

Article

Building Religion through Dialogue: David Hume in Conversation with Twentieth-Century Philosophy of Dialogue

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Abstract: The final part of David Hume's *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion* has often left Hume's readers perplexed. After a long and articulate debate between Philo, the skeptic, and Cleanthes, the theistic philosopher, the reader would expect the victory of Philo, whom many considered to be Hume's spokesperson. Surprisingly, the book ends with the victory of Cleanthes. Keith Yandell suggested that none of these personages represented Hume, and that Philo's change of mind was a "change of perspective", epistemologically grounded in the concept of "propensities", which Hume presented in *The Natural History of Religion*. In this article, I build on Yandell's analysis and explore the dialogical dynamic of Hume's work with the use of the twentieth-century philosophy of dialogue. I first focus on Michael Bakhtin's analysis of Fyodor Dostoevsky's books and show that, as in Bakhtin's analysis, Hume does not orient the plurality of voices based on a pre-made understanding of reality. I then bring Hume into conversation with Martin Buber, especially regarding their epistemological standpoint. The aim of the article is to show the relevance of Hume's thought for our contemporary philosophy of dialogue.

Keywords: Buber; Bakhtin; philosophy of dialogue; religious epistemology; Hume



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1. Introduction

This article brings David Hume's *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion* (Hume and Smith 1947)¹ into conversation with contemporary perspectives on the philosophy of dialogue, especially those of Michael Bakhtin and Martin Buber. Though some scholars mention Hume as a forerunner of the contemporary philosophy of dialogue (Tracy 2015, p. 107; Guilherme and Morgan 2017, pp. 2–3), a more detailed analysis of his famous book in relation to the aforementioned philosophers and theorists of dialogue can be further developed. In the course of the *Dialogues*, Hume touched upon several topics that are relevant for contemporary philosophy of religion: religious skepticism, religious tolerance, and freedom of thought. Hume considered dialogue to be the most apt literary form to discuss religious topics, and he grounded this choice in the ambiguity of the topic itself. This aspect is stated in the first pages of the preface of the *Dialogues* by one of its characters, the young Pamphilus: "Any question of philosophy, on the other hand, which is so obscure and uncertain that human reason can reach no fixed determination with regard to it; if it should be treated at all; seems to lead us naturally into the style of dialogue and conversation" (Hume and Smith 1947, p. 128).

The finale of the *Dialogues* has raised endless debates and provoked many theories among the scholars who worked on Hume's thought. The main reason is that the religious skeptic Philo, whom many considered to be Hume's spokesperson, finally agrees with the theistic philosopher Cleanthes. Pamphilus' conclusion that theism could be the theory nearer to the truth has left Hume's readers with a number of riddles to solve. The debate does not cease to raise questions and opinions among scholars. I am not primarily concerned with adding a new voice to this already complicated and rich scenario, but I deal with Hume's *Dialogues* using a different approach. Instead of trying to understand

Hume's exact intention, I explore the dialogical dynamic of Hume's work with the use of twentieth-century philosophy of dialogue by examining his reception of other authors, or his cultural and political context. I hope to provide new insights into Hume's *Dialogues* and to show the relevance that this text still has for the philosophy of dialogue today.

There are four parts to this article. After outlining the main aspects of the *Dialogues* (2), I introduce some interpretations from the last decades of the twentieth century (3). Out of several approaches to Hume's thought, I focus on Keith Yandell's suggestion that none of the personages represented Hume, and that Philo's change of mind was a "change of perspective", epistemologically grounded in Hume's concept of "propensities" (Yandell 1990). I then hope to show that Yandell's analysis of Hume shows some similarities with Bakhtin's famous analysis of Fyodor Dostoevsky's characters, and that this comparison provides insight into Hume's methodological approach to dialogue (4). I then suggest that the change of perspective or propensity in the *Dialogues* can be reformulated as a "seeing-as", in Wittgensteinian terms, where changes occur in human beings' approach to the world rather than in the world in itself. I then show how Hume and Buber shared this epistemological standpoint, together with a critique of human beings' attempts to "possess" knowledge of an ineffable "object" such as God. A number of similarities and differences between Hume and Buber provides the material for the reflection on dialogue, written and spoken (5). Finally, I hope to show that Hume's *Dialogues* are still relevant for our contemporary philosophy of dialogue and that his stylistic choice still offers material for developing further reflections in the field.

2. Context and Aspects of Dialogues concerning Natural Religion

According to Kemp Smith, Hume might have completed the *Dialogues* in 1751 or in the years immediately after, although it was not published during Hume's lifetime. His good friend Sir Gilbert Elliot persuaded him several times not to publish the *Dialogues*. Adam Smith, the famous philosopher and another of Hume's good friends, shared Elliot's advice.² Hume eventually left to Smith the task of carrying out publication, but it was only his nephew who finally succeeded in 1779, three years after Hume's death (Garrett 2015, p. 32; Hume and Smith 1947, pp. 87–96; Kemp Smith 1941). After its publication, the *Dialogues* rapidly became one of the most well-known texts among Hume's literary production. The puzzling development of the story narrated was one of the most intriguing aspects of the book, and it raised in turn the question of the identification of Hume's "real voice" in the text.

Several scholars noticed that the choice of the dialogical form was particularly relevant in this case. Historically, many thinkers of the Enlightenment presented their theories through the style of the treatise. Under the influence of mathematics and logic, philosophy should proceed methodically, following the manner of a mathematical demonstration; the dialogical style seemed to reflect less systematic and more improvised thought (Dal Pra 1984; Guilherme and Morgan 2017, p. 3). In other times, the form of dialogue enjoyed more popularity and credit, such as in Plato's and Cicero's times. Scholars noticed that Hume's *Dialogues* are mostly inspired by Cicero's *De Natura Deorum* (Hume and Smith 1947; Schofield 2009; Tracy 2015). The open-endedness of Hume's *Dialogues* and its structure are the most striking similarities with Cicero's work. Cicero described the debate between three characters identifiable as the Epicurean, the Stoic, and the Academic skeptic. At the end of their debate on the nature of gods, Cicero wrote: "Here the conversation ended, and we parted, Velleius thinking Cotta's discourse to be the truer, while I felt that that of Balbus approximated more nearly to a semblance of the truth" (Cicero and Rackham 1933, p. 383). Cicero, who described himself as an Academic skeptic, ended his book by asserting that the Stoic philosophy is most likely to resemble the truth. The analogy with Hume's work is striking. However, scholars have noticed that, while Hume did not participate in the conversation himself and left the topic of religion to be debated between fictional characters, Cicero put himself in the narrative. In this way, Cicero took a larger risk than Hume or even Plato (Schofield 2009, p. 64). Scholars have advanced several hypotheses

on Hume's cautious attitude and his change of perspective. Some have suggested that Hume did not want to attract further critiques and especially censorship because of his anti-religious theories, but Hume was already well known for his ideas on the matter of religion. Therefore, he had no reason to blur his position (Hume and Popkin 1980, pp. XV–XVII). Others suggested that Hume was a deistic thinker, but Hume upheld a philosophical skeptical standpoint throughout his life, which contrasts with this supposition of fideism (Hume and Popkin 1980, pp. XV–XVII). It is hard to demonstrate the personal reasons why Hume opted for this stylistic decision. Perhaps the best way to deal with this point is to rely upon the above-mentioned quotation from Pamphilus, who assessed that the dialogue is the best literary form for religion because of the ambiguous and obscure nature of the object, religion itself (Hume and Smith 1947, p. 128).

I think that Hume could have had several reasons to choose the dialogue as the style for his book. Pamphilus explicitly states one important reason: the dialogue seems to be the correct literary form for a topic such as religion. The correspondence between stylistic form and object is rooted in Hume's epistemological standpoint that religion is an ambiguous and obscure topic because human beings cannot grasp its object: God. I am more convinced by the idea that Hume wrote a dialogue because of his epistemological beliefs, rather than because he wanted to blur his ideas on religion. Moreover, I suggest considering the degree of *divertissement* that a dialogical conversation such as this entails. In this exchange of ideas and opinions, Philo finishes by suggesting some incredibly strange and curious theories about God and the creation of the world, which he formulates following Cleanthes' method of reasoning, as we will see in the next pages. The form of the dialogue allows the writer to criticize the church of his time and both the orthodox and the rational approaches to religion, while entertaining his readers with a playful conversation. In this regard, let us not forget that Hume aimed to criticize both the fanaticism of his contemporary church in Scotland and the degeneration of Newtonianism.³ This aspect gives us a further clue. Instead of exhibiting his criticism towards intolerance and narrowness of religious beliefs with a new treatise, Hume strengthened his position on the challenges of treating religion as understandable to human beings by showing that even the discussion religion can lead to flaws and contradictions. In this sense, what style could be better than the dialogue?

Let us now briefly look at the structure of the book. Hume divided it into twelve short dialogues and gave voice to four main characters. It is mostly Cleanthes, Demea, and Philo who engage in the debate. The fourth character, Pamphilus, is presented as Cleanthes's pupil. His task is to introduce the other three and report the discussion to his friend Hermippus. He presents Cleanthes as supporting an "accurate philosophical turn", Philo as maintaining a "careless skepticism", and Demea as upholding a "rigid inflexible orthodoxy" (Hume and Smith 1947, p. 128). Pamphilus is the chronicler of the discussion and the final assessor of the unexpected winner at the end of the narration: "I confess, that, upon a serious review of the whole, I cannot but think, that Philo's principles are more probable than Demea's; but that those of Cleanthes approach still nearer to the truth" (Hume and Smith 1947, p. 228). Therefore, Pamphilus finally gives Cleanthes the palm branch despite Cleanthes being refuted several times by the skeptic Philo. In the next section, we analyze the reasons why scholars considered this ending enigmatic.

For now, let us look at the main aspects of the argumentation. In the second dialogue, Cleanthes famously expresses his position:

Look round the world: Contemplate the whole and every part of it: You will find it to be nothing but one great machine, which again admits of subdivisions, to a degree beyond what human senses and faculties can trace and explain. All these various machines, and even their most minute parts, are adjusted to each other with an accuracy, which ravishes into admiration all men, who have ever contemplated them. The curious adapting of means to ends, throughout all nature, resembles exactly, though it much exceeds, the productions of human contrivance; of human design, thought, wisdom, and intelligence. Since therefore the effects resemble each other, we are led to infer, by all the rules of analogy,

that the causes also resemble; and that the Author of nature is somewhat similar to the mind of man; though possessed of much larger faculties, proportioned to the grandeur of the work, which he has executed. By this argument a posteriori, and by this argument alone, we do prove at once the existence of a Deity, and his similarity to human mind and intelligence (Hume and Smith 1947, p. 143).

Cleanthes' argument is a posteriori and assumes that there is an analogy between humanity's artifacts and the world (see Gaskin 1993, pp. 12–13; Yandell 1990, pp. 167–85). As reported, Cleanthes aims to both prove the existence of the Deity and his similarity with human beings. Philo convincingly attacks these statements by showing that the causes behind the effects are not comparable:

The exact similarity of the cases gives us a perfect assurance of a similar event; and a stronger evidence is never desired nor sought after. But wherever 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 . . . If we see a house, Cleanthes, we conclude, with the greatest certainty, that it had an architect or builder . . . But surely you will not affirm, that the universe bears such a resemblance to a house, that we can with the same certainty infer a similar cause, or that the analogy is here entire and perfect. The dissimilitude is so striking, that the utmost you can here pretend to is a guess, a conjecture, a presumption concerning similar cause (Hume and Smith 1947, p. 144).

Philo challenges Cleanthes' perspective by appealing to the narrowness and limitedness of human beings' intellectual faculties, which, after all, are only one among many other "principles of the universe". To say it in his words:

Thought, design, intelligence, such as we discover in men and other animals, is no more than one of the springs and principles of the universe, as well as heat or cold, attraction or repulsion, and a hundred others, which fall under daily observation . . . What peculiar privilege has this little agitation of the brain which we call thought, that we must thus make it the model of the whole universe? (Hume and Smith 1947, pp. 147–48).

In this regard, Philo argues that we cannot give to a small part of nature, namely our human intellect, the task of setting the rules for a wider part of nature, namely the universe (Hume and Smith 1947, p. 149). In other words, one should suspend judgement concerning theological matters.⁴ Some scholars emphasized Hume's fascination with Newtonian philosophy (Hume and Pike 1970; Hurlbutt 1965) and noticed that Hume, through Philo's critique of Cleanthes, criticized the misrepresentations that Newtonian philosophy had undergone at that time, namely the alteration of praise for human rationality into a new ideological system (Carabelli 1972, pp. 89–112).

Having admitted the impossibility for human beings of grasping a concept that would define an incommensurable object, Philo briefly converges with Demea's apparently extremely differing position. Indeed, in the second part of the *Dialogues*, Demea expresses a position that echoed negative theology on the nature of God: "The essence of that supreme mind, his attributes, the manner of his existence, the very nature of his duration; these and every particular, which regards so divine a Being, are mysterious to men" (Hume and Smith 1947, p. 141). These words reverberate then in Philo's comment that "A total suspense of judgment is here our only reasonable resource" in the matter of religion (Hume and Smith 1947, pp. 186–87).

Finally, in the first part of the *Dialogues*, Philo already seems to be excluding the possibility of applying the principles of common sense and experience to objects that exceed our limited intellect. While common sense and experience can be applied to matters concerning trade, morals, and politics, it is not possible to adopt them to explain theological matters: "We are employed upon objects which, we must be sensible, are too large for our grasp . . . We are like foreigners in a strange country to whom everything must

seem suspicious” (Hume and Smith 1947, p. 135). In the course of the discussion, Philo strengthens his position by challenging Cleanthes’ argumentations and pushing them so far that not even Cleanthes himself is able to answer with a strong counterstatement. The eighth part of the *Dialogues* is an example of this procedure. Here, Philo suggests that, following Cleanthes’ reasoning, we would be able to think of the world as actually resembling an animal more than an artefact. Cleanthes, despite not having a counterstatement ready to object, cannot admit this possibility, though it derives from his own premises (Hume and Smith 1947, pp. 170–72).

After this long discussion, Philo suddenly changes his position. After Cleanthes’ remark that Philo does not regard anything as “sacred and venerable” (Hume and Smith 1947, p. 214), Philo confesses that he could never corrupt the principle of common sense concerning natural religion:

I am less cautious on the subject of Natural Religion than on any other; both because I know that I can never, on that head, corrupt the principles of any man of common sense, and because no one, I am confident, in whose eyes I appear a man of common sense, will ever mistake my intentions (Hume and Smith 1947, p. 214).

As we can see, Philo appeals to common sense as the reason for sustaining his belief in finality in nature—those principles of common sense that he seemed to have excluded previously as a ground for assessing theological matters. Philo emphasizes that nobody has a “deeper sense of religion impressed on his mind, or pays more profound adoration to the divine Being” than him, “notwithstanding the freedom of my conversation, and my love of singular arguments” (Hume and Smith 1947, p. 214). Moreover, Philo agrees with Cleanthes that “nature does nothing in vain . . . all the sciences almost lead us insensibly to acknowledge a first intelligent Author” (Hume and Smith 1947, pp. 214–15). In the last pages of the *Dialogues*, Philo restates several times that Cleanthes’ position is the most reasonable and acceptable. As we can see from the outline of the *Dialogues*, Philo’s change of mind seems to occur quite abruptly in the narration. Let us now examine how several interpreters in the course of the past century have attempted to explain this part of the *Dialogues*.

3. Interpretations of Hume’s Dialogues concerning Natural Religion

For a long time, scholars debated which personage from the *Dialogues* was to be understood as the interpreter of Hume’s own perspectives on religion. More generally, this question concerns Hume’s literary production in its totality and not only his religious thought. Scholars have debated the degree of Hume’s skepticism, whether he adhered to a radical Pyrrhonism or to a “weaker form of academic skepticism” (Russell 2009, p. 3). Some scholars suggested that Hume might have leaned towards naturalism in order to escape the extreme consequences of skepticism, especially by appealing to feelings and morality (Kemp Smith 1941). Other scholars reworked this position by suggesting that Hume distinguished between holding a certain belief X and saying that this belief X is true or objectively certain (Norton 1982, pp. 192–238).

Because of Hume’s undoubted preference for skepticism as a philosophical position, scholars usually excluded the idea that Demea and Pamphilus could be Hume’s potential spokespersons. Demea’s religious orthodoxy would be incompatible with Hume’s thought and ideas, though Demea’s importance to the narration has been recently rehabilitated (von Sass 2019). Pamphilus has also been excluded, as his personage would align more with an auditor and not a philosopher (Yandell 1990, pp. 35–36). Philo was more usually considered to be the best candidate to represent Hume’s thought (Flew 1986; Gaskin 1976; Hume and Smith 1947). Some scholars, however, considered the possibility that Hume had more sympathy for Cleanthes than is usually accorded (see especially Capaldi 1970). Both Cleanthes’ incredible victory and one of the letters that Hume wrote to his friend Gilbert Elliot substantiate this hypothesis: “You would 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. Any Propensity you imagine I have to the other Side, crept in upon me against my Will" (Greig and Hume 1932, pp. 153–54).

Some scholars proposed a different interpretation that I find particularly relevant for our discussion. In his introduction to the *Dialogues*, Richard Popkin says: "... Hume may be represented by different aspects of his characters, even by some bit of Demea's view" (Hume and Popkin 1980, p. XVI). Concerning Cleanthes, Popkin reminded the reader of Hume's appreciation for Isaac Newton, whom Hume considered to be one of the greatest geniuses in the British Isles. Cleanthes was certainly explaining Newton's philosophy: "Hume saw that the religious view based on science (through the argument from design) had to be, or ought to be, accepted by reasonable men—as long as they realized how limited this view was" (Hume and Popkin 1980, p. XVI). In this way, despite Philo seeming to be the best candidate because of his skepticism, Popkin broadened the perspective on the text by allowing Hume to be present in every character of the narration. Popkin thought that Hume wished to show that "all arguments proving God's existence (especially the so-called argument from design) or establishing anything about his nature, were empty". However, this does not prevent him from being present sometimes in one character, and other times in another (Hume and Popkin 1980, p. VIII). Similarly, Yandell suggested that "All of them sometimes represent him. At least, this is so if our criterion is what Hume says elsewhere under his own name" (Yandell 1990, p. 37).

As early as the 1970s and 1980s, the Italian scholars Mario Dal Pra and Giancarlo Carabelli noticed the development of this trend. Dal Pra noticed the tendency to leave aside the aim of finding Hume's real voice (Dal Pra 1984, p. 192). Dal Pra followed Carabelli, who affirmed that Hume was not interested in designing personages that could merely repeat and present the most important philosophical theories of that time. In other words, these personages were not dependent on the practical or theoretical ideals of certain philosophers, but they were designed as people who expressed equally valid perspectives on reality and religion. Carabelli called them "filosofi espositivi", which means that they were actual philosophers who expressed and displayed a specific understanding of the world (Carabelli 1972, pp. 62–64).

Yandell further built his position on this view. He convincingly explained Hume's ending of the book as a "change of perspective" (Yandell 1990, p. 38) and a "complete reversal of the standpoint" upheld until then (Yandell 1990, p. 39). Yandell observed that this change took place because, in part twelve, Philo did not speak anymore as a skeptic thinker but from a "common-sense perspective" (Yandell 1990, p. 38). According to Yandell, this shift in the way Philo talks about reality and the world is grounded in the shift in the object of discussion. While until the twelfth part the characters engage in an animated discussion on natural theology, in the last part they consider the origins of religious faith. Philo uses the intellectual tools of skepticism to converse on the reliability of the argument from design. He shows that natural theology fails because of the fragile theoretical system on which it is based. This does not, however, exclude the possibility of considering religion from a different perspective, which is the discussion on the origins of religious faith. Even though philosophical arguments have the potential to destroy religious systems, the belief in God remains among human beings. Philo has proven his point enough, holding a philosophical victory, and he does not need to prove his point anymore: "Philo relaxes with Cleanthes; the philosophical skeptic retires and the person of common sense re-enters" (Yandell 1990, p. 38). After all, this is not the first time that Philo has agreed with Cleanthes: this already happened in the first part of the *Dialogues*, where Cleanthes had Philo admitting that the skeptic should abandon his philosophical standpoint when dealing with matters of every-day order (Hume and Smith 1947, p. 134).

From an epistemological point of view, Yandell grounds his interpretation of Hume's finale on the concept of propensity (Yandell 1990, pp. 35–39). Hume described this concept in *The Natural History of Religion*, in the context of his anthropological analysis of religion. Hume considered some instincts, such as self-love, affection, love of progeny, gratitude, and resentment to be original or primary; others, such as religious principles, were secondary

(Hume and Root 1956, pp. 21, 75). While the primary propensities can be found in all nations and ages and display the same characteristics, secondary propensities can undergo several processes that change and alter them. Hume concluded that religion belongs to the secondary group of propensities, because various accidents can modify it and different groups of people can display different ideas of religion. Moreover, according to Hume, secondary propensity stems from external elements; for example, one's experience of order in nature can elicit a religious feeling and the idea of a supreme creator. Building on this distinction, Yandell argues that Philo speaks as critical philosopher when he appeals to first-order propensity and as an ordinary human being when he appeals to second-order propensity. I find this theory to be convincing, especially if we consider what we have said above about Hume's use of the dialogue. To say that human beings cannot know with certainty whether God exists does not necessarily mean exclusion of his existence. Because of this, despite the impossibility of demonstrating Cleanthes' standpoint, Philo admits its possibility in virtue of its reasonableness. Moreover, religious beliefs are worthy of investigation and of being considered as valuable standpoints in reality because they are empirically given facts. The fact that they are so widespread among human beings make them important elements of people's lives, and this fact cannot simply be ignored. In this regard, Hume developed an analysis of religion starting from this observation in *The Natural History of Religion*. The idea that some propensities are not necessarily shared by the totality of humanity, as he says at the beginning of this book, means that the world can be understood with different perspectives. Again, to notice disagreement concerning religious principles leads to skepticism about their solidity, but does not necessarily imply that they are right or wrong. With Yandell's reflection on the distinction between primary and secondary propensities, and with the centrality he accorded to the "change of perspective", we can now move to the twentieth-century philosophy of dialogue.

4. A Twentieth-Century Perspective: "A Multi-Vocal Dialogue Avant la Lettre"

The analysis seen so far shows two main problems connected with Hume's *Dialogues*: the identification of Hume among the characters and Philo's change of perspective. For the sake of clarity, I distinguish these problems as separate; we have seen, however, that they are connected with each other, in the sense that the problem of the identification of Hume's voice is connected with the explanation of the finale. In this section, we deal with the first problem, namely "Hume's voice".

As we have seen, recent scholarship on Hume renounced the endeavor to identify the exact voice of the author and instead suggested that every character might report some aspects of Hume's thought. At this point, it seems appropriate to recall Pamphilus' final words, which we already mentioned: "those of Cleanthes approach still *nearer* to the truth." I emphasized "nearer" as it suggests that Hume did not aim to present "the truth", but rather he tried to show how every perspective could express a point of view about the Deity, and how at the same time it could be criticized for its limits. This idea is even stronger if we consider Yandell's analysis of propensities and Norton's suggestion that Hume could have had a double standard of truth. This would give space to a kind of fluidity in Hume's claims on religion: harsh criticism on the one hand, concession common sense on the other.

I agree with the idea that we should not look for "Hume's voice" in his book and I wish to substantiate this idea by juxtaposing it with Mikhail Bakhtin's philosophy of dialogue. David Tracy has touched upon this aspect in his above mentioned essay, where he analyzed the concept of dialogue in Bakhtin and Gadamer. In particular, we recall his definition of Hume's *Dialogues* as a "multi-vocal dialogue *avant la lettre*: a modern radicalized revision of Cicero's already multi-voiced dialogue-treatise *De Natura Deorum*" (Tracy 2015, p. 107). Tracy noticed that Hume used in his work the literary device of the "unreliable narrator: one who makes an untrustworthy announcement on who won the argument" (Tracy 2015, p. 107). In his essay, Tracy focused on an analysis of Bakhtin's philosophy of dialogue and briefly mentioned Hume's work in relation to this broader framework. Bakhtin famously analyzed Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* as a "sympotic

dialogue” as opposed to the “narrative-treatise where a single view prevails (as Aristotle’s treatises)” (Tracy 2015, p. 106). In this regard, the dialogic “subverts any monolithic claim to the exclusive truth: dialogue rejects any authoritarian closure of dissenting voices” (Tracy 2015, p. 106).

Indeed, if we now move to Bakhtin’s own words, his opening of the first chapter of *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetic* offers some material for this analysis. Bakhtin noticed that scholars hoped to recognize Dostoevsky’s voice as represented by the voices of some characters or represented by all the characters in different parts of his books. Contrary to this approach, Bakhtin stated that Dostoevsky “created no voiceless slaves . . . but free people, capable of standing alongside their creator, capable of not agreeing with him and even of rebelling against him” (Bakhtin 1984, p. 6). The core of Bakhtin’s work is that Dostoevsky displayed a “plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses, a genuine polyphony of fully valid voices” (Bakhtin 1984, p. 6). Bakhtin encouraged the reader to change perspective when approaching Dostoevsky: instead of supposing that Dostoevsky designed his characters according to his own plan, Bakhtin suggested that each character was marked by a specific consciousness and understanding of the world. Dostoevsky’s voice was therefore absent, or omnipresent, but fragmented in the complexity of the several personalities described in his books. Because every character is carrying his own understanding of the world, Dostoevsky presented a world where there is no right or wrong, no monolithic understanding of truth and reality. Therefore, the operation to identify the “real” voice of the author becomes pointless. As Wayne Booth wrote in the introduction to Bakhtin’s *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetic*, “(t)he author will have ‘disappeared’ from the work” (Bakhtin 1984, p. XXIII). Booth claimed that all the personages in Dostoevsky’s books do not speak for Dostoevsky himself and are not portrayed as negative or positive examples of how we should or should not behave; they do not serve the author’s plans, but they are subjects in their own dignity, whose end is in themselves (Bakhtin 1984, p. XXIII).

As we have seen, scholars of Hume’s *Dialogues* seem to be more open than in the past to the idea that Hume did not intend to place his own understanding of the world and religion into the *Dialogues*. Similar to Bakhtin’s analysis of Dostoevsky, we can state that we do not find Hume’s thought to be localized in a specific aspect of the text or personage. Hume also portrayed complex personalities who had a specific understanding of the world. The truth is not something that can be possessed but only “neared”. In this way, Hume allows the discussion on religion to be open to several interpretations, where there is no monolithic understanding of truth and reality. Hume did not base his text on a specific understanding of reality, the parameter with which one could evaluate the validity of the several theories discussed in the course of the *Dialogues*. Rather, critical thinking is the real constant of his book, the aspect that dictates our approach to the world, by showing the strengths and weaknesses of theories.

5. A Matter of How We Look at the World

After having considered the problem of Hume’s “real voice”, I move to the second problem, as defined above, namely Philo’s “change of perspective”. A reflection on the changing perspectives or propensities through the course of the *Dialogues* allows us to consider Martin Buber’s philosophy of dialogue. Buber and Hume are very distant in time, education, and philosophical-theological tradition, but there are some similarities between their texts. Their interest in dialogue both shortens and widens the distance between them, meaning that they found different forms to realize their interest in dialogue regarding religion.

In this regard, the authors significantly diverge in style. Hume’s style reminds us of Plato’s dialogue-report. In both Hume’s and Plato’s dialogues, the readers are stimulated to reflect upon the objects that are treated. In this journey, the readers might find out that their position was not as solid or as complete as they had expected. Hume’s dialogue is a fictional and constructive narrative, where three characters challenge each other’s theories. Because Hume does not propose a certain doctrine on religion, letting Pamphilus

say that religion is an obscure and uncertain topic, the reader is left with a plurality of interpretations and the sole evaluation that one among these could be the theory that is “nearer the truth”. Instead of presenting a fictional construction of dialogue, Buber analyzes and describes the relation between human beings. Following his own words, Buber focused, in *I and Thou*, on *die Ontologie des Zwischenmenschlichen*, the ontology of the in-between (Mendes-Flohr 1989, pp. 13–19).⁵

However, two interesting aspects connect these two thinkers. First is the epistemological standpoint. Let us start by considering Buber’s epistemology. Buber based the unity of reality (Mendes-Flohr 1989, pp. 67–72) on the distinction between *Erlebnis* and *Erfahrung*. As Paul Mendes-Flohr has highlighted, Buber particularly developed this distinction in *Daniel: Dialogues on Realization*, in 1913 (Buber and Mendes-Flohr 2018; Mendes-Flohr 1989, p. 72). Buber structured his epistemological standpoint by distinguishing the lived experience, *Erlebnis*, from the experience of the world mediated by sense data and the two a priori principles of space and mind, *Erfahrung* (Mendes-Flohr 1989, p. 72). *Erlebnis* is “an affective modality of experience” and it “can have gradations of realization” (Mendes-Flohr 1989, p. 74). To follow Mendes-Flohr’s analysis, Buber anticipated, in the distinction presented in *Daniel*, the two fundamental modes of engaging with reality that he called I–It and I–Thou in his later work *I and Thou* (Buber and Mendes-Flohr 2018, p. XI).

The opening of this book is, indeed, a reflection of an epistemological kind: “To man the world is twofold, in accordance with his twofold attitude” (Buber 1958, p. 3). Buber states that human beings have two modalities of understanding and dealing with the world: I–It and I–Thou. By doing this, Buber did not mean to state an ontological division, but rather a duplicity in the way human beings approach reality, in the way they enter into a relation with other human beings, the world, and God. This focus on attitude instead of ontology brings us back to Hume’s work. In the course of the *Dialogues*, Hume did not present a shift in ontological understanding of the world; rather, he presented a shift in the way we look at the world. Borrowing an expression from Ludwig Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations* (Wittgenstein 2009), Philo “sees the world as” an object to which one could give a sort of finality.⁶ The object remains the same, but the attitude of the observer has changed. In this way, the object suddenly appears to the observer in a different way.

A second aspect concerns the concept of knowledge. As we have seen before, Buber distinguished between the I–It relation—called I–He or I–She when it referred to human beings—from the I–Thou relation. The first focuses on single attributes of the object and approaches it with foreknowledge and a system of ideas (Buber 1958, p. 11). The I–It relation approaches “experience” as a collection of things or data. However, Buber continued, the world “has no part in the experience. It permits itself to be experienced, but has no concern in the matter. For it does nothing to the experience and the experience does nothing to it” (Buber 1958, p. 5). On the other hand, the I–Thou relation is characterized by the absence of bounds: “Every It is bounded by others; It exists only through being bounded by others. But when Thou is spoken, there is no thing. Thou has no bounds” (Buber 1958, p. 4). In this way, the I–Thou relation allows us to grasp the “whole being”, differently than the It relation: “If I face a human being as my Thou, and say the primary word I–Thou to him, he is not a thing among things, and does not consist of things” (Buber 1958, p. 8). The relation to the world as a Thou, contrary to the I–It relation, is not a matter of intellectual research or gathering data: “Take knowledge: being is disclosed to the man who is engaged in knowing, as he looks at what is over against him. He will, indeed, have to grasp as an object that which he has seen with the force of presence, he will have to compare it with objects, establish it in its order among classes of objects, describe and analyse it objectively. Only as *It* can it enter the structure of knowledge” (Buber 1958, p. 40).

Let us trace then another parallelism with Hume’s *Dialogues*: Philo criticizes Cleanthes’ arrogance regarding mastery of knowledge of the world, despite the fact that fundamentals of this knowledge escape the grasp of human beings’ intellectual abilities. In my opinion, however, both Philo and Cleanthes treat the world in terms of It. Cleanthes analyses

the world as an artifact by employing Newtonian reasoning. Philo still treats the world as an object by continuously appealing to arguments, reasoning, and theories by which one should reject Cleanthes' ideas. Nevertheless, Philo's appealing to the suspension of judgement and his concession to Demea's negative theology shows that he acknowledges the scientific approach to be incompatible with the understanding of the world and God.

A third comparison between the two thinkers is their critique of both intellectual religion and cults. Buber warned his reader that faith is not about trusting certain propositions on God to be true: "But God, the eternal Presence, does not permit Himself to be held. Woe to the man so possessed that he thinks he possesses God!" (Buber 1958, p. 106). According to Buber, the desire to "possess God" results in the objectification of God (cf. Buber 1958, p. 113). This passage is quite similar to Philo's criticism of Demea's *a priori* argument: God is not an object that can be possessed by human intellect. Buber also criticized the cult, where the practitioner replaces the acts of relation with ordered devotional exercises, so that God becomes "the object of a cult" (Buber 1958, p. 114). Finally, Buber noticed that, in the encounter with God, human beings are not concerned with God; rather, they seek a confirmation that there is a meaning in the world (Buber 1958, p. 115). This reflection, again, leads to an objectification of God, who becomes an It instead of being the eternal Thou (Buber 1958, p. 116). Hume raised this point in several parts of his work, including his critique of cults in *The Natural History*, where he explains that human beings, even when they "rise from idolatry to theism", "sink again from theism into idolatry" (Hume and Root 1956, pp. 46–47) and in the critique to miracles the essay *Of Miracles* (Hume 2000). The entire argument of the *Dialogues*, developed by Philo, is grounded on the statement that faith cannot be about giving the assent that certain propositions about God are true, because their content exceeds the possibilities of human knowledge.

As we have said, these two dialogical approaches to religion also present important differences, firstly because Hume's dialogue is a literary construction, while Buber focused on the description of the relation between I and Thou. Secondly, human beings' relation to God has a prominent role in Buber's thought, as the best expression of the I–Thou relation. This aspect is missing in Hume's work. The main reason why Philo changed his position on God is grounded in common sense, according to which the reasonableness of the theistic position can be deduced. Despite these two aspects being responsible for considerably distancing the two thinkers, I believe that the analysis developed above shows how intriguing this parallelism could be.

6. Conclusions

As I hope to have shown, twentieth-century philosophy of dialogue presents many interesting aspects that could be used as tools to provide a deeper and nuanced interpretation of Hume's philosophy of religion without betraying Hume's ironic spirit and critical thinking. The fact that many connections can be established between Hume and our contemporary philosophy of dialogue also says much about the impact that this thinker has had on the development of philosophy of religion in following centuries, being today an irreplaceable thinker in the history of human thought.

In this regard, I compared, to some extent, Hume's literary procedure in the *Dialogues* to Dostoevsky's literary technique, according to Bakhtin's analysis. I hope to have strengthened this parallelism by showing how scholarship on Hume had moved in this direction by as early as the 1970s, whether each of the characters portrayed were considered as "filosofi espositivi", or whether the possibility of adopting a different perspective on the world was considered by "changing perspective or propensity". In this regard, I argued that Hume did not use the dialogue as a style to affirm a new standpoint on religion, but in order to show both the inadequacy of orthodox and intellectual doctrines on religion and the inadequacy of stylistic forms, such as the treatise, when dealing with a topic such as religion. As I have stressed, Pamphilus' statement that the dialogue is the most suitable literary form for an object as obscure and ambiguous as religion reflects Hume's epistemological standpoint on religion and invites the readers to consider the plurality

of possibilities when talking about religion. When writing the *Dialogues*, Hume showed at the same time that the topic is epistemologically complex, that the dialogue is the best form in which to discuss it, and that he was able to subtly criticize his adversaries while creating a playful and intriguing narration. As a consequence, by choosing the dialogue as the prominent literary form for religion, Hume opens the possibility of reaching several different interpretations, allowing a larger audience in order to welcome participants with heterogeneous backgrounds as interlocutors of the debate. I have explained this point by referring to Yandell's interpretation of Hume's concepts of propensities: because religious principles belong to "second-order" propensities, there is a lack of agreement on the nature and structure of such principles. Ultimately, this means that Hume suggested that, when discussing religious matters, it is not possible to say what is right and what is wrong. When bringing Hume into conversation with Bakhtin, I highlighted that, as in Bakhtin's analysis of Dostoevsky, Hume does not orient the plurality of voices based on a pre-made understanding of reality or ideology. There is no right or wrong in the theories explained, only a continuous flow of critical thinking. Agreement and disagreement are, therefore, fluid characteristics of the debate. Each of the characters of the *Dialogues* is sometimes praised and other times ironically portrayed. They agree and disagree with each other, depending on the aspect they are discussing. Through this procedure, Hume seems to show that everyone who aims to engage in the topic of religion can be equally criticized and challenged: this happens to the dogmatic, the philosopher, and even to the skeptical. This, in turn, means that nobody really knows the truth. Pamphilus's final words that Cleanthes' position is "nearer the truth" might be interpreted as a sign that someone in the dialogue—or the author—knows the truth. However, I wish to conclude by pointing to one aspect in particular, namely that the emphasis here is not on whether someone (e.g., Pamphilus, Hume himself) has a notion of the truth, but that nobody in the dialogue, nor in everyday life, is able to state it. It is not less important to recall that Hume was probably inspired by Cicero's above-mentioned *De Natura Deorum*, a book that also leaves the reader with a multiplicity of interpretations.

Finally, I showed that Buber's philosophy of dialogue also provides inspiring insights into Hume's work. Both thinkers admitted the possibility of relating to reality on two different levels. Buber substantiated this aspect by formulating the differences between I-Thou and I-It relations. Hume described as well, perhaps in an unprecedented way, the possibility for human beings to access multiple levels of understanding of reality. On the one hand, the scientific and logical-philosophical explanation follows specific rules and allows for a description of the world within the frame of human beings' intellectual limits. On the other hand stands the realm of the common sense, which includes the co-habitation of the world with other human beings. In this sphere, which Philo himself considered sacred, one can experience the possibility of finality in nature, and of the existence of God. This aspect comes together with the critique, shared by both the thinkers even if in different ways, on human beings' tendency to analyze and describe aspects of the world that our intellect cannot properly grasp.

Is the fictional dialogue described by Hume the same as Buber's? The fast answer is no. Fiction is not the same as reality, at least if we consider reality to be, pragmatically speaking, the life that we live "out there" with other human beings. Moreover, Philo is not persuaded by the encounter with Cleanthes, but by the "reasonableness" of his position and by the observation that the principle of Deity is rooted in a number of human beings. However, Hume finely described a situation presenting a multiplicity of voices, inviting the reader to remember that matters such as religion and meaning in the world demand a constant reconsideration of our standpoints, unexpected alliances, and unforeseen twists in the positions previously upheld. In every page of the *Dialogues*, which Hume insisted could be printed, even in the last days of his life, the author reminds the readers of the complexity of the world. He invites them to consider that reality never presents itself in a monolithic and pre-ordained shape to human beings; it rather continuously offers a plurality of interpretations. Only with the sharpness of Philo can we hope to solve

the challenges of this plurality, but we should not forget that the totality of the society “out there” might demand different standards of interpretation. This is, most definitely, a challenge that our contemporary age does not cease to pose.

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Notes

- ¹ There are several editions of Hume’s *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion*. In this article I used Norman Kemp Smith’s edition and his own introduction (Hume and Smith 1947).
- ² Hume did not only have trouble with the publication of the *Dialogues*. For example, he had to renounce the publishing of essays such as *Of Miracles* (Hume 2000), which was originally part of *A Treatise of Human Nature* (Hume 2007), *Of suicide* and *Of the Immortality of the Soul*, which were originally part of the *Four Dissertations* (Hume 2001). Hume’s editor Millar was persuaded by some prosecutors to discard those texts. Another important text on religion, *The Natural History of Religion* (Hume and Root 1956), was published with milder tones than what Hume originally envisaged. Nevertheless, Hume received harsh criticisms that prompted him to reply this way:
 “In this Interval I published at London, my natural History of Religion along with some other small Pieces: Its public Entry was rather obscure, except only that Dr Hurd wrote a Pamphlet against it, with all the illiberal Petulance, Arrogance and Scurrility, which distinguishes the Warburtonian School. This Pamphlet gave me some Consolation for the otherwise indifferent Reception of my Performance.” (Greig and Hume 1932, p. 5)
- ³ Carabelli thought that Demea partially reflected the standpoint presented by a book republished in 1718, *The Marrow of Modern Divinity*. The author, probably Edward Fisher, upheld in the book an antirationalistic and mystical understanding of religion, which appealed to the emotional dimension of human beings. The book started a controversy in Scotland, and it was condemned by the general assembly in 1720, as it became very popular among ministries and people. According to Carabelli, Demea partially reflected this standpoint. (Carabelli 1972, pp. 164–76).
- ⁴ This aspect was then considered and further developed by Immanuel Kant. In the Preface to the *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics*, Kant recognized that Hume made the most decisive attack upon metaphysics with his critique of the concept of cause and effect (Kant and Hatfield 2004). In Section 57, “On the determination of the bounds of pure reason”, Kant referred to Hume’s *Dialogues* and acknowledged the validity of Hume’s criticism of the argument from design. In particular, Kant developed his critique to this argument in the section of the *Critique of Pure Reason* called “The Impossibility of the Physico-Theological Proof” (Kant et al. 1998).
- ⁵ Paul Mendes-Flohr explains that Buber introduced the term *das Zwischenmenschliche* as early as in 1906 and that he was indebted to Georg Simmel’s sociological theory. According to Mendes-Flohr, this fact indicates that Buber’s interest in sociology was prominent before he developed his mature philosophy of dialogue. Mendes-Flohr further explains that Buber’s interest in society was first dependent upon the crisis of *Kultur*. This concern took the shape of a “romantic discontent” in the modern and industrialized society, which was apolitical and asocial. In 1923, with the publishing of *I and Thou*, Buber’s interest took a different direction, namely, interpersonal relations acquired a prominent place in his thought (Mendes-Flohr 1989, pp. 13–19).
- ⁶ In this famous work, Wittgenstein formulated his theory of “seeing-as”, which is defined as “a special sort of seeing which only occurs under certain conditions. It is not an ordinary ‘act’ of visual apprehension, but is an experience of a certain sort” (Seligman 1976). A famous example from Wittgenstein’s work is the picture-rabbit, in which the rabbit might be seen as a duck. While the act of “seeing” is an act that happens immediately without implying an act of thinking, “seeing-as” involves reflection to a certain extent. I see a rabbit, then I see a duck. “But what is different: my impression? my attitude?—Can I say? I describe the change like a perception; just as if the object had changed before my eyes” (Wittgenstein 2009, p. 206^e). The object remains unchanged, but my approach to it has changed. Wittgenstein explains it by appealing to the concept of “inner picture” and by investigating human beings’ perception. When you see-as, you have already perceived all the relevant properties and could therefore experience something as if it was in another context. Philosophy in general, according to Wittgenstein, does not change things; it invites us to look at them in a different way: “Philosophy must not interfere in any way with the actual use of language, so it can in the end only describe it. For it cannot justify it either. It leaves everything as it is” (Wittgenstein 2009; Genova 1993).

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