to operate upon us. (T 1.4.7.11)

In short, Hume advocates his mitigated skepticism on the basis that it does not mix with our natural propensities. He cannot consistently hold this position and still endorse the Title Principle; by lights of the Title Principle, mitigated skepticism ought to be rejected. Given this, it seems that Hume cannot endorse the Title Principle in the *Enquiry*.

Crucially, the Title Principle seems unable to dismiss natural religion.[[39]](#endnote-39) For natural religion prominently involves probable reasoning; certainly, this reasoning might strike one as quite lively, given the importance of its topic. So it seems that Title Principle recommends such reasoning, much on the same grounds that it recommends philosophy over skepticism.[[40]](#endnote-40) By the lights of the Title Principle, and hence Cleanthes’ epistemological framework, there is no epistemic difference between natural religion and philosophical reasoning (that is not excessively skeptical), or natural religion and everyday reasoning. All are instances of lively reasoning that mixes with our propensities, and all are thus epistemically justified.

In line with this, having professed the Title Principle in T 1.4.7.11, it is notable that Hume does not use it to dismiss superstition over philosophy. Instead, he is forced to appeal to its dangerous consequences:

…we ought to prefer that which is safest and most agreeable. And in this respect I make bold to recommend philosophy, and shall not scruple to give it the preference to superstition of every kind or denomination… Generally speaking, the errors in religion are dangerous; those in philosophy only ridiculous. (T 1.4.7.13)

Superstition is distinct from natural religion,[[41]](#endnote-41) but it seems clear that the Title Principle would endorse both forms of theological reasoning insofar as both involve lively reasoning mixing with our propensities.

In light of this, it is illuminating to consider the last word in part 1 of the *Dialogues*, which belongs to Cleanthes:

And surely, nothing can afford a stronger presumption, that any set of principles are true, and ought to be embraced, than to observe, that they tend to the confirmation of true religion, and serve to confound the cavils of Atheists, Libertines, and Freethinkers of all denominations. (DNR 1.20, 42)

Here Cleanthes suggests that we should accept principles on the basis of their usefulness to religion.[[42]](#endnote-42) But this is no sound epistemic basis on which to accept principles, and is incongruous with what Hume says in both the *Treatise* and the *Enquiry*:

There is no method of reasoning more common, and yet none more blameable, than, in philosophical disputes, to endeavour the refutation of any hypothesis, by a pretence of its dangerous consequences to religion and morality. When any opinion leads to absurdities, it is certainly false; but it is not certain that an opinion is false, because it is of dangerous consequence. (EHU 8.26; see also T 2.3.2.3)

Hume’s stance in the passages above is that we should not dismiss hypotheses on the basis of their danger to religion and morality. Presumably, he would also want to reject the converse policy of *accepting* principles on the basis of their advantage to religion and/or morality.[[43]](#endnote-43) But this is exactly the course that Cleanthes advocates, in proposing that we accept as true those principles that confirm religion. Similarly problematic is Hume’s dismissal of superstition in T 1.4.7.13. Although Hume does not here reject superstition on the basis of its danger to *religion and morality* in particular (but rather its danger *simpliciter*), his stance nevertheless seems problematic for much the same reasons as Cleanthes’, or as Hume’s imagined opponents in T 2.3.2.3 and EHU 8.26: such lines of argument accept or reject hypotheses not on the basis of evidence for their truth or falsity, but rather on the basis of their perceived practical consequences, which would be epistemically suspect.

Given the above, it is understandable, then, that one might endorse the Title Principle and quite naturally wind up endorsing natural religion. Little surprise that Cleanthes, who seems to endorse the epistemology of the *Treatise*, would be the principal advocate of natural religion. Cleanthes’ theology is a natural offshoot of the epistemological position that he adopts in the *Dialogues*.

1. Conclusion

In the light of the above, we can see Philo’s and Cleanthes’ theological disagreement as stemming from a difference in their underlying epistemological positions. On the whole, Cleanthes seems closely aligned to the epistemological position of the *Treatise*, in that he advocates something very much like the Title Principle. This is responsible for his rejection of the Theological Discontinuity Thesis, since according to the Title Principle, there is no meaningful epistemological difference between theology and philosophy: all are lively reasonings that mix with our propensities. Meanwhile, Philo seems obviously aligned to the epistemological position of the *Enquiry*, in endorsing mitigated skepticism (which he, like the *Enquiry*, views as a product of a modicum of Pyrrhonism). Mitigated skepticism advocates the limitation of our enquiries to those that our faculties are best adapted to handle. Since philosophy but not theology is continuous with the reasonings of common life (which our faculties *are* adapted to handle), this is epistemic grounds to reject theology but not philosophy.

Thus, if the epistemologies of the *Treatise* and the *Enquiry* meaningfully differ, as it seems they do, it seems clear that we should read Hume’s own position in the *Dialogues* as aligned with that of the *Enquiry*, which is his more mature work, and which he worked on in roughly the same period as the *Dialogues*. In this, it seems that Philo has the strongest claim to act as Hume’s spokesperson in the *Dialogues*.

There are a number of general worries regarding such a thesis. I lack the space to adequately address all of them in fullness here, but a few pertinent concerns are as follows. First, Hume claims to make Cleanthes the “hero” of his *Dialogues* in a letter to Sir Gilbert Elliot of Minto:

You wou’d perceive by the Sample I have given you, that I make Cleanthes the Hero of the Dialogue. Whatever you can think of, to strengthen that Side of the Argument, will be most acceptable to me. (HL i.153–4)

Of course, to claim that Cleanthes is the hero of the *Dialogues* is not necessarily to say that Cleanthes’ position is correct. For Cleanthes might be an Aristotelian *tragic* hero, who, though generally (epistemically) virtuous, is led to downfall by a crucial flaw. The sympathy expressed in taking someone to be a tragic hero fits well with my reading, since, if I am correct, Cleanthes’ epistemological framework used to be Hume’s own. Moreover, it should not be forgotten that Hume continues in the above letter to Elliot:

Had it been my good Fortune to live near you, I shou’d have taken on me the Character of Philo, in the Dialogue, which you’ll own I coud have supported naturally enough: And you woud not have been averse to that of Cleanthes. (HL i.154).

Here Hume quite clearly aligns himself with Philo. His claim of making Cleanthes the hero of the *Dialogues* might well be made to please Sir Gilbert Elliot, who Hume recognises would be partial to Cleanthes’ position.

In similar vein is Pamphilus’ somewhat surprising declaration of Cleanthes as the winner of the debate (DNR 12.34, 130). In response, it should be noted that Pamphilus may not be an entirely reliable narrator. He is Cleanthes’ student, almost akin to a son (DNR 1.2, 32), after all, and some bias on his part would not be surprising. Pamphilus might in this respect serve as a useful dialectical misdirection for Hume to better obscure his irreligious tendencies.[[44]](#endnote-44) As it was, the *Dialogues* were sufficiently controversial that Hume was wary of publishing them in his lifetime, that Adam Smith repeatedly refused to agree to do so after Hume’s death, and that Hume’s publisher William Strahan eventually passed the responsibility for doing so on to Hume’s nephew. In having Pamphilus declare Cleanthes the winner of the debate, Hume might intend to mitigate as best he can the appearance of heretical excess in order to increase the chances of the *Dialogues*’ safe passage to publication,[[45]](#endnote-45) and mitigate any potential fallout to those charged with publishing it.[[46]](#endnote-46) Perhaps Hume notes the close relationship between Pamphilus and Cleanthes as a wink and a nod to the knowing reader, who will spot Pamphilus’ bias in this respect.[[47]](#endnote-47)

A more specific worry for my interpretation is as follows. Pamphilus notes that Philo is ‘embarrassed and confounded’ upon Cleanthes delivering the earlier mentioned argument from the anatomy of the eye on the basis of what looks like the Title Principle (DNR 3.10, 57). If I am right that Philo endorses Hume’s considered epistemology, why would Philo have this reaction?

An important note: Philo’s being “embarrassed” might not mean that he feels awkward or humiliated, as per the common usage of the term today. One of the definitions of “embarrassed” listed in the Oxford English Dictionary that was common from the seventeenth century to the nineteenth (although now rare) is as follows: “feeling, expressing, or characterised by uncertainty; perplexed, confused, bewildered”. In describing Philo as “embarrassed and confounded”, Hume likely uses “embarrassed” to emphasise Philo’s puzzlement at Cleanthes’ words.[[48]](#endnote-48)

Why is Philo thusly confounded? My reading has a natural account of Philo’s reaction. I believe that Philo’s confoundment sources from a failure to provide a straightforward rebuttal of Cleanthes. This need not mean that Philo is forced to accede to Cleanthes’ point, however. The problem is that Philo’s and Cleanthes’ disagreement fundamentally sources from their very different epistemological starting points. Philo cannot respond to Cleanthes’ argument from the anatomy of the eye without addressing the fundamental epistemological framework that underlies it. But this is neither easy nor straightforward in the context of their flowing conversation. Philo can recognise the cogency of Cleanthes’ position without being forced to accept it, because Philo’s own starting position radically differs. On this view, Philo’s being at a loss for an answer makes perfect sense here. Philo and Cleanthes might reasonably disagree, if both their fundamental frameworks are cogent. Or even if Cleanthes’ is not, Philo could hardly be expected to offer a substantive rebuttal of it within the context of the *Dialogues*.[[49]](#endnote-49)

I have argued in the paper that Philo’s skeptical principles are aligned with that of the *Enquiry*, while Cleanthes’ are aligned with those of the *Treatise*. Their differing positions on natural religion can be seen as arising from these divergent fundamental epistemological bases. However, I have not been able to enter into a sufficiently substantive discussion of the details of Philo’s position on natural religion, nor of Cleanthes’. I have certainly been unable to say as much about Philo’s Reversalas the topic merits.[[50]](#endnote-50) The paper has only investigated the roots of Philo and Cleanthes’ positions, but the branches and leaves remain largely unexamined. I have here explored the nature of their attitudes towards skepticism. The full implication of these attitudes for natural religion is a topic for another time.[[51]](#endnote-51)

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1. In the references to Hume’s texts throughout, ‘T’ refers to the *Treatise of Human Nature*, ‘EHU’ to the *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, ‘EPM” to the *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, ‘DNR’ to the *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, ‘NHR’ to the *Natural History of Religion*, and ‘HL’ to *The Letters of David Hume*. Arabic numerals refer to book, part, section, and paragraph numbers (T); to section and paragraph numbers (EHU; EPM; NHR); or to part and paragraph numbers, followed by page numbers (DNR). HL Roman numerals refer to volume, and Arabic numerals to page numbers in the Greig edition of the *Letters* (OUP, 1932). All references to Hume’s texts refer to the Oxford Clarendon editions, except for the *Dialogues*, which refer to the 1993 Oxford edition edited by Gaskin; page numbers refer to this edition. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. As we will see, Cleanthes’ epistemological position evolves in part 3 of the *Dialogues*, and it is especially this considered position that I see as echoing the *Treatise*. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Elsewhere, I have argued at length that the anti-skeptical frameworks of the *Treatise* and the *Enquiry* differ considerably; moreover, the epistemological position of the *Enquiry* is Hume’s considered position, and is also philosophically superior to that of the *Treatise*. See my Hsueh Qu, *Hume's Epistemological Evolution* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020). [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. It might be thought that Hume’s ‘Fragment on Evil’, framed at about the same time that he wrote the *Treatise*, suggests that the arguments of the *Dialogues* were already formulated at this early stage; see M.A. Stewart, "An Early Fragment on Evil," in *Hume and Hume's Connexions*, ed. M.A. Stewart and John P. Wright (Philadelphia: Pennsylvania University Press, 1995), 160–70 for some discussion. However, the few pages available to us do not license any meaningful conclusions in this regard. The ‘Fragment on Evil’ has a very limited scope: it only concerns the impossibility of deducing the moral attributes of the deity from the natural attributes of such a being. This in itself does not rule out (or even meaningfully bear against) the thesis that Philo’s epistemology is discontinuous with that of the *Treatise*. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. The reading of Philo as Hume’s spokesperson has a rich tradition in the secondary literature. For defenders of this position, see Kemp Smith’s introduction to David Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* (New York: Library of Liberal Arts, 1779/1947); William Parent, "An Interpretation of Hume's *Dialogues*," *The Review of Metaphysics* 30, no. 1 (1976): 96–114; Terence Penelhum, "Hume's Skepticism and the *Dialogues*," in *Mcgill Hume Studies*, ed. David Norton, Nicholas Capaldi, and Wade Robison (San Diego: Austin Hill Press, 1979), 253–78; John Arthur Passmore, *Hume's Intentions*, 3rd ed. (London: Duckworth, 1980); Richard Henry Popkin, *The High Road to Pyrrhonism* (San Diego: Austin Hill Press, Inc., 1980); Antony Flew, *David Hume: Philosopher of Moral Science* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986); Stanley Tweyman, *Scepticism and Belief in Hume's Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* (Dordrecht: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1986); David O'Connor, *Hume on Religion* (London: Routledge, 2001), 214; Martin Bell, "Hume on the Nature and Existence of God," in *A Companion to Hume*, ed. Elizabeth S. Radcliffe (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2008), 349; Thomas Holden, *Spectres of False Divinity: Hume's Moral Atheism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 5; Don Garrett, *Hume*, Routledge Philosophers (New York: Routledge, 2015), 287; C.M. Lorkowski, "Doxastic Naturalism and Hume's Voice in the *Dialogues*," *Journal of Scottish Philosophy* 14, no. 3 (2016): 253–74; and Aleksandra Davidović, "Who Speaks for Hume: Hume's Presence in the *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*," *Belgrade Philosophical Annual* 34 (2021): 113–37, among others.

   Some commentators have taken Pamphilus or Cleanthes to speak for Hume, although such views are somewhat dated now. For examples of the former, see Charles Hendel, *Studies in the Philosophy of David Hume, 2nd Edition* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1925); and Rudolf Metz, *David Hume, Leben Und Philosophie* (Stuttgart: Frommann, 1929). For examples of the latter, see Andrew Seth Pringle-Pattison, *The Idea of God in the Light of Recent Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1917); Bertram Mitchell Laing, "Hume's *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*," *Philosophy* 12 (1937): 175–90; and A.E. Taylor, "Symposium: The Present-Day Relevance of Hume's *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 18 (1939): 179–228.

   Other commentators argue that no single character speaks for Hume. Andre Willis, *Towards a Humean True Religion* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2015), 116–117 argues that Hume speaks through all the characters, and that Hume’s aim was not so much to attain a coherent, final position so much as to guide the reader as to how to discuss the relation of religion to reason. John Bricke, "On the Interpretation of Hume's "Dialogues"," *Religious Studies* 11, no. 1 (1975): 1–18 maintains that no character in the *Dialogues* serves as Hume’s primary spokesperson. John Nelson, "The Role of Part Xii in Hume's *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*," *Hume Studies* 14, no. 2 (1988): 347–72 makes the case that each character represents a different stage in Hume’s intellectual development, a view that is broadly along the same lines as mine, although the details of our readings are very different, in particular my taking Philo to decisively speak for Hume in the *Dialogues*. J.C. Gaskin, *Hume's Philosophy of Religion* (London: Macmillan, 1978), 13 takes any character who makes a good philosophical point to speak for Hume. Tim Black and Robert Gressis, "True Religion in Hume's *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*," *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 25, no. 2 (2017): 244–64 argue that both Philo and Cleanthes exhibit true religion. Rich Foley, "Unnatural Religion: Indoctrination and Philo's Reversal in Hume's *Dialogues Concerning Natural Understanding*," *Hume Studies* 32, no. 1 (2006), 84 rejects the very question of which character speaks for Hume, as does Samuel Clark, "No Abiding City: Hume, Naturalism, and Toleration," *Philosophy* 84, no. 327 (2009), 84. William Lad Sessions, "A Dialogic Interpretation of Hume's *Dialogues*," *Hume Studies* 37, no. 1 (1991): 15–40 sees Hume’s own position as emerging from the dialogue itself, rather than as being represented by any single character; Naoki Yajima, "Why Did Hume Not Become an Atheist?: The Influence of Butler on Hume's *Dialogues*," *Journal of Scottish Philosophy* 15, no. 3 (2017): 249–60 takes a similar view. Robert Fogelin, *Hume's Presence in the Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 101 argues that “the entire dialectical structure of the *Dialogues* speaks for Hume”. See also Michel Malherbe, "Hume and the Art of Dialogue," in *Hume and Hume's Connexions*, ed. M.A. Stewart and John P. Wright (Philadelphia: Pennsylvania University Press, 1995), 201–23.

   Meanwhile, Andrew Pyle, "David Hume and the Argument to Design," in *The Continuum Companion to Hume*, ed. Alan; O'Brien Bailey, Dan (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2012), 247 offers a conciliatory assessment of the difference between the ‘Philo’ and ‘no single character’ readings. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Todd Ryan, "Academic Scepticism and Pyrrhonian Scepticism in Hume's *Dialogues*," in *Academic Scepticism in the Development of Early Modern Philosophy*, ed. Sébastien Charles and Plíno Junqueira Smith (Dordrecht: Springer, 2017): 319–43 is a notable exception. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Bricke, 12 argues that both Philo and Cleanthes espouse some un-Humean views, but also concedes that both make unmistakeably Humean claims, and enumerates a number of respects in which Cleanthes’ views reflect Hume’s. Parent catalogues a number of respects in which Philo’s views resemble Hume’s. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Of course, many of their claims echo both the *Treatise* and the *Enquiry*, for instance Cleanthes’ rejection of the possibility of *a priori* arguments for questions of existence in part 9 of the *Dialogues*. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Other commentators who read Philo as endorsing mitigated skepticism include Tweyman, *Scepticism and Belief*, 25; H.O. Mounce, *Hume's Naturalism* (London: Routledge, 1999), 117; O'Connor, 46; Terence Penelhum, "Hume's Views on Religion: Intellectual and Cultural Influences," in *A Companion to Hume*, ed. Elizabeth S. Radcliffe (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2008), 328; Holden, 23; Alan Bailey and Dan O'Brien, *Hume's Critique of Religion: 'Sick Men's Dreams'* (London: Springer, 2014), 85; Martin Bell, "Hume and Proofs for the Existence of God," in *The Oxford Handbook of Hume*, ed. Paul Russell (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 617; Ryan, 326; and Davidović, 126.

   Commentators who see Philo as a Pyrrhonian skeptic instead include Phillip Stanley, "The Scepticisms of David Hume," *The Journal Of Philosophy* 32, no. 16 (1935): 412–31; James Noxon, "Hume's Agnosticism," *Philosophical Review* 73, no. 2 (1964): 248–61; Nelson, 363; and Clark, 80. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Indeed, Holden, 23 remarks that it is precisely “Philo's defense of this same species of epistemic humility that marks him most clearly as Hume's spokesman”. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. This particular disagreement between Philo and Cleanthes is practical rather than epistemological, of course. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. As Tweyman, *Scepticism and Belief*, 28 and O'Connor, 46 argue. Ryan maintains that Cleanthes does not misunderstand the nature of Philo’s skepticism. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Philo’s claim about the unsustainability of Stoicism in its highest flights corresponds to EHU 8.34, which takes to be unsustainable the “enlarged view” of the Stoic that exhorts one to “comprehend the whole system of nature” such that “every event became an object of joy and exultation”. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Ryan, 337. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Although it should be noted that Hume suggests in a footnote to EHU 12.20 that these arguments against reason are not in fact invincible, but might be addressed by appealing to Hume’s theory of abstract ideas. This would cohere with Philo’s barbed remark that the invincibility of these reflexive arguments is something that “sceptics pretend” (DNR 1.11, 37). [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Ryan emphasises Cleanthes’ response to Philo on this point, and moreover argues that Cleanthes is right to criticise Philo in this regard. Andrew Pyle, *Hume's Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion: Reader's Guide* (London: Continuum, 2006), 33–34 also sees Cleanthes as objecting that Philo holds a double standard in distinguishing natural science and natural religion. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. In this, Hume’s essay ‘On Miracles’ in EHU 10 is an attack on revealed religion. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. Hume’s reference to ‘moral philosophy’ does not merely refer to ethical enquiries, but rather to any reasoning that concerns human nature (e.g. politics, psychology, economics). [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. Ryan, 334. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. Ryan, 342–343 sees Cleanthes as winning the point against Philo that we cannot antecedently dismiss the project of natural religion, but can only do so on the basis of a close examination of the details of the relevant arguments. We need not, however, read Philo’s engagement with the nuts-and-bolts of Cleanthes’ design arguments as any sort of concession on Philo’s behalf. Imagine a debate between a physicist and a perpetual motion machine enthusiast. The physicist antecedently dismisses the possibility of the latter’s prospects of success, but if the latter continues to insist upon the tenability of their project, the physicist might take it upon herself to take apart the details of the enthusiast’s calculations. As Holden, 26 puts it: “[Hume] is only entertaining such questions in order to enforce skeptical conclusions, and so he is not so much neglecting the strictures of mitigated skepticism as he is *vindicating* them when he engages in philosophical argument concerning the first cause of all”. Nevertheless, Holden cautions that this is not the complete story, and argues that mitigated skepticism allows for certain attenuated general claims regarding the deity. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. Benjamin S. Cordry, "A More Dangerous Enemy? Philo's "Confession" and Hume's Soft Atheism," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 70 (2011), 66 takes this claim to be “so qualified as to be almost empty”. Peter Millican, "The Context, Aims, and Structure of Hume’s First Enquiry," in *Reading Hume on Human Understanding*, ed. Peter Millican (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 38 takes Philo’s acknowledgment of God to be “so attenuated as to amount to virtually nothing at all”. Fogelin, 128–129 says that it leaves “no more than an anemic deity no theist would find acceptable”. Bailey and O'Brien, 224–225 take Philo’s conception of God to be contentless. Willem Lemmens, "The 'True Religion' of the Sceptic: Penelhum Reading Hume's *Dialogues*," *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 42, no. S1 (2012), 192 says that “the epistemic content of this [purported religious] belief is minimal”. Pyle, "Argument to Design", 262 calls this “in fact no concession at all”. Terence Penelhum, "Hume's Atheism and the Role of Cleanthes," *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 42, no. S1 (2012), 206 puts the point stridently, saying that Philo’s words do not leave room for “even a thin (or attenuated) deism”, and Davidović, 133 echoes Penelhum’s views in this regard. Charles Echelbarger, "Hume's Tacit Atheism," *Religious Studies* 11 (1975): 19–35 takes Philo’s words to be consistent with atheism. Beryl Logan, "The Irregular Argument in Hume's Dialogues," *Hume Studies* 18, no. 2 (1992), 495 describes the thesis as “highly attenuated and hedged”, and argues that Philo does not even assert it. See also Antony Flew, *Hume's Philosophy of Belief* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1961), 192; J.C. Gaskin, "God, Hume and Natural Belief," *Philosophy* 49 (1974), 288; and J.C. Gaskin, "Hume's Critique of Religion," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 14, no. 3 (1976), 301.

    For disagreement, see Black and Gressis. More strongly, Willis, 126 argues that this passage in fact represents no reversal in Philo’s position, because “Philo *never* undermined the basic force of the design argument”; Willis argues that Philo’s religious position is substantive.

    Views that fall between these two spectrums also have their defenders. Holden, 27 takes Philo’s concession to be “very meagre”, but nevertheless affirms “some sort of positive thesis (however meagre or inconsequential) about the likely properties of the first cause of all” and thus advances “*some* sort of natural theology”. Like Willis, Holden, 37 takes this passage to involve no reversal in Philo’s position, although for opposite reasons: he takes it that Philo’s claim is sufficiently weak as to be consistent with his attacks on the design argument. Don Garrett, "What's True About Hume's 'True Religion'?," *Journal of Scottish Philosophy* 10, no. 2 (2012), 219 takes this not to “postulate a Deity morally worth of worship”, although maintains that it is “‘genuinely’ religion for all that”. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. As Holden, 37-38 puts it: “Philo's ‘reversal’ (on the current interpretation) exploits the fact that a sufficiently weak analogy to a human mind could be said to hold of just about any being, for any given unknown being will ‘probably bear some remote analogy’ to a human intelligence, so long as we read ‘some remote analogy’ weakly enough”. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. Black and Gressis, 257. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. A number of commentators have maintained that Cleanthes endorses ‘irregular’ arguments for God’s existence; see for instance Nelson Pike, "Commentary," in *David Hume, Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, ed. Nelson Pike (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merill, 1970), 232; Penelhum, "Hume's Skepticism"; Stanley Tweyman, "Introduction," in *David Hume: Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion in Focus*, ed. Stanley Tweyman (London: Routledge, 1991), 1–94; Logan; O'Connor, Ch.5; and Black and Gressis. For denials, see Gaskin, *Hume's Philosophy of Religion*, 129; and Pheroze Wadia, "Professor Pike on Part Iii of Hume's *Dialogues*," *Religious Studies* 14, no. 3 (1978): 325–42. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. Black and Gressis, 249. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. Garrett, *Hume*, in reading Hume’s epistemology as fundamentally sense-based, takes all arguments to rest on feeling; Garrett indeed would argue that for an argument to have a rational basis would involve its being founded on feeling in some sense. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. Logan, 484. [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. O'Connor, 84. [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. Black and Gressis, 249. [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
30. Black and Gressis, 258. [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
31. The significance of the Title Principle is of course a controversial matter in Hume scholarship, and I lack the space to defend this claim here. I explain and defend the role of the Title Principle in T 1.4.7 in my Hsueh Qu, "Hume’s Practically Epistemic Conclusions?," *Philosophical Studies* 170, no. 3 (2014): 501–24; and *Hume's Epistemological Evolution*, Ch.6. Many commentators have accorded the Title Principle pride of place in T 1.4.7. For some examples, see Don Garrett, *Cognition and Commitment in Hume's Philosophy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); Mounce, 60; Don Garrett, "Hume’s Conclusions in ‘Conclusion of This Book’," in *The Blackwell Guide to Hume's Treatise*, ed. Saul Traiger (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2006), 151–76; P. J. E. Kail, *Projection and Realism in Hume's Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 70; Henry Allison, *Custom and Reason in Hume: A Kantian Reading of the First Book of the Treatise* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 323–330; Kevin Meeker, *Hume's Radical Scepticism and the Fate of Naturalized Epistemology*, Palgrave Innovations in Philosophy (Basingstoke: Palgrace Macmillan, 2013), 73–81; Karl Schafer, "Curious Virtues in Hume's Epistemology," *Philosophers' Imprint* 14, no. 1 (2014): 1–20; Frederick Schmitt, *Hume's Epistemology in the Treatise* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 368–375; Don Garrett, "Hume on Reason, Normativity, and the Title Principle," in *The Oxford Handbook of Hume*, ed. Paul Russell (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 32–53; Donald Baxter, "A Pyrrhonian Interprettion of Hume on Assent," in *Skepticism: From Antiquity to the Present*, ed. Diego E. Machuca and Baron Reed (New York: Bloomsbury, 2018), 388–389; and Nathan Sasser, "Hume's Purely Practical Response to Philosophical Scepticism," *Hume Studies* 43, no. 2 (2017): 3–28. [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
32. This epistemology resembles contemporary accounts that found justification on a certain phenomenal character, such as the Phenomenal Conservatism found in Michael Huemer, *Skepticism and the Veil of Perception* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2001) and the Dogmatism in James Pryor, "The Skeptic and the Dogmatist," *Noûs* 34, no. 4 (2000): 517–49. Similar accounts are defended by Chris Tucker, "Why Open-Minded People Should Endorse Dogmatism," *Philosophical Perspectives* 24 (2010): 529–45; Berit Brogaard, "Phenomenal Seemings and Sensible Dogmatism," in *Seemings and Justification: New Essays on Dogmatism and Phenomenal Conservatism*, ed. Chris Tucker (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 270–89; and Elijah Chudnoff, *Intuition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), among others. [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
33. Philo presumably would cede that there are some areas where skepticism cannot be defeated. In my Qu, *Hume's Epistemological Evolution*, 191–193, I argue that Hume in the *Enquiry* takes certain aspects of skepticism with regard to the senses to be insuperable in this way. [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
34. See Ronald Butler, "Natural Belief and the Enigma of Hume," *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie* 42, no. 1 (1960): 73–100. [↑](#endnote-ref-34)
35. Gaskin, *Hume's Philosophy of Religion*, 117–119 criticises this reading sharply. Tweyman, *Scepticism and Belief*, 64–65 argues against this reading by pointing out that belief in a divine creator does not seem to be essential to our cognitive lives in the way that beliefs in inductive uniformity or external objects are. O'Connor, 92–93 points out that Hume denies that a belief in a divine creator is universal in the opening paragraph of *The Natural History of Religion* (NHR Intro 1), and also notes that religious beliefs in general hardly seem unavoidable. Liz Goodnick, "Cleanthes's Propensity and Intelligent Design," *The Modern Schoolman* 88, no. 3 (2011): 299–316 likewise cites the *Natural History* to argue that the propensity responsible for a belief in a divine creator importantly differs from that responsible for inductive reasoning. Foley offers a careful and systematic takedown of the natural belief reading of Cleanthes. Black and Gressis likewise reject this reading. [↑](#endnote-ref-35)
36. See my Qu, *Hume's Epistemological Evolution*, 133–134 for a rejection of ‘irresistibility’ readings. [↑](#endnote-ref-36)
37. As Peter Millican, "Hume's Chief Argument," in *The Oxford Handbook of Hume*, ed. Paul Russell (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 105 notes. [↑](#endnote-ref-37)
38. See my Hsueh Qu, "The Title Principle (or Lack Thereof) in the *Enquiry*," *History of Philosophy Quarterly* 33, no. 3 (2016): 257–74, and *Hume's Epistemological Evolution*, Ch.8, which argue for this thesis in much greater detail. If the reader is not convinced by the admittedly brief case put forward in this paper for the claim that Hume actively disavows the Title Principle in the *Enquiry*, then she may set it aside; it suffices for my purposes that Hume does not actively advocate it in his later work. [↑](#endnote-ref-38)
39. It might be that the irregular argument for design would fall foul of other epistemological frameworks we find in the *Treatise*. It would be ruled out by the ‘Rules by which to judge of causes and effects’ in T 1.3.15, for instance. And it is certainly controversial whether the feeling of design would count as one of the “permanent, irresistable, and universal” principles of the imagination as opposed to the “changeable, weak, and irregular” ones. However, I have argued in my *Hume's Epistemological Evolution*, 119–123 that these epistemic frameworks are ultimately abandoned in favour of the Title Principle, in virtue of their inability to circumvent the skeptical regress we find in T 1.4.1. [↑](#endnote-ref-39)
40. See my Qu, *Hume’s Epistemological Evolution*, 152–158 and Kenneth Winkler, "Hume’s Inductive Scepticism," in *The Empiricists: Locke, Berkeley, and Hume*, ed. Margaret Atherton (Oxford: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 1999), 199–200 for some related discussion concerning superstition. [↑](#endnote-ref-40)
41. Notably, superstition “opens a world of its own, and presents us with scenes, and beings, and objects, which are altogether new” (T 1.4.7.13). This is a stark contrast to Cleanthes’ anthropomorphism, which seeks to draw as close an analogy as possible between the realm of the divine and the natural. Moreover, as spelt out in ‘Of Superstition and Enthusiasm’, superstition is characterised as primarily founded on the enlivening influence of fear, and is associated with the Catholic religion; this hardly seems true of natural religion. [↑](#endnote-ref-41)
42. Cleanthes might mean this as pragmatic rather than an epistemological principle, but even so, he would indicate a willingness to set aside the epistemologically problematic implications it brings, which is a departure from Hume’s stated position in EHU 8.26 and T 2.3.2.3. The same can be said of Hume’s own rejection of superstition on the basis of its dangerousness in T 1.4.7.13. [↑](#endnote-ref-42)
43. One might maintain, as Garrett, "Hume's 'True Religion'", and Garrett, *Hume*, 301 suggest, that ‘true religion’ here refers to religious doctrines that are in fact true (rather than for instance religious doctrines that are popularly *taken* to be true—c.f. *Hume*,297). If this is the case, then the fact that a set of principles confirms true doctrines can be considered an epistemic mark in their favour. Of course, this would be question-begging to opponents who will deny that these religious doctrines are true in the first place. [↑](#endnote-ref-43)
44. Similar remarks might be made about Philo’s Reversal. [↑](#endnote-ref-44)
45. Davidović, 120. [↑](#endnote-ref-45)
46. Indeed, Hume’s nephew, who ultimately oversaw the *Dialogues*’ publication, seems not to have escaped censure; Smith himself likely declined to do so due to worries about the controversy this would bring to his own person. See Dennis Rasmussen, *The Infidel and the Professor: David Hume, Adam Smith, and the Friendship That Shaped Modern Thought* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017), 194–196. Thus, although it is true that Hume would not have feared for any consequences for himself, as Willis, 116 notes, there might nevertheless have been strong reasons for Hume to exercise prudence in this regard.

    Willis, 116 also argues that the claims in the *Dialogues* were less controversial than some in Hume’s earlier writing, citing this as further reason as to why Hume would not have felt the need to camouflage his views. But, as mentioned above, Hume certainly felt the *Dialogues* were sufficiently inflammatory as presented that he put off its publication for two and a half decades, until after his death; see Rasmussen, 197. Indeed he explicitly recognises the controversy of this work in a letter to Strahan, noting that he refrains from publishing the *Dialogues* due to his desire “to live quietly, and keep remote from all Clamour” (HL ii.323). If his actual views were even more extreme than straightforwardly set out in this work, as I suggest, he would certainly be sufficiently concerned to obscure them. [↑](#endnote-ref-46)
47. Davidović, 123 points out that the wording of Pamphilus’ declaration closely mirrors Velleius’ declaration of the Stoic Balbus as the winner of the debate at the close of Cicero’s *De Natura Deorum*, with the Academic Skeptic Cotta taking second place. This declaration is often read as a piece of transparent misdirection on Cicero’s part, which offers further support for reading Pamphillus’ declaration in a similar way. [↑](#endnote-ref-47)
48. If one takes Hume’s use of “embarrassed” in its more modern sense, my account nevertheless has the resources to provide an interesting reading of this embarrassment: we might take Philo’s embarrassment to represent Hume’s own. Hume recognises that he cannot dismiss Cleanthes’ point without dismissing his own former epistemology as defended in the *Treatise*. Perhaps Hume might have felt shame at having previously defended a problematic epistemology, and subtly alludes to this embarrassment via Philo. [↑](#endnote-ref-48)
49. My Qu, *Hume's Epistemological Evolution* makes the case that the epistemology of the *Treatise* is ultimately problematic, and that Hume explicitly acknowledges its flaws in the first *Enquiry*. Thus, by reading the *Dialogues* in the light of the first *Enquiry*, we have a substantial dismissal of Cleanthes’ brand of natural religion. [↑](#endnote-ref-49)
50. For some further discussion of Philo’s Reversal, see John Immerwahr, "Hume's Aesthetic Theism," *Hume Studies* 22, no. 2 (1996): 325–38; Terence Penelhum, *Themes in Hume: The Self, the Will, Religion* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000), 208–209; Foley; Lorne Falkenstein, "Hume on "Genuine", "True", and "Rational" Religion," in *Eighteenth-Centruty Thought, Volume 4*, ed. James G. Buickerood (New York: AMS Press, 2009), 171–201; Penelhum, "Hume's Views on Religion"; Garrett, "Hume's 'True Religion'"; Willem Lemmens, "Hume's Atheistic Agenda: Philo's Confession in Dialogues, 12," *Bijdragen: Internation Journal in Philosophy and Theology* 73, no. 3 (2012): 281–303; Lemmens, "Penelhum Reading Hume's *Dialogues*"; Lorkowski; and James Tarrant, "Hume's Belief in God," *Philosophy* 93 (2018): 91–108, among others. [↑](#endnote-ref-50)
51. For very helpful comments, thanks are owed to Don Garrett, Daryl Ooi, and a reading group at the National University of Singapore. I am also grateful to two anonymous referees for this journal for some excellent and detailed comments. [↑](#endnote-ref-51)