

Introduction

In the history of philosophy of religion and natural theology, David Hume is an immensely influential contributor. One of his most important works in the field is his *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, which contains his greatest treatment of natural theology, specifically the design argument. However, there's a big problem which the *Dialogues* present to understanding Hume. Eleven of the twelve parts of the *Dialogues* contain Hume's sharp criticisms and attacks on the Design argument. But in the final part, in what is often called "Philo's Reversal," he seems to completely reverse course by renouncing his skepticism and endorsing the Design argument. This provides us with a puzzling interpretive problem.

"Philo's Reversal" has been called the "primary problem" for understanding the *Dialogues*.¹ Numerous interpretations have been offered. Scholars like Kemp Smith read the reversal as an insincere attempt to satisfy the pious. On the opposite end of the interpretive spectrum, Nelson Pike believes that we should basically take the Reversal at face value, which would make Hume a card-carrying fideist, since in the Reversal he pointed his readers away from reason to faith.

I agree with William Austin who, in his aptly titled paper "Philo's Reversal," argued that there are problems with both of these views. It is difficult to maintain that Hume included the Reversal just to soothe the hurt feelings of the pious when one considers the harsh and irreligious things Hume says in the Reversal.² On the other hand, the Reversal cannot be taken at face value, as Pike suggests, because it simply doesn't mesh with Hume's wider work, especially his essay

¹ Austin, William H. "Philo's Reversal." *Philosophical Topics*, Vol. 13, No. 2, The Proceedings of the Forty-Third and Forty-Fourth: Annual Meetings of the Southwestern Philosophical Society, 1985, pp. 103-111. University of Arkansas Press. Pg. 103.

² Austin, William. "Philo's Reversal." 104.

“Of Miracles.”³ Hume cannot possibly be sincere in referring his readers to revelation because in “Of Miracles” he mockingly attacks the reliability of testimony concerning miracles, which is the backbone of revelation.

I agree with Austin’s interpretation of the Reversal— it reveals that Hume’s objective in the *Dialogues* “was to thwart any use of the design argument in support of Christian orthodoxy, and above all to show that no practical consequences should be drawn from it.”⁴ But the question I want to ask is *why*. What was Hume hoping to achieve by throwing natural and revealed religion into total skepticism? The typical answer to that question paints Hume as a skeptical Ebenezer Scrooge who revels in souring religion for everyone else. The actual answer to that question is important not only for understanding one of the most important philosophers of religion, but also for acknowledging his efforts and the bravery necessary to make them. In Philo’s Reversal, Hume links himself to one of his greatest influences, Pierre Bayle, and reveals that the purpose of his skepticism in the *Dialogues* is to promote religious tolerance.

Background: Pyrrhonism

One of the most important philosophical currents of the Early-Modern period was the resurgence of Pyrrhonism.⁵ Pyrrhonism is named after the ancient Greek skeptic Pyrrho, but the philosophy which bears his name is most importantly found in the writings of 2nd-3rd century CE philosopher Sextus Empiricus. Pyrrhonism is a radical form of skepticism which “involves having no beliefs about philosophical, scientific, or theoretical matters—and according to some

³ Austin, William. “Philo’s Reversal.” 110.

⁴ Austin, William. “Philo’s Reversal.” 109.

⁵ Popkin, Richard. “The Sceptical Crisis and the Rise of Modern Philosophy: I.” *The Review of Metaphysics*, vol. 7, no. 1, Sep 1953, pp. 132-151. Philosophy Education Society Inc. JSTOR 141.

interpreters, no beliefs at all, period.”⁶ Nothing is free from skepticism, according to the Pyrrhonist—even his own skepticism.

This skepticism weighed heavily on the minds of Early-Modern philosophers. For example, Montaigne wrote of his frustrations concerning Pyrrhonism:

“To judge of the impressions that we receive from objects, we ought to have a judicatory instrument; to prove the reliability of this instrument we must have a demonstration; to prove the demonstration, an instrument; so here we are, going in a circle! Seeing the senses cannot settle our dispute, being themselves full of uncertainty, it must be reason that is to do it; but no reason can be established without the support of another reason: so here we are, running backwards to infinity.”

Blaise Pascal, another prominent Early-Modern philosopher, struggled with what he called the *crise pyrrhonienne*. According to Pascal, Pyrrhonism was invincible and no axioms or principles could be found which were indubitable—all one could conclude was that Pyrrhonism is true.⁷

The result of this infuriating skepticism is that “nothing certain can be established concerning the one by means of another, both the judging and the judged being in continual motion and mutation.”⁸ Montaigne and Pascal agreed that the only escape from Pyrrhonism was through God’s grace: the renunciation of reason and belief in the “mysteries of faith.”⁹

⁶ Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. “Sextus Empiricus.”

⁷ Pascal, Blaise. *Pensées*. No. 432. Found in Richard Popkin “The Sceptical Crisis and the Rise of Modern Philosophy: III.” *The Review of Metaphysics*, vol. 7, no. 3, Mar. 1954, pp. 499-510. Philosophy Education Society Inc. JSTOR. Pg. 500.

⁸ Montaigne. “Apologie de Raymond Sebond.” pp. 161-211 and 230-368. Found in Richard Popkin “The Sceptical Crisis and Rise of Modern Philosophy: I” 143-4.

⁹ Popkin, Richard. “The Sceptical Crisis and Rise of Modern Philosophy: I and III.” 143-4 and 500.

Pierre Bayle

The fideist theme of bemoaning the limits of reason and “flying” to faith as the only trustworthy guide to truth was most famously championed in the Early-Modern period by Pierre Bayle, one of the most widely-read philosophers of the eighteenth century. Bayle, a French Huguenot, lived a life scarred by religious persecution. As a result of the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685, he was forced to flee France for the liberal haven of Holland. Even though he managed to escape persecution himself, both his brothers and his father died within two years of his flight. One of his brothers died in a French jail because of his writings. In Bayle’s view, the religious intolerance of the Revocation was “based on moral and logical absurdity. As a result, his mind was always occupied with advocating for religious toleration--“The greater part of his life’s work can be understood as Bayle’s attempt to lay bare the absurdity represented by this event [the Revocation].”¹⁰

Bayle’s greatest life work is his *Historical and Critical Dictionary* in which he alphabetically orders philosophers and their ideas, then skeptically analyzes them. In his analysis, he employs antinomies with his Christian faith at the center. For example, he will consider the Eucharist—the actual presence of the literal body of Christ in the Mass—and normal rational principles. Our reason tells us that physical bodies don’t exist in two separate places at the same moment. However, the doctrine of transubstantiation is telling us the exact opposite: the literal body of Christ is present at every single Mass across the world at the same time.¹¹

¹⁰ Stanford Encyclopedia. “Pierre Bayle.”

¹¹ Bayle, Pierre. “Pyrrho.” *Historical and Critical Dictionary*. Translated and Edited by Richard Popkin. 200-201.

How does Bayle reconcile the two? He doesn't. Whenever reason and religious faith are at odds, Bayle always opts for faith. Antinomies like this one help him accomplish two goals throughout the *Dictionary*. First, they are meant to humble the religious dogmatists of his day by basically saying "You can't provide any rational justification for your view of the Eucharist over another. How about you get off your dogmatic high horse and stop killing each other over it!" The end result of this hard-won humility would (hopefully) be religious tolerance.

Second, he is employing antinomies to drive Christians to abandon reason as their guide and to seek a new one: faith. For example, in his *Dictionary* article on Pyrrho, Bayle says

"...it was wrong to waste time disputing with the Pyrrhonists or to imagine that their sophisms can be easily eluded by the mere force of reason; that it was necessary above all to make them feel the infirmity of reason so that this feeling might lead them to have recourse to a better guide, which is faith."¹²

Bayle even goes so far as to agree with a philosopher of his own day, François de la Mothe le Vayer, who said that Pyrrhonism was the school of philosophy "least opposed to Christianity and as the one 'which can most docilely accept the mysteries of our religion.'"¹³ This mantra of abandoning rationality as a sure guide and flying to faith—is one of *the* mantras of the *Dictionary*, showing up in at least 12 other sections.¹⁴ In the words of Richard Popkin, for Bayle

¹² Bayle, Pierre. "Pyrrho." *Historical and Critical Dictionary*. 204

¹³ François de la Mothe le Vayer. *Prose chagrine*. Part. II. Bayle, Pierre. "Pyrrho." *Historical and Critical Dictionary*. Translated and Edited by Richard Popkin. 204-5

¹⁴ Bayle, Pierre. *Historical and Critical Dictionary*. Articles Bunel, Rem. E, Manicheans, Rem. D., Pomponazzi, Rem. G, Pyrrho, Rem. B and C, and the Clarifications on Atheism, Manichaeism, and Pyrrhonism. Richard Popkin. "High Road to Pyrrhonism." 27

“The ship of Jesus Christ was not made to sail on rationalist seas. The best faith... is that which is built on the ruins of reason.”¹⁵

In making his fideist case, Bayle uses Pyrrhonic skepticism as well as antinomies. He “...extends every type of classical skeptical argument, and every imaginable one, into a total dissolution of all of man’s intellectual pretensions. He leaves nothing alone, and is happy to show that all theorizing, regardless of subject matter, is incoherent, inadequate, and inconsistent.”¹⁶

Bayle’s relentless skepticism with fideism as its end worked well for him on multiple levels. On the first level, it enables him to humble religious dogmatists and subtly promote religious tolerance. On a second level, he ingratiated himself to fideist Christians—mostly within the Reformed tradition—by likening reason to the Mosaic law of the Hebrew Bible. According to Reformed theologians of Bayle’s day, the Mosaic law was “only fit for making man realize his own weakness and necessity of a redeemer and a law of grace.” It was meant not as an end in itself, but to lead people to Jesus Christ. Bayle said the same thing of reason: “it is only fit to make men aware of his own blindness and weakness and the necessity for another revelation. That is the one of Scripture.”¹⁷

The *Dialogues*

It has long been known that Bayle greatly influenced Hume, especially since he was one of his favorite authors.¹⁸ His influence is everywhere in the *Dialogues*, which deals primarily

¹⁵ Popkin, Richard. “The High Road to Pyrrhonism.” *American Philosophical Quarterly*, vol. 2, no. 1, Jan. 1965, pp. 18-32. University of Illinois Press. JSTOR. Pg. 29.

¹⁶ Popkin, Richard. “The High Road to Pyrrhonism.” 29.

¹⁷ Bayle, Pierre. “On Manicheans.” *Historical and Critical Dictionary*. 151.

¹⁸ Mossner, Ernest. “Hume’s Early Memoranda, 1729-1740: The Complete Text.” Letters, I. JSTOR.

with the Design argument—the most popular and forcible argument of natural theology in Hume’s day. The Design argument was popularized by philosophers and scientists such as Sir Isaac Newton and William Paley. Hume, in his “Letter from a Gentleman to His Friend in Edinburgh,” defines the argument as follows:

“Wherever I see Order, I infer from Experience that there, there has been Design and Contrivance. And the same Principle which leads me into this Inference, when I contemplate a Building, regular and beautiful in its whole Frame and Structure; the same Principle obliges me to infer an infinitely perfect Architect, from the infinite Art and Contrivance which is displayed in the whole Fabric of the Universe. Is not this the Light in which this Argument hath been placed by all Writers concerning Natural Religion?”¹⁹

In Hume’s day, this argument was used, mostly by Christians, to prove two things: 1.) the existence of a Designer and 2.) the infinitely perfect character of that Designer.²⁰

To confront this argument Hume employs skepticism remarkably similar to Bayle’s. What Popkin said of Bayle and his *Dictionary* is true of Hume and the *Dialogues*: he uses every skeptical argument and leaves no stone unturned to show the incoherency of all theorizing.²¹ In response to the two-pronged scope of the Design argument, Hume covers his bases and launches two types of objections to the Design argument: 1.) Those which may admit of the existence of

¹⁹ Hume, David. “Letter from a Gentleman to His Friend in Edinburgh.” *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding with A Letter from a Gentleman to His Friend in Edinburgh and Hume’s Abstract of A Treatise of Human Nature*. Hackett. 2nd Edition. Pg. 119-20.

²⁰ Paley, William. *Natural Theology; Or, Evidences of the Existence and Attributes of the Deity. Collected from the Appearances of Nature*. 12th edition. Darwin Online. Pg. 454. <http://darwin-online.org.uk/content/frameset?itemID=A142&viewtype=text&pageseq=1>

²¹ Popkin, Richard. “The High Road to Pyrrhonism.” 29.

some Designer but cast his character into doubt; 2.) Those which show that there may not even be a Designer.

Let us first look at Hume's objections to the existence of a Designer. At two different points in the *Dialogues* Hume confronts the *a priori*—what we call the Cosmological argument—which, beside the Design argument, was one of the more popular arguments of natural theologians in Hume's day. In Part II, Hume rejects the *a priori* argument on the grounds that outside of experience, all possibilities are equally probable. And since nobody has ever experienced the “creation” of the universe, we're in no position to confidently say how the universe came to be as it is.²² In Part IX, Hume attacks the same argument by denying the coherence of the concept of a necessary being on grounds that no being's existence implies a contradiction. And even if he grants necessary being, Hume can't see any reason why the material universe itself cannot be the necessarily existent thing which natural theologians are looking for.²³

In Part IV, Hume constructs what has brilliantly been called²⁴ “The Design Dilemma.”²⁵ William Paley argued that organized complexity entails a designer. The thinking behind the argument goes like this: a simple object like a rock does not strike an observer with the grandiosity of its design. But if you were to stumble upon a watch lying upon the ground—an

²² Hume, David. *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*. Edited by Richard Popkin. Second Edition. Hackett. Pg. 17 (This is the standard version of the *Dialogues* which I'll cite as *Dialogues* for the rest of the paper.)

²³ *Dialogues*. Pg. 55-56.

²⁴ By Dr. Josh Watson.

²⁵ *Dialogues*. Pg. 28-29.

object with hundreds of intricately organized parts resulting in a specific function—you would likely intuit that the watch had to have been personally designed and made.²⁶

However, Hume raises the following objection: what's stopping the Designer from having a Designer? And so on, ad infinitum? In Hume's view, this leaves the natural theologian in a dilemma: either the Design argument leads to an infinite regress *or* to avoid the regress, the mind has no parts. According to Hume, if you choose the first horn of the dilemma, then he can see no reason why you won't simply allow an infinite regress of physical causes of the universe rather than of designers. The classical theist would want to claim the second horn of the dilemma and say that the Designer's mind is simple. However, Hume has no sympathy for that view:

“those who maintain the perfect simplicity of the Supreme Being... are complete *mystics*... They are, in a word, *atheists*, without knowing it. For though it be allowed that the Deity possesses attributes of which we have no comprehension yet ought we never to ascribe to him any attributes which are incompatible with that intelligent nature essential to him. A mind whose acts and sentiments and ideas are not distinct and successive, one who is wholly simple and totally immutable, is a mind which has no thought, no reason, no will, no sentiment, no love, no hatred; or, in a word, is no mind at all.”²⁷

To deal effectively with this dilemma, one would have to provide a coherent view of Divine simplicity, different than those offered by classical theists of Hume's day. But what's clear from Hume's Design dilemma is that in the *Dialogues* he brings the full might of his philosophical skepticism down on the Design argument. He pulls no punches.

²⁶ Paley, William. *Natural Theology; Or, Evidences of the Existence and Attributes of the Deity. Collected from the Appearances of Nature*. Pg 6-10.

²⁷ *Dialogues*. Pg. 29.

Hume buttressed his skepticism to the existence of a Designer by giving numerous alternative explanations for the universe and its order which eliminate the need for a Designer. His alternatives range from the brilliant and reasonable—such as his proto-Darwinian theory of evolution²⁸—to suggesting that the universe is a vegetable²⁹ or that there are 30,000 designers rather than one³⁰.

These examples highlight the similarity of Hume's method with Bayle's—its relentlessness and willingness to go in any direction to cast down opposing arguments. Hume almost certainly did not *actually* think it very plausible that the universe is a vegetable, nor that there are thousands of deities. These alternatives are Hume's offhanded proposals of “other systems of cosmogony which would have some faint appearance of truth; though it is a thousand, a million to one if either yours or any of mine be the true system.”³¹ Their ultimate purpose is to show the proponent of the Design argument the error of their reasoning, that “All these systems... of skepticism, polytheism, and theism, you must allow, on your principles, to be on a like footing, and that no one of them has any advantage over the others.”³²

In parts X and XI, Hume presents the problems which natural evil poses to knowledge of the Designer's nature via the Design argument. He doesn't go so far as to say that evil is logically incompatible with the existence of a good Designer, but what he loses in the scope of his argument he gains in its toughness to refute. He is even willing to grant that there may be good reasons why God allows evil and suffering in the world, even if they are unknown to us. But the, “the mere supposition that such reasons exist may be sufficient to *save* the conclusion

²⁸ *Dialogues*. Pg. 50-51.

²⁹ *Dialogues*. Pg. 40.

³⁰ *Dialogues*. Pg. 43

³¹ *Dialogues*. Pg. 49.

³² *Dialogues*. Pg. 43

concerning the divine attributes, yet surely it can never be sufficient to *establish* that conclusion.”³³

In his view, the evil we observe in nature is surprising³⁴—it certainly isn’t what we would expect if there were an infinitely powerful and good Designer, and the only justified conclusion of the matter is “... that the original source of all things is entirely indifferent to all these principles, and has no more regard to good above ill than to heat above cold, or to drought above moisture, or to light about heavy.” The most probable explanation of evil in the world is that God is wholly apathetic to morality and the happiness of his creatures, and that

“we have no more reason to infer that the rectitude of the Supreme Being resembles human rectitude than that his benevolence resembles the human. Nay, it will be thought that we have still greater cause to exclude him from moral sentiments, such as we feel them...”³⁵ In short, Hume shows that natural theology gives the champion of the Design argument an impotent, imperfect, or apathetic Designer, which is a far cry from the promises of the original Design argument.

Philo’s Reversal

After his brilliant criticism of natural theology and its treatment of evil, Hume launches into Philo’s Reversal, the puzzle which initially brought us here. It famously begins with Philo—the harshest critic of the Design argument throughout the *Dialogues*—saying nobody more profoundly adores God than he and that “A purpose, an intention, a design strikes everywhere the most careless, the most stupid thinker; and no man can be so hardened in absurd systems as

³³ *Dialogues*. Pg. 71.

³⁴ *Dialogues*. Pg. 68-69.

³⁵ *Dialogues*. Pg. 74-75

at all times to reject it.”³⁶ He goes on to say that God couldn’t make his existence more plain if he wanted³⁷ and that “the works of nature bear a great analogy to the productions of art... we ought to infer... that their causes have a proportional analogy... the existence of a DEITY is plainly ascertained by reason.”³⁸

As previously mentioned, this sudden “Reversal” has been shocking to readers of the *Dialogues* since its publication. However, it needn’t be so shocking, especially when it is placed in the context of the rest of the *Dialogues* (which is what I’ve tried to do up to this point). It is safe to assume that Hume wouldn’t spend 11 parts of the *Dialogues* arguing for the complete abolition of the Design argument only to subvert all his efforts in the 12th. Consequently, it is most reasonable to assume that Hume’s skepticism was never meant to completely discard the Design argument.

Thankfully, we don’t have to just assume Hume’s objective. If we read past the shocking “Reversal,” we discover that he agrees to *some* version of the Design argument, but certainly not the one proposed by religiously interested theists. Even the atheist, according to Hume, must give his assent that the principle which first gave order to nature bears at least some analogy to human design and thought. But, according to Hume, that is as much as the Design argument can prove—it in no way demonstrates that we can know much of anything about the nature or moral character of the Designer.³⁹ In fact, Hume believes that the Design argument demonstrates so little about the nature of the Designer that the dispute between theists and atheists is “merely verbal.”⁴⁰

³⁶ *Dialogues*. Pg. 77

³⁷ *Dialogues*. Pg. 78

³⁸ *Dialogues*. Pg. 79

³⁹ *Dialogues*. Pg. 81.

⁴⁰ *Dialogues*. Pg. 80.

After Hume is done with it, natural theology is a far cry from what it was beforehand. At the end of his treatment of the Design argument, Hume gives the following assessment of natural theology:

“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 further 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?”⁴¹

Hume has so emptied the Design argument and natural theology of their content that they can have no practical effect on human life. Neither can they tell you anything about God’s nature and character. Hume has no problem with someone giving “plain, philosophical assent to the proposition” which has no practical, coherent content. Consequently, natural theology can be treated only with a sort of philosophical indifference produced by a humbling awareness of the limitations of one’s reasoning.

⁴¹ *Dialogues*. Pg. 88

Given Hume's reputation as a skeptic, you would expect him to end there. "So what," I can imagine Hume saying, "reality is unintelligible and unknowable. That's just how it is." But instead he points his readers another route: faith and revelation. Given the importance of the passage, it's worth quoting in full:

"Some astonishment, indeed, will naturally arise from the greatness of the object: Some melancholy from its obscurity: Some contempt of human reason that it can give no solution more satisfactory with regard to so extraordinary and magnificent a question. But believe me, Cleanthes, the most natural sentiment which a well-disposed mind will feel on this occasion is a longing desire and expectation that heaven would be pleased to dissipate, at least alleviate, this profound ignorance by affording some more particular revelation to mankind, and making discoveries of the nature, attributes, and operations of the divine object of our faith. A person, seasoned with a just sense of the imperfections of natural reason, will fly to revealed truth with the greatest avidity: While the haughty dogmatist, persuaded that he can erect a complete system of theology by the mere help of philosophy, disdains any further aid and rejects this adventitious instructor. To be a philosophical skeptic is, in a man of letter, the first and most essential step towards being a sound, believing Christian..."⁴²

If this passage sounds remarkably familiar, it's because it is. This passage is basically a step-by-step repeat of Pierre Bayle's skeptical fideism—skepticism makes us feel the "infirmity of reason so that this feeling might lead them to have recourse a better guide, which is faith."⁴³

⁴² *Dialogues*. Pg. 89.

⁴³ Bayle, Pierre. "Pyrrho." *Historical and Critical Dictionary*. 204.

This is not just an homage to Bayle. It's the key to understanding Hume's purpose for writing the *Dialogues*—a hint that not only was Hume's skepticism greatly inspired by Bayle, but also his purpose for using it: religious toleration.

This makes greater sense of a passage earlier in Part XII of the *Dialogues* where Hume considers the best way to prevent the “pernicious consequences” of religion:

“Every expedient which he tries for so humble a purpose is surrounded with inconveniences. If he admits only one religion among his subjects, he must sacrifice, to an uncertain prospect of tranquility, every consideration of public liberty, science, reason, industry, and even his own independence. If he gives indulgence to several sects, which is the wiser maxim, he must preserve a very philosophical indifference to all of them and carefully restrain the pretensions of the prevailing sect; otherwise he can expect nothing but endless disputes, quarrels, factions, persecutions, and civil commotions.”⁴⁴

“Giving indulgence to several sects” —another way of saying practicing religious tolerance— can be kept by a “very philosophical indifference to all of them and carefully restrain[ing] the pretensions of the prevailing sect.” In his *Enquiry*, Hume wrote of how Pyrrhonic skepticism was useful in making “dogmatical reasoners... sensible of the strange infirmities of human understanding” and would “inspire them with more modesty and reserve, and diminish their fond opinion of themselves, and their prejudice against antagonists.”⁴⁵ And in a letter to a friend, he remarked how he employed skepticism to “abate the Pride of mere human Reasoners... Modesty, then, and Humility, with regard to the Operations of our natural Faculties, is the Result of

⁴⁴ *Dialogues*. Pg. 85.

⁴⁵ Hume, David. *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*. 111.

Scepticism.”⁴⁶ In other words, Hume uses skepticism to “restrain the pretensions” of dogmatists and reasoners for the sake of those they may harm.

And what about the “philosophical indifference?” That’s what Hume worked to produce the entire *Dialogues*. The *Dialogues* cast natural theology into the skepticism which produces the philosophical indifference necessary for religious toleration.

At this point, my reader would be right to object: religious toleration doesn’t have as much to do with natural theology as it does doctrines derived from revelation. I agree, but that objection misses something crucial in Hume’s homage to Bayle at the end of the *Dialogues*. By mirroring Bayle, Hume is simultaneously linking himself to his mission of religious tolerance and adopting a different method to achieve it.

William Austin points out the fact that “Hume himself never showed any signs of flying to revealed truth with any noticeable degree of avidity.”⁴⁷ And helpfully connects it to Hume’s essay “Of Miracles,” in which Hume disparagingly attacks revealed religion by attempting to undermine belief in testimony regarding miracles—the backbone of revealed religion. Hume’s referral to faith and revelation at the end isn’t sincere—he subjects revealed religion to the same skeptical treatment as natural religion. It’s a sarcastic jab at those who have read “Of Miracles,” and for those who haven’t it’s a joke waiting for its punchline. By the end of the *Dialogues*, Hume has completed his attempt to destroy both avenues to knowledge of God—natural and revealed religion—by throwing them into insurmountable skepticism.

Hume subjected natural religion to skepticism to produce the philosophical indifference necessary for toleration. And his tongue-in-cheek fideism reveals that he did the same to

⁴⁶ Hume, David. “A Letter from a Gentleman to His Friend in Edinburgh.” 116.

⁴⁷ “Philo’s Reversal.” 110.

revealed religion for the same purpose. His method differs from Bayle because he goes further by uprooting revealed religion because he believed it was inherently dogmatic and harmful. Hume called the religion of the proponents of the Design argument—usually Christians—a “vulgar superstition” whose history

“abounds so much with accounts of its pernicious consequences on public affairs... Factions, civil wars, persecutions, subversions of government, oppression, slavery: these are the dismal consequences which always attend its prevalence over the minds of men. If the religious spirit be ever mentioned in any historical narration, we are sure to meet afterwards with a detail of the miseries which attend it. And no period of time can be happier or more prosperous than those in which it is never regarded or heard of.”⁴⁸

According to Hume, all religion will be like this, and “only a cover to faction and ambition,” unless it be the “philosophical and rational kind.”⁴⁹ The “true religion” has a “proper office... to regulate the hearts of men, humanize their conduct, infuse the spirit of temperance, order, and obedience.”⁵⁰ At the end of “Of Miracles,” Hume makes it clear that Christianity can never be a religion of the “philosophical and rational kind”:

“...the *Christian Religion* not only was at first attended with miracles, but even at this day cannot be believed by any reasonable person without one. Mere reason is insufficient to convince us of its veracity: And whoever is moved by *Faith* to assent to it, is conscious of a continued miracle in his own person, which subverts

⁴⁸ *Dialogues*. Pg. 82

⁴⁹ *Dialogues*. Pg. 82-83

⁵⁰ *Dialogues*. Pg. 82

all the principles of his understanding, and gives him a determination to believe what is most contrary to custom and experience.”⁵¹

However, Hume doesn’t unfairly set his criticism on Christianity. In “Of Miracles” he discusses the alleged miracles of the three monotheistic religions—Christianity, Islam, and Judaism—and wouldn’t consider any of them to be of the “philosophical and rational kind.” He most often addresses and attacks Christianity because it is the religion most prevalent in his 18th century Scottish context. In his view, the dogmas of Islam and Judaism contain the same dangers as those of Christianity.

Conclusion

This interpretation of the *Dialogues* solves two big problems in Hume scholarship. First, it solves the puzzle of Philo’s Reversal by showing that there really is no reversal at all. Hume’s goal was never to completely discard the Design argument, but rather to empty it of all its religious content for the sake of religious toleration. Second, it corrects misconceptions about Hume himself. Hume’s irreligious skepticism wasn’t motivated by prejudice and arrogance. Instead, it was motivated by a desire for religious tolerance. Recognizing that desire and his efforts to fulfill it can give us a newfound appreciation of Hume’s brilliance and bravery.

Appendix A

It has been brought to my attention that the Design Dilemma put forward by Hume in Part IV of the *Dialogues* presents a problem for my thesis. Hume’s formulation of the Dilemma is so formidable that it’s difficult to imagine that he would be willing to acknowledge the existence of any Designer.

⁵¹ Hume, David. “Of Miracles.” *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*. Edited by Richard Popkin. 2nd Edition. Pg. 125.

I mentioned earlier that the Dilemma requires a robust response in defense of divine simplicity. However, for the sake of interpreting Hume I don't believe that putting forward a modern defense of divine simplicity is particularly helpful simply because there is no way of knowing if Hume would think it valid. Also, Hume formulates the Dilemma in such a way that he seems to categorically reject divine simplicity, not just the arguments for it put forward in his day.

Rather than starting a one-sided (since he currently has no way of responding) philosophical debate with Hume concerning divine simplicity, the threat which this Design Dilemma poses for my thesis can be answered by briefly mentioning historical facts concerning Hume's life and his philosophical skepticism.

The greatest danger which this Dilemma poses for my thesis is that it drives Hume to atheism rather than the agnosticism which, I think, makes the most sense of the *Dialogues* and his philosophy as a whole. However, that interpretation of the Dilemma faces a big problem: Hume himself explicitly said that he was not an atheist.⁵²

That single historical fact, however, isn't the only reason to think that the Dilemma is Hume's defeater for any coherent formulation of theism. If we were to ask Hume today if he were a theist, you would likely get the same answer: no. There are more philosophical reasons for that, namely his belief that the dispute between atheists and theists is "merely verbal," as I mentioned earlier. But the more important and basic aspect of Hume's philosophy which would drive him to that answer is his skeptical method. Hume's skepticism isn't like that of, say, Richard Dawkins. It doesn't lead him only to negation. Rather, it cuts both ways and tempers his

⁵² Jessop, T. (1956). *The Life of David Hume*. By Ernest Campbell Mossner. (Edinburgh: Thomas Nelson & Sons. 1955. Pg. 483-486.

philosophical conclusions—just as his skepticism keeps him from accepting the arguments for theism, it keeps him from wholly accepting those for atheism. Even though we don't have Hume's explicit answer to the Design Dilemma, we can be sure that his skepticism raised enough doubts in his mind that he didn't see the Dilemma as a defeater for theism.