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An Analysis of David Hume's
Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion

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WAYS INTO THE TEXT

Key Points

- David Hume (1711-1776) is often regarded as the greatest philosopher ever to have written in English. Born in Edinburgh into minor gentry, Hume was one of the leading figures of the Enlightenment.*
- In the *Dialogues* Hume critically examines the prospects for justifying belief in God.
- Hume presents this examination in the form of a dialogue* which allows Hume to maneuver the reader without explicitly revealing his own views. This has led to dispute about how to interpret the *Dialogues*.

Who Was David Hume?

David Hume was born in Edinburgh in 1711. The second son of minor gentry, Hume went on to become a central figure of the European Enlightenment.¹

Although highly regarded by the intelligentsia* of his day, Hume often found himself in opposition to the more conservative forces of eighteenth-century Scotland, particularly the clergy. In many respects, this struggle with the forces of traditionalism* defined Hume's life. Hume often found himself up against prominent conservative clerics, and in much of his philosophical work Hume made his dim view of such conservatism known. The *Dialogues*, published posthumously, represents the central example of such criticism.

Hume is known for being a skeptic* about many philosophical matters, particularly in circumstances where his strong commitment to empiricism* entailed doubt or disbelief. Indeed, Hume's development and defense of empiricism is perhaps the defining feature of his philosophical work.

After his death in 1776, it took some time for Hume's reputation to reach the heights it currently occupies. Until later in the nineteenth century, Hume was largely regarded first as a successful historian and an accomplished prose stylist, and second as a philosopher of middling importance. Today he is widely

recognized as the greatest philosopher ever to have written in English due to his many foundational contributions to modern philosophy, which remain highly influential.²

What Does the *Dialogues* Say?

The topic of the *Dialogues* is a controversial one: the justification of the existence of God. Indeed, such controversy was probably a factor in the book's posthumous publication. Hume completed the first draft of the *Dialogues* in 1751, but his friends had dissuaded him from publication because of the work's contentious nature.³ Putting forward any substantial critique of religious belief came with significant social costs in eighteenth-century Scotland. Although, to be sure, Hume had already expressed some of his other irreligious views in print, such as in his *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, published in 1748.⁴

Hume took great pains to write the *Dialogues* in a way which would protect it from the kind of vocal, dogmatic criticism that might drown out the book's arguments. Indeed, Hume remarked to his friend Adam Smith* that "nothing can be more cautiously and more artfully written".⁵

This need for caution and artfulness was part of the reason why the book took the form of a dialogue. This allowed Hume to lead his reader towards certain conclusions that might not have been accepted otherwise. Arguments are sometimes more readily accepted when their conclusions appear naturally out of a conversation. However, so cautious and artful were the *Dialogues* that this left room for disagreement among commentators regarding just what conclusions Hume wanted his reader to accept. Most are agreed, though, that the *Dialogues* reflect Hume's low regard for clerical influence in society, and organized religion more generally.⁶ Most are also agreed that if the arguments that Hume gives a favorable hearing to in the *Dialogues* allow for any belief in God, it is in a sense of "God" so far removed from religious orthodoxy as to call into question whether the term "God" should be used to describe the content of the belief at all.⁷

Another conclusion that comes across even more clearly in the *Dialogues* is that the question of God's existence should be examined empirically.* Thus, the *Dialogues*

constitute a defense of the empiricist methodology pre-supposed by a type of 'natural theology' (hence 'natural religion' in the title), and reflects the centrality of empiricism to Hume's wider philosophy.

Hume considers four main arguments about God's existence in the *Dialogues*.

1. The argument from design*, which is intended to support belief in God by citing apparent design in nature.
2. The cosmological argument*, which is intended to support belief in God by maintaining that the universe must have an uncaused, first cause, a role only God can play.
3. The argument from evil*, which is supposed to count against God's existence by citing the presence of evil in the world.
4. The debate about whether God's nature is knowable, and if so what that nature is.

The *Dialogues* is a literary and philosophical masterpiece worthy of consideration in its own right, but the work also has considerable relevance today. The continuing "culture wars"*, which include arguments about such matters as the intelligent design hypothesis*, reflect many of the issues with which the *Dialogues* is concerned. A lot can be learned, therefore, by considering the subtle arguments which fill the *Dialogues'* pages.

Why Does the Dialogues Matter?

There are few works which rival the *Dialogues* in terms of both literary and philosophical importance. The work contains canonical statements of many of the central arguments in the philosophy of religion, and, ultimately, had a major influence on the debate about God's existence. And, it is a work which demonstrates the art of persuasion at its most artful. Given the tenor of the age, Hume had to use every persuasive device at his disposal to sway his reader, and to protect against what he expected to be a barrage of criticism. The result is a masterclass in what is known as the "Socratic method"*—rational inquiry through participants in a debate asking and answering questions of one another, thereby testing the clarity and consistency of their respective positions. In the *Dialogues*,

Hume presents scene upon scene of the Socratic method in action. But the most important Socratic exchange that occurs is not between the main characters, but rather between Hume and his reader. Here we find the *Dialogues'* greatest achievement: in Hume's subtle and artful questioning of anyone who dares to examine the *Dialogues* with a rational eye.

As a work of literature, the *Dialogues* also exemplifies great beauty, containing the prose of one of the English language's great stylists. Consider, for example, the following passage:

The order and arrangement of nature, the curious adjustment of final causes, the plain use of intention of every part and organ; all these bespeak in the clearest language an intelligent cause or author. The heavens and the earth join in the same testimony: The whole chorus of nature raises one hymn to the praises of its Creator.⁸

One will struggle to find a more rhetorically powerful statement of the argument from design.* The *Dialogues* are full of such commandingly elegant passages.

Key Questions

Synthesize: Why did Hume want to disguise his own views on religion?

Analyze: Would it have been better for Hume to be more explicit about his views?

Apply: How might the Socratic method help resolve contemporary debates like those found in the culture wars (the conflict between the forces of conservatism and progressivism)?

Metadata

People: Adam Smith, David Hume

Places: Edinburgh, Scotland

Times: 1700s

Themes: Existence of God, Eighteenth-Century Scotland, Enlightenment, Empiricism, *A Priori* Justification, Empirical Justification, Natural Theology, Natural Religion, Socratic Method

¹ See Terence Penelhum, *David Hume: An Introduction to his Philosophical System*, (West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 1992), ix. See also William Edward Morris and Charlotte R. Brown, "David Hume", in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Stanford: Metaphysics Research Lab CSLI, 2014), ed. Edward N. Zalta, <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2014/entries/hume/>>.

² See Morris and Brown, *passim*.

³ See Dorothy Coleman, "Introduction", in *Hume: Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion And Other Writings*, ed. Dorothy Coleman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), xiv.

⁴ David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Tom L. Beauchamp (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

⁵ David Hume, "To Adam Smith", in *The Letters of David Hume Vol. II*, ed. J. Y. T. Greig (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1932), 334.

⁶ See J. C. A. Gaskin, "Hume on religion", in *The Cambridge Companion to Hume*, ed. David Fate Norton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 340-341. See also Andrew Pyle, *Hume's Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, (London: Continuum, 2006), 122.

⁷ See: Gaskin 320-322. See also Morris and Brown, §8.4.

⁸ David Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, ed. Stanley Tweyman, (London, Routledge, 1991), 127.

SECTION 1: INFLUENCES

Module 1: The Author and the Historical Context

“Hume is our Politics, Hume is our Trade, Hume is our Philosophy, Hume is our Religion.”

James Hutchison Stirling, *The Secret of Hegel*

Key Points

- The *Dialogues* is a literary and philosophical masterpiece,
- The *Dialogues* reflect Hume’s commitment to empiricism and his strongly skeptical views on religion.
- The struggle between the forces of traditionalism* and progress that was particularly fierce during the Enlightenment* shaped, and was shaped by, the *Dialogues*.

Why Read This Text?

Hume’s *Dialogues* is a philosophical masterpiece: in the artfully constructed debates which occur between the main characters; and in the masterful way Hume maneuvers readers of the *Dialogues* to question belief in God. Indeed, the *Dialogues* contains what many authorities see as refutations of arguments, such as the argument from design*, which are still considered credible in other contexts today.¹

There is literary beauty in the *Dialogues* too. Hume’s skill with a pen is legendary, and the *Dialogues*, which Hume worked on for many years, illustrate why.

Thus, one finds in the *Dialogues* an abundance of arguments wrought beautifully in prose, a great tapestry of reason. Consider, for example, the following passage, which presents evidence in support of the argument from evil*.

Observe...the curious artifices of Nature, in order to embitter the life of every living being. The stronger prey upon the weaker, and keep them in perpetual terror and anxiety. The weaker too, in their turn, often prey upon the stronger, and vex and molest them without relaxation... And thus on

each hand, before and behind, above and below, every animal is surrounded with enemies, which incessantly seek his misery and destruction.²

Here, we see discussed, with Hume’s signature style, the apparent cruelty and mercilessness of the natural order as counting against the existence of an omnipotent*, omniscient*, omnibenevolent* god. This is supporting evidence for the argument from evil*, which, at a minimum, questions what kind of supreme being would create such a world.

And examples of such philosophical profundities crafted in high literary style are legion in the *Dialogues*. Thus, the philosophical depth and literary beauty of the *Dialogues* has ensured its status as one of the most influential texts in the philosophy of religion.

Author’s Life

Hume was born on the 7th of May 1711 to Joseph and Katherine Home (Hume adopted a more phonetic spelling of his name as an adult). Hume’s father, an advocate*, died when Hume was only two years old, and so Hume’s mother took sole charge of his upbringing. As a child, Hume displayed such intellectual precocity that when his older brother John went to study at the University of Edinburgh, Hume went with him, even though he was, at most, 11 years old.

Hume studied Latin and Greek at Edinburgh, but read widely in literature, history, philosophy, and natural science. It was in this environment, against a backdrop of a strict Calvinist* upbringing, that Hume decided to pursue the life of a scholar and philosopher.

In early adulthood Hume abandoned the religious beliefs of his upbringing, although he sometimes drew back from explicitly expressing his criticisms in print. For example, Hume removed a critical discussion of miracles before publishing his first work: *A Treatise of Human Nature*. Hume held high hopes for the *Treatise* (published in parts between 1739 and 1740), but in his view “it fell dead-born from the press; without reaching such distinction as even to excite a Murmur among the

Zealots.”³ This was perhaps an overly pessimistic assessment. The *Treatise* caused sufficient excitement “among the zealots” (i.e. conservative clerics) for Hume to be refused an academic chair at both Edinburgh and Glasgow University (in 1745, and 1752, respectively).⁴ It is an indication of the climate of the times that Hume never held an academic post in large part due to his reputation as an atheist.*

Hume found great success as a historian, however, with his *History of England* (published in six volumes between 1754 and 1762) becoming a bestseller, and remaining so for many years, providing him with financial security and independence.

Nevertheless, Hume never felt free fully to express his views on religion in print, and throughout his life was persuaded to hold back from publishing controversial material.⁵ And none was considered likely to be more controversial than his *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, which he eventually decided would be published posthumously; which it was, in 1779.

Author's Background

Scotland in the eighteenth century was at the forefront of the Enlightenment. It must have been an exciting place for an intellectual like Hume to be plying his trade (although he also spent parts of his life in England and France). Indeed, Hume is often listed as one of five figures from eighteenth-century Scotland whose contributions to the Enlightenment were so significant that they are privileged with a name for their own movement: the “Scottish Enlightenment”.⁶ The other four were Francis Hutcheson*, Adam Smith*, Thomas Reid*, and Adam Ferguson*.

Religion was a powerful force in Scottish society in the eighteenth century, although its role in public life was becoming increasingly questioned. Scots were becoming increasingly literate, their education system was increasing its reach, and the wider social and intellectual forces of the Enlightenment were being felt. As human knowledge advanced in Europe, religion began a slow retreat.

Indeed, a caricature of that period in history might paint a picture of straightforwardly opposing forces: religion versus science; faith versus reason;

regress versus progress. But such a picture would be a rather simplistic representation of what was a much more complex reality. Indeed, in Hume’s *Dialogues* we find the opposite of such a caricature. Instead we find represented in high resolution the way in which different foundational debates cut across one another to create a very intricate dialectic*. Of particular note are the debates between empiricism* and rationalism*, and revealed* versus natural theology*.

And it was to the participants in these disputes that Hume directed his contributions. This included Hume’s immediate peers in the intelligentsia* (Hume was well-connected among intellectuals, and had friends on both sides of the debates), as well as the wider, educated populace.

Key Questions

Synthesize: why is the *Dialogues* considered a literary and philosophical masterpiece?

Analyze: if authorities consider Hume to have refuted the argument from design, over 200 years ago, why does the argument still have relatively widespread currency today?

Apply: in what way are the debates dealt with in the *Dialogues* relevant today?

Metadata:

People: Francis Hutcheson, Adam Smith, Thomas Reid, Adam Ferguson, David Hume

Places: Edinburgh, Glasgow, Scotland

Times: 1700s

Themes: Existence of God, Eighteenth-Century Scotland, Enlightenment, Empiricism, Rationalism, Revealed Theology, Natural Theology, Calvinism, Culture Wars, Intelligent Design Hypothesis

¹ As Simon Blackburn states: "The great thing about the *Dialogues* is the attack on the argument [from] design, it's usually taken to be the decisive destruction of that argument." See Simon Blackburn, interview by Nigel Warburton, *fivebooks.com*, July 8th, 2013, <<http://fivebooks.com/interviews/simon-blackburn-on-david-hume>>.

² David Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, ed. Stanley Twyman, (London, Routledge, 1991), 153.

³ David Hume, "My Own Life", in *The Letters of David Hume Vol. I*, ed. J. Y. T. Greig, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1932), 2.

⁴ Although by the time of his refusal of the Glasgow chair, Hume had also published *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, which built on much of the material in the *Treatise*.

⁵ Dorothy Coleman, 'Introduction', in *Hume: Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion And Other Writings*, ed. Dorothy Coleman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), xiv.

⁶ See Alexander Broadie, "Scottish Philosophy in the 18th Century", in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Stanford: Metaphysics Research Lab CSLI, 2013), <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2013/entries/scottish-18th/>>.

Module 2: Academic Context

“Generally speaking, the errors in religion are dangerous; those in philosophy only ridiculous.”

David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*

Key Points

- The philosophy of religion is concerned with the philosophical investigation of the foundations of religious thought. Chief among such foundations are metaphysical* claims concerning the existence of various entities, including God.
- Three issues are central to questions of God’s existence: (a) what God’s nature is; (b) how we are to know what God’s nature is; (c) and how we are to know whether the God with that nature exists.
- Regarding (a), (b), and (c), Hume held that there were major problems facing every position one might hold, with many of his concerns deriving from his empiricism.

The Work in its Context

There are two major philosophical debates which are important for understanding the *Dialogues*. The debate between rationalism* and empiricism*, and the debate between revealed* and natural theology*.

The debate between rationalism and empiricism was a major concern of epistemologists in the modern period. Epistemology* is the study of knowledge: its nature and its provenance. Rationalists disagree with empiricists about many things, but one key disagreement concerns the answer to this question: what is the source of knowledge? Rationalists hold that we know at least some propositions independently of sensory experience (i.e. without seeing, or hearing, and so on). The favored example is mathematics, which, they contend, we know via reasoning, i.e. *a priori**. Empiricists deny this, and hold that all propositions are known on the basis of sensory experience, i.e. empirically*.¹

This general debate has important implications for questions regarding the existence of God. If one is to try to establish that God exists, how should one do so? Empirically? Or *a priori*? Hume, the arch empiricist, argued that any justification had to be empirical. The general debate between rationalists and empiricist continues to this day, with the discipline remaining split on the issue.²

The debate between revealed and natural theology was also epistemic in nature. Natural theologians held that the theological claims should be justified by rational argument as opposed to an appeal to authority. There are two kinds of ‘natural theology’*, either justifying the theological claims *a priori*, or empirically. Proponents of revealed theology* contend that the theological claims should be justified by appeal to authority, either special experiences (revelations), or texts.

Overview of the Field

Many of the debates in the philosophy of religion are debates about the truth of a subclass of metaphysical propositions. This includes the debate about the existence of God. Metaphysics* is that area of philosophy which investigates the ultimate nature of reality. A major part of metaphysics is ontology*, the study of what exists. Thus, “does God exist?” is an ontological (and thus metaphysical) question.

A further key aspect of the debate between rationalism and empiricism is relevant here. Empiricism is a view which not only makes claims about the source of knowledge, but also about meaning. The general thought behind empiricism is that all that human beings can rely on when it comes to trying to gain knowledge of the world is what we gain through (or build out of what we gain through) our senses. This then invites questions about propositions which purport to be about that which we don’t obviously gain knowledge of through our senses. In particular, this invites questions about most of metaphysics, because the standard view is that most of the propositions of metaphysics are *a priori*. This leaves empiricists with two main options. First, to argue that the supposedly *a priori* propositions of metaphysics are, in fact, empirical. Second, to dismiss those metaphysical propositions which aren’t rescuable via the first option as

meaningless—in the sense that “the wob de gloo loo did zint gony” is meaningless. To opt for this second option is to opt for an empiricist theory of meaning.³

Thus, these two options face empiricists when considering the metaphysical proposition: God exists. If one is an empiricist and wants to defend that proposition, then one must employ the resources of the empiricist wing of natural theology, appealing to empiricist arguments like the argument from design*. If one is an empiricist and wishes to deny that God exists, then one will have to contest the arguments of empiricist natural theologians. Much of the *Dialogues* is concerned with just this dispute. And much of the *Dialogues* is also concerned with the question of whether one should try to settle the issue of God’s existence empirically at all.

These debates cannot be properly understood without grasping the wider epistemological dispute which underpins them: concerning the truth, and scope of empiricism, as a theory of knowledge, and meaning.

Academic Influences

The empiricist tradition was a major influence on Hume. John Locke*, and George Berkeley* were important precursors, and together with Hume they are the three central figures of the school known as British Empiricism*.

Hume is probably the greatest empiricist of the modern period, not just in virtue of his general status as a philosopher, but also because of the emphatic nature of his empiricism. The *Dialogues* provide a good indication of just how strident Hume’s empiricism was. But the following, famous passage, taken from his *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, is perhaps the best example of the vigor of Hume’s empiricism.⁴

When we run over libraries, persuaded of these principles, what havoc must we make? If we take in our hand any volume; of divinity or school metaphysics, for instance; let us ask, *Does it contain any abstract reasoning concerning quantity or number?* No. *Does it contain any experimental reasoning*

concerning matter of fact and existence? No. Commit it then to the flames: For it can contain nothing but sophistry and illusion.⁵

And in the *Dialogues* we find Hume endeavoring to “commit to the flames” much, if not all, of that which is found in any “volume of divinity”—i.e. much, if not all, of orthodox religious belief.

Key questions

Synthesize: why do empiricists view *a priori* propositions with suspicion?

Analyze: if all *a priori* propositions are meaningless, which academic disciplines would be most affected?

Apply: do you think the proposition that God exists is empirical? What arguments can you give in support of your answer?

Metadata:

People	John Locke, George Berkeley, David Hume
Places	Britain
Times	1700s
Themes	Existence of God, Empiricism, Rationalism, Revealed Theology, Natural Theology, Argument from Design, <i>A Priori</i> , <i>A Posteriori</i> (Empirical)

¹ This is a simplified picture of the debate. For a more detailed overview, see Peter Markie, "Rationalism vs. Empiricism", in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Stanford: Metaphysics Research Lab CSLI, 2015),

<<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2015/entries/rationalism-empiricism/>>.

² David Bourget, and David J. Chalmers, "What do philosophers believe?" *Philosophical Studies* 170 (2014): 465-500.

³ Again, this is a simplified picture. For a more detailed overview, see Markie, *passim*.

⁴ For an excellent overview of Hume's views on the centrality of empiricism to philosophy, see William Edward Morris and Charlotte R. Brown, "David Hume", in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, (Stanford: Metaphysics Research Lab CSLI, 2014), <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2014/entries/hume/>>, §3.

⁵ David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Tom L. Beauchamp (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 211.

Module 3: The Problem

“Is [God] willing to prevent evil, but not able? then is he impotent. Is he able, but not willing? then is he malevolent. Is he both able and willing? whence then is evil?”

Epicurus, in Hume’s *Dialogues*.

Key Points

- Can God’s existence or non-existence be established? What method should we use to answer this question?
- Atheists* claim that God’s *non*-existence can be established; theists* and deists* think His *existence* can be established. Agnostics* disagree with everyone, holding that neither God’s existence nor non-existence can be established. Revealed theologians* appeal to the authority of religious experiences and texts to settle this dispute; natural theologians* appeal to *a priori** or empirical* reasoning.
- Hume defends empiricist natural theology, and is thought by many commentators to hold a view approaching atheism (although he rejected that attribution).

Core Question

There are two overlapping questions that constitute the subject matter of the *Dialogues*. First, can God’s existence or non-existence be established? Second, what method can be used to answer the first question?

In Hume’s time, the answer that God’s existence can be established was supported by powerful forces. Indeed, even among the intelligentsia* of the day, there was relatively widespread agreement that such an answer was correct (deism being the preferred position among intellectuals). There was far less agreement, however, regarding how to answer the second question.

Defenders of belief in God faced a dilemma. On the one hand, revealed theology offered a position in debates about the existence of God that seemed virtually

irrefutable. If one holds that one’s position can only be assessed via divine revelation, then this makes one’s position safe from nearly all rational scrutiny. The most radical version of this approach is fideism*, which holds that to demand reasons in support of a belief which is held on the basis of faith—i.e. a special kind of believing in the absence of reason—is simply to demand something which is irrelevant.

But revealed theology and fideism face significant difficulties. Revelations can be contradictory, and how does one distinguish delusion from divinity? Moreover, in what was becoming an increasingly secular age, there was significant pressure to provide arguments for the faithful to defend themselves against the advance of atheism and agnosticism.

Natural theology, which promises to justify God’s existence through reasoning, seems to offer a solution to the difficulties faced by revealed theology and fideism, by offering rational arguments in place of appeals to authority. But here the second horn of the dilemma is revealed: once one accepts the need for rational arguments to justify belief in God, then one opens up the possibility that the debate might be lost.

Hence the dilemma faced by believers in God: either to retreat to the unassailable citadel of revealed theology or fideism, and allow opponents to occupy the field of rational argument unopposed; or turn and face those opponents on that field, natural theology in hand, and face the possibility of defeat.

Conservative clerics tended to embrace the first horn of that dilemma, liberals the second, and a striking feature of the *Dialogues* is how it captures this dispute, personified in two characters: Cleanthes*, the liberal, and Demea*, the conservative.

The Participants

Despite not being strictly atheists, the ancient Greek philosopher Epicurus*, and the seventeenth century philosophers Baruch Spinoza* and Thomas Hobbes*, were considered the main opponents of orthodox religion in Hume’s time.¹

Epicurus believed that the universe was governed by mechanistic processes and that deities had no interest in human affairs, including all forms of religious observance.²

Spinoza held that God *is* nature, i.e. God is the totality of entities which make up the universe and the laws which govern them.³ On Spinoza's view, God is not anthropomorphic, i.e. like a person, but the very substance of reality itself.

Hobbes held that everything is material,⁴ and agreed with Spinoza that this included God.⁵

Thus, although each held, in some sense or other, that there was a God, or gods, it was in a sense so far removed from Christian orthodoxy as to appear akin to atheism.

Indeed, the issue of God's nature divides two of the main positions one can take: theism and deism. Theists believe that God is the omnipotent*, omniscient*, omnibenevolent*, eternal, creator/sustainer of the universe, who intervenes directly in human affairs. Deists view God as more like an architect than the theist's micro-manager. According to deism, God is the creator of the universe, but it runs itself perfectly in His absence, and He does not interfere in that universe, including the events of human history. Deism was perhaps the most intellectually respectable theological position for scholars to take in the Enlightenment period. There has been some debate about the compatibility of deism and Christianity.⁶

Agnosticism* is the view that it can't be known whether or not God exists, and one argument for this is to contend that given this or that account of God's nature, then it is not possible to know whether such an entity exists. For example, one possibility discussed in the *Dialogues* is that God's nature should be understood very minimally as simply *the uncaused cause of the universe*.⁷ One might consider that it is impossible to know whether or not God in that sense exists, and thus embrace agnosticism.

The Contemporary Debate

In the *Dialogues*, Hume builds on the criticisms of orthodox religious belief presented by Epicurus, Spinoza, Hobbes, and others. For example, Hume presents sophisticated versions of the argument from evil, which is often attributed to Epicurus (note the quote at the beginning of this module).

Hume's approach in the *Dialogues* was more subtle than many other commentators, however. Rather than straightforwardly presenting his own view, and defending it, Hume preferred to play his opponents off against each other. For example, much of the *Dialogues* consists of Cleanthes, the liberal theologian, and Demea, the conservative theologian, engaging in a kind of mutually assured destruction of each other's arguments.

Indeed, this example illustrates the extent to which the *Dialogues* is a kind of allegory for the arguments of the day. This occurs on two levels: first, in the way in which the three main characters represent standard positions on the arguments; Cleanthes the liberal, Demea the conservative, and a third character, Philo the skeptic.* Second, in the way in which Hume's attempts to persuade the reader are to some extent covert, conducted behind the veil of the debates that Cleanthes, Demea, and Philo engage in. Hume probably did this in order to ensure that the arguments in the *Dialogues* could speak for themselves, and not be dismissed simply because they were being put forward by a perceived atheist.

Key Questions

Synthesize: what are the two central questions that concern the *Dialogues*?

Analyze: what are the advantages and disadvantages of trying to settle the question of God's existence empirically?

Apply: are you a theist, deist, fideist, atheist, or agnostic? What arguments can you give in support of your position?

Metadata:

People Epicurus, Spinoza, Hobbes, Cleanthes, Demea, Philo, David Hume

Places Europe, Britain
Times 1700s
Themes Existence of God, Empiricism, Revealed Theology, Natural Theology, Theism, Deism, Atheism, Agnosticism, Fideism

¹ Dorothy Coleman, "Introduction", in *Hume: Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion And Other Writings*, ed. Dorothy Coleman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), xiii.

² James Warren, *Facing Death: Epicurus and his Critics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 39. See also David Konstan, "Epicurus", in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Stanford: Metaphysics Research Lab CSLI, 2014), <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2014/entries/epicurus/>>, §3.

³ To be fair, Spinoza's view is complex and there is some dispute about how to read him. See Steven Nadler, "Baruch Spinoza", in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Stanford: Metaphysics Research Lab CSLI, 2013), <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2013/entries/spinoza/>>, §2.1.

⁴ See Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. C. B. Macpherson (London: Penguin Books, 1985) 81.

⁵ P. Springborg, "Hobbes's Challenge to Descartes, Bramhall and Boyle: A Corporeal God", *British Journal for the History of Philosophy*, 20 (2012): 903–34.

⁶ Charles Taliaferro, and Elsa J. Marty (eds.), *A Dictionary of Philosophy of Religion* (New York: Continuum, 2010), 60-61.

⁷ David Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, ed. Stanley Tweyman, (London, Routledge, 1991), 108.

Module 4: The Author's Contribution

"[In] a nutshell... Hume's position is [that] you can't check out of Hotel Supernatural with any more baggage than you took into it."
Simon Blackburn, *fivebooks.com*

Key Points

- Hume defends an empiricist approach to the question of God's existence. There is some debate about what his final position was, but most commentators agree that he was unconvinced that God, in any orthodox sense, exists.
- Hume's *Dialogues* were enormously influential, particularly among other intellectuals.
- Although Hume was not the first to express views seen as hostile to religious orthodoxy, his critique deserves its status as among the most definitive.

Author's Aims

One of the most appealing, and perhaps also most frustrating, aspects of the *Dialogues* is that Hume does not clearly state what his aims are. Instead, one has to infer these by a close reading of the text, with Hume's whole corpus of work in mind.

Consider, for example, Simon Blackburn's analysis of what Hume was trying to achieve with the *Dialogues*. Namely that Hume wanted to question

what our natural reasoning powers can deliver about God... to the point where we can't draw any implications for how to behave, who to worship, what kind of doctrines or beliefs to hold. We're reduced, in effect, to a kind of silence... [And] all the wars and the dogmas and the legal systems which are founded with the alleged authority of religion, in turn, are just creations spun out of our own heads... It means that arguing about the existence of

God becomes kind of pointless. What you should argue about is the implications people think they can draw from it.¹

This is what Blackburn was gesturing towards with his "Hotel Supernatural" quote at the beginning of this module. And something like this reading of Hume is arguably the most dominant—that if he left any room for belief in the existence of God, it was in a sense of "God" so distant and lacking in substance as to remove any force from the claim that God exists, and thus to radically undermine clerical influence in society.²

Approach

It is the presenting of a subtle and artful dialogue* of competing arguers that distinguishes Hume's approach. The *Dialogues* is considered by some to be the greatest example of a dialogue since classical antiquity³, and his choice of a dialogue form was driven in part by the demands of persuasion in the face of entrenched belief.

Hume wanted to let the arguments speak for themselves, independently of his, or anyone else's reputation. Moreover, as Blackburn indicates above, Hume was supremely economical, i.e. he was careful not to try for more than he really required. Hume's clearest and most vociferous criticisms of religion were against orthodox Christian doctrines, like belief in miracles, and the prominent role played by clerics in society in virtue of their institutional power. That Hume held such views is uncontroversial—his work makes that clear.⁴ Moreover, it also seems clear that Hume was unconvinced by orthodox theistic conceptions of God—as the anthropomorphic "super-being"; an idea that is mocked in the *Dialogues*.⁵

All that this seems to leave open are "thin" conceptions of God whereby He is understood as something rather minimal by orthodox standards, such as the first cause of the universe, about which we know little to nothing. Hume is not going to lose any sleep over allowing such a possibility, and thus seems to grant it towards the end of the *Dialogues*.⁶ But here we can see the persuasive value of the dialogic approach: handing an empty victory to one's opponents after winning the arguments that really count. If Hume had advertised such a position from the

outset, then it would have been immediately resisted. Instead he allows it to appear to arise naturally out of the cut and thrust of the debate. Subtle and artful indeed.

Contribution in Context

How original is the *Dialogues*? The central arguments, such as from design, or evil, were not themselves original, being discussed long before Hume was alive. Also, the main positions available, such as theism*, deism*, and agnosticism*, had been the subject of previous enquiry. However, Hume's contribution to the debate was still magisterial.

Genuinely novel arguments which are central to a field of philosophy are relatively rarely produced. Instead, what usually happens is that philosophers develop or respond to arguments which are already in existence. They amend, they clarify, they object. This is largely what Hume does in the *Dialogues*, to a magnificent degree. Hume marshals the debate with the skill and sophistication of a great philosopher: he sees where the pitfalls are, and how the summit of persuasion can be reached. Quite simply: he *argues* brilliantly.

Another key feature of Hume's contribution is his relentless, focused application of empiricist principles. This can be seen in how the debate is conducted in the terms of empiricist natural theology—and in how careful Hume is not to rule in or out more than what good empiricist principles would allow. As evidenced, for example, in his rejection of belief in an anthropomorphic super-being, on the one hand, and his proverbial “shrug of the shoulders” at much more minimal conceptions of God, on the other.

Key Questions

Synthesize: it is uncontroversial to claim that Hume held some critical views of religion; what were those views?

Analyze: what did Blackburn mean by his “Hotel Supernatural” comment?

Apply: think about what an “empty victory” in a debate is. Can you identify any examples other than the one discussed here?

Metadata:

People	Simon Blackburn, David Hume
Places	Europe, Britain
Times	Classical antiquity, 1700s
Themes	Existence of God, Empiricism, Natural Theology, Theism, Deism, Agnosticism, Christianity, Anthropomorphism

¹ Simon Blackburn, interview by Nigel Warburton, *fivebooks.com*, July 8th, 2013, <<http://fivebooks.com/interviews/simon-blackburn-on-david-hume>>.

² See J. C. A. Gaskin, “Hume on religion”, in *The Cambridge Companion to Hume*, ed. David Fate Norton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 340-341. See also Andrew Pyle, *Hume's Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, (London: Continuum, 2006), 122-132. See also William Edward Morris and Charlotte R. Brown, “David Hume”, in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Stanford: Metaphysics Research Lab CSLI, 2014), <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2014/entries/hume/>>, §8.4.

³ Dorothy Coleman, “Introduction”, in *Hume: Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion And Other Writings*, ed. Dorothy Coleman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), xi.

⁴ See Paul Russell, “Hume on Religion”, in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Stanford: Metaphysics Research Lab CSLI, 2014), <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2014/entries/hume-religion/>>, *passim*.

⁵ See David Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, ed. Stanley Twyman, (London, Routledge, 1991), 128-132.

⁶ See Hume, *Dialogues*, 184-185.

SECTION 2: IDEAS

Module 5: Main Ideas

“Whatever exists must have a cause... of its existence... in mounting up, therefore, from effects to causes, we must either go on in tracing an infinite succession... or must at last have some recourse to some ultimate cause, that is *necessarily* existent [but] the first supposition is absurd... [and] we must, therefore, have recourse to a necessarily existent Being... There is consequently such a being... a Deity.”

Demea, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*

Key Points

- The key themes: natural versus revealed theology*; *a priori** versus empirical* justification of God; the arguments from design*, and evil*; the cosmological argument*; what “God” is taken to mean.
- Hume’s conclusion: the debate on God’s existence should be settled empirically; and God, in any substantial orthodox sense, does not exist.
- These themes and contentions are presented in the form of a dialogue*, written with all of Hume’s characteristic suavity and elegance.

Key Themes

There are three main characters in the *Dialogues*, each of whom represents a major position on the question of whether, and how belief in God might be justified.

First, there is the conservative figure of Demea*, who holds that faith in God’s existence is to be preferred to reasoning which purports to demonstrate God’s existence, but also that if reasoning is required then it should be *a priori*. Demea defends a famous *a priori* argument for the existence of God known as the “cosmological argument”*, according to which the universe could have come into existence only if there is an uncaused, first cause, which must be God.¹ Demea also defends mysticism*: the view that God’s nature is unknowable.²

Second, there is the more liberal figure of Cleanthes*, who agrees with Demea that God exists, but disagrees that God’s existence can be demonstrated by *a priori*

reasoning. Instead, Cleanthes holds that God’s existence is justified by empirical reasoning. Thus, Cleanthes is an empiricist natural theologian.* Cleanthes defends the argument from design*, according to which the natural world appears as if it were designed, such that there is a justified inference to the existence of a designer, who must be God.³ Cleanthes also defends anthropomorphism: that God is a super-being with person-like qualities.⁴

Third, there is Philo* the sceptic*. Philo’s role in the *Dialogues* is complex, but frequently he acts as a kind of “devil’s advocate”, taking up contrarian positions, and playing his fellow interlocutors off against each other. So much so, indeed, that it can sometimes seem as if Philo is being inconsistent.

Nevertheless, Philo does agree with Cleanthes that God’s existence can only be justified empirically. There is some disagreement among commentators on whether or not Philo accepts the existence of God.⁵ But given the totality of what Philo asserts in the *Dialogues*, he is best understood as withholding belief. His interventions in the debates are nearly always directed at undermining arguments for the existence of God, and only occasionally does he suggest he would allow for the existence of something which might be labelled “God”, but which would best be understood as simply “that which is the cause of the universe about which we can know almost nothing”. Philo also champions the argument from evil towards the end of the *Dialogues*, according to which the existence of God (understood in the theistic* sense) is inconsistent with the existence of evil in the world.⁶ Finally, Philo appears to agree with Demea that God’s nature is unknowable (although remember that by “God” Philo simply means something like: “the cause of the universe”).⁷

The following table provides a map of the core issues discussed in the *Dialogues* by summarizing the main positions taken by each character:

	Demea	Cleanthes	Philo
God exists	Yes	Yes	No ⁸
God's nature is knowable	No	Yes	No
God's existence should be justified empirically	No	Yes	Yes
God's existence should be justified <i>a priori</i>	Yes	No	No
The cosmological argument is persuasive	Yes	No	No
The argument from design is persuasive	No	Yes	No
The argument from evil is persuasive	No	No	Yes

Exploring the Ideas

The first major issue addressed in the *Dialogues* is whether to adhere to natural theology. On this question, there is an alliance between Philo and Demea. Philo, the sceptic, has a general disdain for the power of human reason, particularly regarding matters distant from immediate human experience, and expresses some approval for fideism*, although this may be nothing more than a debating tactic. Demea, the theological conservative, also expresses opposition to natural theology, based on a preference for revealed theology. Cleanthes, the natural theologian, then poses a dilemma for Philo which seems to win the point. Either he must reject much of natural science (implausibly), or at least consider the arguments of natural theology, which shares the methods of natural science.⁹

Cleanthes then puts forward an argument from natural theology: the argument from design. The basic form of the argument is as follows.

Argument from design

P1: The universe appears designed.

P2: If the universe appears designed then the universe is designed.

P3: If the universe is designed, then it has a designer.

P4: If the universe has a designer, then that designer is God.

C: Thus, God exists.

Much of the discussion centers on the second premise. One of the key arguments Cleanthes gives in support of P2 is an inference to the best explanation: the appearance of design is best explained by appealing to a designer. Consider, Cleanthes suggests, the regularity of nature, and how everything in it seems to have a function—the eye, for example.

But Philo urges caution on Cleanthes. All that we can know empirically, he suggests, is that *parts* of nature seem design-like. What we cannot infer is that nature as a whole is design-like, because we have no experience which supports it. We haven't observed all of nature, entire universes, or universe-like entities being built.¹⁰

Demea also is unimpressed by the argument from design, particularly the first version proposed by Cleanthes, because in Demea's view it makes God's existence merely probable, rather than certain. In part nine of the *Dialogues* Demea tries to rectify this situation by presenting another of the major arguments with which the *Dialogues* is concerned: the cosmological argument.¹¹ An *a priori* argument for the existence of God, it proceeds as follows.¹²

The cosmological argument

P1: The universe has an ultimate cause.

P2: The ultimate cause of the universe cannot be contingent.

P3: If P2, then the ultimate cause of the universe must be necessary.

P4: The only necessary entity is God.

C: Thus, God exists.

The notions of necessity and contingency are important here. If x exists contingently, it just means that x exists but might not have. Many things familiar from ordinary experience appear contingent in this way: you and I are contingent, for example. In contrast, if x exists necessarily, then x exists and must exist; there is no possible state of affairs in which x does not exist.

One consideration that can be given in support of the cosmological argument is to contend that positing a necessary entity can bring an end to the demand for explanation of where the universe “came from” –thereby avoiding an infinite regress of explanations. If one posits a contingent entity as the cause of the universe, then one can ask where that contingent entity “came from” –i.e. what caused it, and the regress begins. But if one posits a necessary entity, then one can’t sensibly ask questions about where that necessary entity “came from” –it’s necessary, so *must* exist, and the regress never gets started.

Cleanthes’ most forceful objection to the cosmological argument is to question why one should accept that the necessary entity which is the cause of the universe must be God.¹³ Particularly if one has in mind a substantial conception of God, such as the theistic or deistic one. Indeed, Demea’s appeal to the cosmological argument brings to mind the view of Spinoza that we discussed above in Module 3 “The Participants”, where “God” was used to refer to nature itself. But this is a sense of “God” so far removed from orthodoxy as to call into question whether the use of the term is legitimate.

Language and Expression

Although the *Dialogues* is written with wit and verve in Hume’s characteristically exemplary style, the complexity of the debate presented, and the somewhat archaic prose, with lengthy, frequently elaborate sentences, can present challenges to the novice reader. The work was aimed at a highly educated eighteenth-century audience, and in many ways set out to provoke and perplex that audience; to make them think.

Another potential barrier is Hume’s highly rhetorical style: the arguments are presented not in austere scientific prose, as much contemporary philosophy is (particularly in the Anglophone and Germanophone worlds). Instead, Hume presents the arguments as part of an animated conversation; full of metaphor, exaggeration, exclamation, and a dizzying variety of other literary devices. This adds much color to the text, but it can also obscure some of the argumentative moves, and make it difficult to keep track of the overall thread of debate.

Consequently, one may come away from the *Dialogues* feeling confused, confounded even. But it is important to recognize that this is not necessarily a bad thing. Philosophy is to a large degree about the process of working through, and alleviating confusion; about achieving clarity of understanding, achieving wisdom.

Key Questions

Synthesize: can you explain what the argument from design and cosmological argument are?

Analyze: are the argument from design and the cosmological argument persuasive? Why, (or why not)?

Apply: given the advances in modern science, especially physics, do you think we are any closer to settling the debate about either the argument from design or cosmological argument?

Metadata:

People	Cleanthes, Demea, Philo, David Hume
Places	Britain, Europe
Times	1700s
Themes	Existence of God, Natural Theology, Empiricism, Theism, Fideism, Mysticism, Anthropomorphism, Argument from Design, Cosmological Argument, Argument from Evil

¹ David Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, ed. Stanley Tweyman, (London, Routledge, 1991), 148-151.

² Hume, *Dialogues*, 107-116.

³ Hume, *Dialogues*, 128-147.

⁴ Hume, *Dialogues*, 107-116.

⁵ See Andrew Pyle, *Hume's Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, (London: Continuum, 2006), 122-132.

⁶ Hume, *Dialogues*, 152-171.

⁷ Hume, *Dialogues*, 107-116.

⁸ Unless "God" is taken to mean "the cause of the universe" in which case: Yes.

⁹ Hume, *Dialogues*, 97-106.

¹⁰ Hume, *Dialogues*, 107-116.

¹¹ Hume, *Dialogues*, 148-151.

¹² This version, at least. There are many versions; for an overview see Bruce Reichenbach, "Cosmological Argument", in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Stanford: Metaphysics Research Lab CSLI, 2013), <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2013/entries/cosmological-argument/>>.

¹³ Hume, *Dialogues*, 148-151.

Module 6: Secondary Ideas

“[How] do you *mystics*, who maintain the absolute incomprehensibility of the deity, differ from sceptics or atheists, who assert, that the first cause of all is unknown and unintelligible?”

Cleanthes to Demea, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*

Key Points

- The debate between mysticism and anthropomorphism, and on the argument from evil.
- The mysticism/anthropomorphism and argument from evil debates form an important part of the *Dialogues*, and cut across the other debates in interesting ways.
- The mysticism/anthropomorphism and argument from evil debates are major issues in their own right within the philosophy of religion.

Other Ideas

Demea opens the mysticism/anthropomorphism debate at the beginning of the *Dialogues* by defending the position that God’s nature is unknowable. As he states:

The question is not concerning the being, but the Nature of God. This, I affirm, from the infirmities of human understanding, to be altogether incomprehensible and unknown to us. 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.¹

The opposing view, defended by Cleanthes, is anthropomorphism: that God has person-like qualities, in particular a psychology. God *loves* humankind (thus has emotions), God *knows* everything (thus has beliefs) God *wants* humankind to be good (thus has desires); and so on. God is a *super*-person, of course, but nevertheless analogous in many respects to human persons.

Cleanthes is prompted to first state the argument from design as one way of supporting his anthropomorphism. Cleanthes’ general thought is that if God is the world’s designer, and we can appreciate His handiwork by observing the world, then that might shed some light on the nature of the designer.

We will reflect further on the mysticism/anthropomorphism debate shortly, but first consider the argument from evil, introduced by Philo in part eleven of the *Dialogues*.²

Philo goes on to suggest that this state of affairs is incompatible with the existence of the theistic God. As we will see, there are different ways of spelling out this thought, but perhaps the simplest reconstruction of this argument is as follows:

Argument from evil

P1: If God is omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent, then there should be no evil in the world.

P2: There is evil in the world.

C1: Thus, either God doesn’t exist, or He isn’t omnipotent, omniscient or omnibenevolent.

P3: By definition God is omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent.

C2: Thus, God doesn’t exist.

We turn now to consider this argument, and the mysticism/anthropomorphism debate in more detail.

Exploring the Ideas

When Philo responds to Demea’s introduction of mysticism into the debate at the beginning of the *Dialogues*, it looks at first glance as if he agrees with Demea. This is because he seems to concur that we cannot know the nature of God—but note that by “God” Demea says that he means “the original cause of this universe”.³ It is easy to miss the significance of this. If “the cause of the universe” is all one means by the term “God”, then the claim that God exists becomes rather empty. Yet, if one is a mystic, as Demea is, then it is not immediately obvious how one can distinguish one’s claim that God exists from an empty version of the claim that

“God exists” where “God” is understood to mean “the cause of the universe”. Call this the “emptiness problem”.

Thus, mysticism seems to face a dilemma. On the one hand, asserting that God’s nature is unknowable seems to lead to the emptiness problem. On the other, trying to avoid the emptiness problem by saying more about what one means by “God” seems to lead directly away from mysticism. Thus the mystic’s dilemma: embrace emptiness, or abandon mysticism.

In the *Dialogues*, Cleanthes attacks Demea on this very point.⁴ As he states:

mystics... are, in a word, atheists, without knowing it. For though it be allowed, that Deity possesses attributes, of which we have no comprehension; yet ought we never to ascribe him any attributes, which are absolutely incompatible with that intelligent nature, essential to him. A mind whose acts and sentiments and ideas are not distinct and successive; one that 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 word, no mind at all.

Such anti-mystical arguments are given a positive hearing in the *Dialogues*, and Cleanthes’ anthropomorphism seems to have the upper-hand for much of the text. However, Cleanthes faces his own difficulties when encountering the argument from evil put forward by Philo in part eleven.

Cleanthes struggles in the face of Philo’s two pronged attack. First, Philo presents the “consistency problem of evil”, which is the argument from evil we considered above. Namely that the existence of evil is inconsistent with the existence of the theistic God. Second, Philo presents the “inference problem of evil”, and in doing so succeeds in cornering the natural theologian on his own empiricist principles. The inference problem is as follows. If one is an empiricist, then one should form one’s inferences from how the world is. If one wishes to infer from the nature of the world to the existence of an intelligent designer, then one should infer the nature of that designer from the nature of the world. But considering the world

with all its manifest cruelties, the best one could say about its designer is that He is indifferent to suffering.

Overlooked

The *Dialogues* is one of the most widely-discussed philosophical texts of the modern period, so there are no major philosophical aspects of it which have been overlooked by the literature. As will be discussed below, the *Dialogues* were read closely by many great thinkers of the modern period, and the ingenious subtlety of the text has generated a lively debate about how to interpret it. This has produced a thorough examination of its arguments over the near quarter-millennium since it was published.

However, one aspect of the text could perhaps be better appreciated in at least one context: literary study. The *Dialogues* is a literary masterpiece as much as a philosophical one; and thus it is a regrettable fact that it is studied so little as a work of literature. This is probably a consequence of the *Dialogues* being better known as a work of philosophy than of literature—one would be unlikely to find it in the literature section of the typical academic library, for example, or of any library, indeed. So it has been left to philosophers to sing the praises of Hume’s style, which they have duly done. But philosophers are perhaps not best suited to the task, for they tend to be struck more by the beauty to be found in persuasion, rather than in prose. So it is disappointing that Hume’s literary achievements remain relatively underappreciated in that field which takes literary achievement as its prime concern.

Key Questions

Synthesize: can you explain what mysticism and anthropomorphism are?

Analyze: are the arguments against mysticism persuasive? Why, (or why not)?

Apply: consider the debates we have examined above. Can you think of any objections, or replies to objections that were not discussed, but that you think might be successful?

Metadata:

People Cleanthes, Demea, Philo, David Hume
Places Britain, Europe
Times 1700s
Themes Existence of God, Natural Theology, Empiricism, Theism, Mysticism, Anthropomorphism, Argument from Evil

¹ David Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, ed. Stanley Tweyman, (London, Routledge, 1991), *Dialogues*, 107.

² Hume, *Dialogues*, 169.

³ Hume, *Dialogues*, 108.

⁴ Hume, *Dialogues*, 123.

Module 7: Achievement

"[God is] a Being, so remote and incomprehensible, who bears much less analogy to any other being in the universe than the sun to a waxen taper, and who discovers himself only by some faint traces or outlines, beyond which we have no authority to ascribe to him any attribute or perfection." – David Hume.¹

Key Points

- Hume was instrumental in the development of a strong, often dominant, empiricist tradition in philosophy. Hume's *Dialogues* were also a key to the rise of widespread anti-clerical views, atheism, and secularism in the modern world.
- Hume's brilliance and the broader forces of the enlightenment explain his contributions to the rise of empiricism and anti-clericalism.
- Powerful religious forces pushed strongly against many of his arguments long after his death; and empiricism's opponents have proven to be at least as resourceful and tenacious as empiricists themselves.

Assessing the Argument

Assessing the success or failure of any philosophical argument is difficult because progress in philosophy is achieved slowly, at best, and the kind of consensus that might be achieved in experimental science is very rare. What one can always determine, however, is how *consistent* a philosopher has been, and the skill and sophistication of their approach. By that measure, Hume scores very highly indeed. His commitment to empiricist principles in his examination of the issues is unwavering; and this contrasts rather embarrassingly with his opponents who, as the *Dialogues* highlights, have many tensions in their position, and face many dilemmas. Moreover, the way in which Hume marshals the debate so that it leaves his adversaries with an apparently empty victory demonstrates great argumentative agility and foresight. Even Hume's opponents, who he insisted must check out of Hotel Supernatural with just the same baggage they checked in with, would acknowledge the skill and sophistication of the *Dialogues*

In addition, the general historical trends which followed Hume's contributions are relatively clear. Empiricism*, Hume's central thesis in virtually all his work, certainly drew great strength, ultimately, from Hume's contributions to modern philosophy. Indeed, by the middle of the twentieth century, a version of empiricism, known as "logical empiricism", had established itself as the most powerful empiricist movement philosophy has ever seen.² And although it eventually faltered (as pretty much all philosophical movements seem to do eventually), it gave birth to newer, more complex empiricist approaches; which remain popular today.³ And Hume's intellectual legacy remains highly relevant to that popularity. Since the turn of the twenty-first century, there have been over seven hundred articles published with "Humean" in the title or abstract.

Moreover, if Hume's aim was to strengthen anti-clerical social forces, and skeptical positions on the existence of God, then there is evidence he was successful. Nearly three quarters of academic philosophers now describe themselves as atheists.⁴ And in Hume's native country, Scotland, almost half of the population now say that they have "no religion".⁵ This must have seemed a very distant prospect indeed when Hume was preparing the *Dialogues* for posthumous publication.

Achievement in Context

The *Dialogues* emerged during what has been called the "golden period of English theology".⁶ It was the golden age for two main reasons. First, the enlightenment tide was raising enquiry to a new height across numerous disciplines. Second, the new frontier of natural theology, infused with many contributions from philosophers, fueled a boom in scholarly output. The stage was set for reputations to be made.

Thus, on the one hand there was certainly a market for the *Dialogues*, as much from those who would contest its arguments as from those who would accept them. But on the other, Hume was concerned enough about its possible reception in certain quarters to delay its publication. Although Hume had friends among the liberal clergy, he had numerous enemies among those of more conservative cast, who at one stage sought (unsuccessfully) to have him excommunicated from the Church of Scotland*. Something he joked about in a letter to his friend, Allan Ramsay:*

You may tell the reverend gentleman the Pope, that there are many here who rail at him, and yet would be much greater persecutors had they equal power. The last Assembly sat on me. They did not propose to burn me, because they cannot. But they intend to give me over to Satan, which they think they have the power of doing. My friends, however, prevailed, and my damnation is postponed for a twelve month.⁷

Nevertheless, despite such travails, the *Dialogues* was no *succès de scandale*⁸, causing few ripples in public life when it was published. Yet, as we will discuss below, it had wide-ranging effects—being read, and built upon, by many of Europe’s leading thinkers in the years that followed.

Limitations

The *Dialogues*’ main strength, its artful subtlety, is also perhaps its main weakness. Although much valuable philosophical work has been generated by the detailed and lengthy debates over the work’s interpretation, this has perhaps undermined somewhat the book’s effectiveness. If one accepts the standard reading of the *Dialogues* as being skeptical towards the existence of God (in any substantial sense of “God”), then the fact that a significant proportion of commentators argue that the book should be read as *supporting* belief in God⁸ (in some substantial sense) is perhaps not the most ideal result.

If Hume had lived to see such disagreement over his conclusion, one suspects that he would have wanted to put such disputes to rest by clarifying his view, and may have been disappointed that his work had created such a variety of interpretation that his actual conclusion had been somewhat obscured.

On the other hand, Hume was famous for his delight in a good argument and took pleasure in outfoxing his adversaries. So one can also imagine Hume taking pleasure in the fact that the variety of interpretations of the *Dialogues* demonstrates that there is a good deal of truth in his claim that nothing could have been “more cautiously and more artfully written”.⁹

Key Questions

Synthesize: how did Empiricism fare as a doctrine after Hume’s contributions to it?

Analyze: is the variety of interpretations of the *Dialogues*’ conclusion a strength or a weakness of the work?

Apply: can you describe two ways in which Hume’s arguments in the *Dialogues* have gained wide currency in contemporary society?

Metadata:

People	Wittgenstein, Allan Ramsay, David Hume
Places	Scotland
Times	1700s
Themes	Natural theology, Church of Scotland, Golden Period of British Theology, Empiricism, Logical Empiricism

¹ David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Tom L. Beauchamp (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 197.

² See Stephen P. Schwartz., *A Brief History of Analytic Philosophy* (London: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 46-101.

³ See Schwartz, 76-118; see also David Bourget, and David J. Chalmers, “What do philosophers believe?” *Philosophical Studies* 170 (2014): 465-500.

⁴ See Bourget and Chalmers, 490.

⁵ Scottish Television News, “Almost half of Scots not religious, according to new figures” (26th August 2015) <<http://news.stv.tv/scotland/1327477-almost-half-of-scots-not-religious-according-to-scottish-household-survey/>>.

⁶ Paul Russell, “Hume on Religion”, in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Stanford: Metaphysics Research Lab CSLI, 2014), <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2014/entries/hume-religion/>>, §1.

⁷ David Hume, "To Allan Ramsay", in *The Letters of David Hume Vol. I*, ed. J. Y. T. Greig (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1932), 224.

⁸ See Ronald J. Butler, "Natural Belief and the Enigma of Hume", *Archiv für die Geschichte der Philosophie*, 42 (1960), 73-100. See also Stanley Twyman, *Scepticism and Belief in Hume's Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1981), 121-56.

⁹ David Hume, "To Adam Smith", in *The Letters of David Hume Vol. II*, ed. J. Y. T. Greig (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1932), 334.

Module 8: Place in the Author's Work

"Some years ago, I composed a piece, which would make a small Volume in Twelves. I call it *Dialogues on natural religion*. Some of my friends flatter me, that it is the best thing I ever wrote."

David Hume, *The Letters of David Hume Vol. II*

Key Points

- Hume's main philosophical focus was the defense and development of empiricism.*
- The *Dialogues* is Hume's last published work, building on some material he had published previously.
- Some think that the *Dialogues* is his best work.

Positioning

The most important relationship between the *Dialogues* and Hume's other philosophical work is empiricism. In a series of major contributions during his lifetime, Hume developed a wide-ranging and sophisticated empiricist philosophical system. *A Treatise of Human Nature* published in parts between 1739 and 1740, laid down the foundation of Hume's empiricism. Hume extended and developed his philosophy in a number of other works, including his: *Enquiry concerning Human Understanding* (1748); *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals* (1751); *Essays and Treatises on Several Subjects* (1754); and *Four Dissertations* (1757).

The *Dialogues*, published in 1779, three years after his death, were his last published work. And in many respects, the *Dialogues* bring together Hume's thoughts on a key consequence of his commitment to empiricism. Namely, that if one is to be an empiricist, then this leaves little room for orthodox religious belief. Although Hume had published some of his thoughts on religion in previous works, such as a discussion of miracles in the *Enquiry*, the *Dialogues* are his most thorough examination of the prospects for justifying belief in God.

Thus, the *Dialogues* occupy an important position in Hume's total *oeuvre*: his final thoughts on the implications that empiricism holds for religious belief.

Integration

The dominant philosophical fashion of Hume's age was to produce grand overarching philosophical systems, where a single approach was employed to address all the problems of philosophy. Hume was no exception in that regard, and he tried to integrate all of the philosophical problems that he addressed into his empiricist worldview.

Hume's empiricism also often had a skeptical character, in the sense that he would not hesitate to dismiss what he saw as mere dogma or superstition if it was not supported empirically. This includes, of course, religious beliefs, but also, according to many interpretations, purported features of reality which were (indeed are) considered indispensable components of one's ontology*. One famous example is Hume's purported skepticism about causation.¹ This reading of Hume is controversial (most readings are), but some argue that it is a consequence of his firm-footed empiricism.² If all we can rely on for knowledge are the deliverances of sensory experience, and sensory experience only contains events following in each other in regular ways, then all we can know are that events are regular in this way. But this stops short of evidence that any event *causes* another. Consider: the event of the car's shadow being cast on the road at one moment (call it "t₁"), is followed by the event of the car's shadow being cast on the road at a slightly later moment (call it "t₂"). But no-one would argue that this is sufficient to conclude that the shadow at t₁ caused the shadow at t₂ (as in fact the event of the car being struck by sunlight from a certain angle caused both shadows). Thus, mere event-succession is not sufficient for causation. But sensory experience, one might think, just presents us with a succession of events: we experience only the "shadows", and are not justified in claiming we can know anything else.

We need not enter into the debate regarding this reading of Hume's position. Rather, that it is a respectable reading of his view is enough to indicate to us the strength of Hume's commitment to empiricism, even when such a commitment might seem to invite a radical skepticism about such matters as the existence of

causation. And such skeptical empiricism is ever-present in the *Dialogues*, which are cast in the mold of Hume's wider philosophy.

Significance

There is no consensus on which of Hume's works is the greatest. However, it is widely agreed that *Dialogues* is at least among his best. The lack of consensus comes not from wildly differing views over the qualities of the *Dialogues* considered independently; it is widely regarded as a philosophical and literary masterpiece.³ Rather, the lack of consensus is driven by the quality of the other works that Hume produced.

Some are convinced of the *Dialogues* superiority, though. Edward Gibbon*, one of the greatest historians of the modern period, and a contemporary of Hume's, held that the book was "the most profound, the most ingenious, and the best written".⁴ One can understand the reasons for such praise. The book is unique in Hume's corpus, as the only dialogue, and contains some of his most mature and carefully constructed work. The book was long in the making, in part due to his hesitancy in publishing it before his death, and thus benefited from a long gestation. It is also arguably his most *intriguing* work. Full of sleights of hand, deft touches, puzzles and problems to ponder, all contained within that most enigmatic of philosophical forms: the dialogue.

This also helps to explain the enduring nature of the *Dialogues'* appeal. It will probably always remain to some degree an unsolved mystery, and thus likely to attract the attentions of the philosophically curious.

Key Questions

Synthesize: where did the *Dialogues* sit in the chronology of Hume's work?

Analyze: does sensory experience really present us merely with a succession of events rather direct evidence that any event is the cause of another?

Apply: how might the question of which of Hume's works is the greatest best be settled?

Metadata:

People	Edward Gibbon, David Hume
Places	Britain, Europe
Times	1700s
Themes	Empiricism, Skepticism, Causation

¹ See William Edward Morris and Charlotte R. Brown, "David Hume", in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Stanford: Metaphysics Research Lab CSLI, 2014), <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2014/entries/hume/>>, §5.

² Ibid.

³ Dorothy Coleman, "Introduction", in *Hume: Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion And Other Writings*, ed. Dorothy Coleman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), xiv.

⁴ Quoted in Coleman, xi.

SECTION 3: IMPACT

Module 9: The First Responses

“The fact indeed indisputably is, that Philo, not Cleanthes, personates Mr Hume.”
Thomas Hayter, *Hume on Natural Religion*

Key Points

- Most critics thought the *Dialogues* demonstrated that Hume was an atheist. Others simply ignored the book. Further, ad hominem* critics, simply attacked Hume’s character, or argued that Philo* was “obviously” Hume’s mouthpiece in the *Dialogues*.
- By the middle of the 19th century, Hume had become increasingly difficult to ignore, and that’s when the most substantive debate really began on the issues he raised.
- The dominance of conservative religious forces in society drove the ad hominem and dogmatic criticisms.

Criticism

The standard view of the *Dialogues* immediately after publication was that it had an atheistic conclusion, largely supported by the arguments of Philo (to which Hume gives the most favorable hearing), thus Philo was widely considered to be Hume’s mouthpiece.¹ This was despite the ending of the *Dialogues* in which Philo and Cleanthes apparently agree that God exists (De meo has already departed the conversation by this point). That the *Dialogues* ends this way has generated much discussion, and is a key reason for the interpretive debate about the *Dialogues*. A popular reading of this ending is that Philo’s apparent “u-turn” (given his hostility to belief in God throughout the rest of the *Dialogues*) is an empty concession to Cleanthes. Because the kind of God Philo is entertaining as existing is so far removed from the sense of “God” as employed in orthodox religion as to be unworthy of the name. If we understand “God” as Philo seems to, as merely the uncaused cause of the universe about which we can know virtually nothing, then acceding belief in that is to grant very little indeed.

Initial critics were not convinced of the scope for interpretative latitude that later scholars were more open to. The perception of Hume as a skeptical atheist drove a lot of this criticism, motivating a hostile reaction to him from those of a less philosophical persuasion who were committed believers, and generating cynicism regarding his motives.

Much of this reaction was driven by a sense of outrage at cherished beliefs being challenged. Thomas Hayter, for example, asked:

“Has skeptical philosophy any balm to comfort the devout heart; any medicine to refresh the religiously-afflicted spirit? Let us, in imagination, consign the religionist to Philo’s direction, and watch the result.”²

And many were convinced that Philo (understood as an atheist) was the intended victor of the *Dialogues*. Joseph Priestly, for example, was adamant that “though the debate seemingly closes on the side of the theist, the victory is clearly on the side of the atheist.”³ Such immediate responses set the tone, and this was the standard view in many circles for decades after the *Dialogues* was published.

In terms of serious philosophical criticism, Immanuel Kant* is the most significant figure who took note of Hume’s arguments in the immediate post-publication period. In his *Critique of Pure Reason* (published 1781), he considers the argument from design*, and agrees with Hume that it is unpersuasive.⁴

William Paley*, whose work *Natural Theology* (published 1802) discussed many of the issues in the *Dialogues*, chose not to tackle Hume directly. Instead he “shadow-boxed” Hume by constructing responses to some of Hume’s arguments without mentioning Hume explicitly. *Natural Theology* had an immense reputation for much of the 19th century, and contains what has come to be seen as a canonical expression of the argument from design.⁵

It is telling, however, that Paley’s attempts to shadow-box Hume, although popular, were not well reasoned, often relying on little more than bold assertion. The dogmatic criticism that Hume tried so hard to avoid in his artful construction

of the *Dialogues* persisted in many quarters, and it wasn't until the Darwinian revolution* commenced in the middle of the nineteenth century that Hume's arguments began to be given the full hearing in British society that they deserved.

Responses

The posthumous nature of the *Dialogues* meant that Hume could not respond to criticism. Thus, it was left up to those following in his intellectual footsteps to defend him. Perhaps the most striking example was Charles Darwin.*

Darwin was an English naturalist who published, in 1859, his seminal *Origin of Species*, which struck a decisive blow in favor of the empiricist critique of the argument from design. In many respects, Darwin finished the work that Hume started. The argument from design, for long the argument of choice of intellectually respectable theologians, was almost universally accepted in nineteenth century "polite society".⁶ But after Darwin, the tide turned.

Darwin's central contribution was to propose a plausible mechanism to explain how organisms evolve, namely: natural selection. At its most basic, natural selection is the following process: geographical distribution of organisms, plus random heritable variation in those organisms, plus resource competition faced by those organisms, plus only the best environmentally adapted organisms surviving ("survival of the fittest"), plus eons, creates massive biological diversity and complexity.

In this beautiful, essentially simple explanation, Darwin destroyed the best examples then used by proponents of the design argument. Here was a plausible, blind mechanism which could explain the appearance of design in nature.

Conflict and Consensus

There are not many grounds for consensus between the opponents in the debate about the existence of God. In Hume's time believers in God held the upper hand in society. With Darwin, a tipping point was reached. Atheists, agnostics, and their allies sensed that a decisive victory was possible. Because not only had Darwin dealt (what was seen by many) as a fatal blow to the argument from design, his

theory of evolution also had one particularly striking consequence: if true, then all living things on Earth were likely descended from a common ancestor. The implications of this were potentially devastating for the orthodox religion of the day. Darwin's empirical theory of evolution was threatening to deliver what revealed the theologians had been warning their more liberal colleagues about for much of the modern period: the defeat of natural theology. Thus, the battle lines were drawn, and prominent clerics brought their most fervent rhetoric to bear in a series of public and highly publicized disputes of the period which, by slow degrees, saw the clerics steadily lose ground as Darwin's ideas gained evidential support and popular acceptance.

There is a famous event which illustrates the character this contest took when Darwin's ideas were still new. In 1860, at the British Association for the Advancement of Science, in Oxford, a debate was held on Darwin's ideas. In the anti-Darwin corner was Bishop Samuel Wilberforce*, known as an uncompromising debater. In the pro-Darwin corner was Professor Thomas Huxley*, who came to be known as "Darwin's bulldog" because of the many occasions on which he forcefully defended Darwin's theories.

Wilberforce did his best to heap ridicule on the notion that, as he put it, human beings might be little more than "improved apes", rather than God's "crown and perfection."⁷ This, he suggested, insulted humankind and their creator. In a famous moment, he turned to Huxley and asked (perhaps in jest) whether he was descended from apes on his grandmother or grandfather's side.⁸ At which point Huxley turned to one of his colleagues and said "the Lord hath delivered him into mine hands"⁹, before replying to Wilberforce that he "would rather be descended from an ape than from a man who used his intellect and influence to introduce ridicule into a grave scientific discussion"¹⁰. In mid-nineteenth century Britain this was barn-storming stuff. Temperatures rose, tempers frayed; members of the audience fainted (legend has it), and then into the fray came Captain Robert Fitzroy*, a former companion of Darwin's on his famous voyage aboard the HMS Beagle, during which Darwin formulated many of the ideas that formed the basis of his theory of evolution. But Fitzroy was not there to support Darwin, he entered

holding aloft a copy of the Bible, and denounced his former colleague, as the scene descended into disarray.¹¹

Not all the debates that followed were so eventful, but, slowly, there was solidification into mainstream acceptance of many of the positions that Hume had argued for a century before in the *Dialogues*.

Key Questions

Synthesize: what was the standard view of the *Dialogues* when it was published?

Analyze: how justified do you think reviewers were in holding that the intended conclusion of the *Dialogues* was atheistic?

Apply: is there a version of the argument from design which might resist the critique of Hume and Darwin?

Metadata:

People Charles Darwin, Thomas Huxley, Samuel Wilberforce, Robert Fitzroy, William Paley, Immanuel Kant, Joseph Priestly, Thomas Hayter, Philo, David Hume

Places Oxford, Britain

Times 1800s

Themes Atheism, Agnosticism, Empiricism, Evolution, Natural Selection

¹ See James Fieser, *Early Responses to Hume's Life and Reputation Vols. 9 & 10* (London: Bloomsbury, 2003).

² Quoted in Tweyman, 78.

³ Quoted in Martin Priestman, *Romantic Atheism: Poetry and Freethought, 1780-1830* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 18.

⁴ Although Kant does so with a sense of regret. See Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. N. Kemp Smith (London: Macmillan, 1976), 518-24.

⁵ See William Paley, *Natural Theology: Or Evidences of the Existence and Attributes of the Deity Collected from the Appearances of Nature* (Boston: Gould and Lincoln, 1867), 1.

⁶ Pyle, 138-139.

⁷ Thomas Dixon, *Science and Religion: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: OUP, 2008), 74.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ There are interesting questions to be asked about the role this tale has played in the history of supposed conflict between science and religion, including whether it functions almost as a piece of propaganda for atheists and their allies. See Dixon, 73-80.

Module 10: The Evolving Debate

“What a book a Devil’s chaplain might write, on the clumsy, wasteful, blundering low and horridly cruel works of nature!”

Charles Darwin, *in a letter to his friend Joseph Hooker*

Key Points

- Hume’s arguments were progressively built on, and responded to, as Darwin’s ideas reverberated throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.
- Empiricism* grew in stature during that period, particularly in the early part of the twentieth century. Religious belief retreated further.
- The *Dialogues* played its part by illuminating the issues in ways that others could build on, and by providing an example of how the debate should proceed.

Uses and Problems

Debates about empiricism and skepticism* about orthodox religious belief have gone through innumerable iterations since Hume’s *Dialogues*. During that time, Hume’s influence on the debate has waxed and waned, depending on the fashions of the day.

One prominent commentator of interest was the major Victorian intellectual John Stuart Mill.* Although he was an empiricist like Hume, he defended the argument from design as the best defense of natural theology, and remained unconvinced by Darwin’s theory of evolution. In Mill’s words:

Leaving aside [the theory of evolution] to whatever fate the progress of discovery may have in store for it, I think it must be allowed that, in the present state of our knowledge, the adaptations in nature afford a large balance of probability in favor of creation by intelligence. It is equally certain that this is no more than a

probability; and that various other arguments of Natural Theology which we have considered, add nothing to its force.¹

Mill used this to defend a position between theism* and deism*, such that God, although not quite the absentee landlord of deism, was limited in His power and perfections.²

Following Mill, the next major addition to the debate came with the development of a very self-confident variety of empiricism as the twentieth century dawned. Let us turn now to consider it.

Schools of Thought

In the early-to-mid twentieth century, it seemed as if final victory for empiricism might be at hand. The standard rationalist* objection to empiricism had for a long time been to point to examples of a apparent *a priori* knowledge, such as mathematics, challenge empiricists to explain such knowledge empirically, and then criticize them as they failed to do so.

But with the work of thinkers like Bertrand Russell*, Gottlob Frege*, and Ludwig Wittgenstein*, a good answer to this objection on behalf of empiricists began to seem possible. This came out of revolutionary developments in logic* and epistemology* that took place at the time. First, an analysis of mathematics using logic was deemed viable due to advances that had taken place in both disciplines. This analysis took the form of trying to derive all of mathematics from logic using only principles of logic. The general idea was to try and show that mathematics was really only logic in disguise.³

This was then combined with the thesis that all logical truths are tautologies—which roughly means that they are trivial truths consistent with every possible way the world might be.⁴ For example, take “P” to stand for any proposition. One well-known tautology is: “P or not P”. Plug in any proposition for “P”, such as “snow is white”, or “I live on Mars”, or “grass is always pink” and “P or not P”

comes out true. I live on Mars or it's not the case that I live on Mars (true!). Grass is always pink or it's not the case that grass is always pink (true!). And so on.

And if, it was thought, all logic is tautologous, and all mathematics is really just logic, then all mathematics is tautologous too. In that case, rationalists can claim all they want that mathematics is an example of *a priori* knowledge, because even if it is granted as knowledge, it has been shown to be of a trivial sort: just a bunch of tautologies, which say nothing about the world.⁵

This "logical empiricist" proposal was a technical, sophisticated articulation of Humean empiricism, in perhaps its most far-reaching form. Indeed, once this picture gained in currency, it became part of the project of logical empiricists*, who, like Hume before them, tried to "commit metaphysics to the flames", along with nearly all of traditional philosophy. The logical empiricists did this by adopting a strong version of an empiricist theory of meaning, of a very Humean sort, such that only those propositions which were empirically verifiable, or tautologies, were meaningful. Against such a position, most of the claims of traditional philosophy, never mind religion, were under threat. This was the empiricist project at its peak.⁶

In Current Scholarship

Contemporary philosophers of religion are still grappling with a key issue Hume raised in the *Dialogues*: the epistemic status of religious beliefs - in particular, about whether the doctrine of *evidentialism* applies. Evidentialism is the view that a belief is justified only if it is proportional to the evidence. Many hold that religious beliefs fall short of this standard, because religious beliefs are not self-evident, and there is not conclusive evidence in their favor. Hume and those he influenced have largely won that debate (as viewed by the wider philosophical community). In response, some argue that evidentialism does not apply to religious belief. Alvin Plantinga, and his defense of *reformed epistemology* is a central example of this. Reformed epistemology endeavors to give an account of how religious beliefs might be in some sense "warranted" despite not being justified in the evidentialist sense.⁷

For better or worse, philosophy of religion has declined somewhat as a central concern of contemporary western philosophy. This is to some extent a result of the social changes which have seen religion in general lose its place as a fundamental pillar of many cultures. It is also the consequence of changing fashions in philosophy, which, especially in the twentieth and twenty first centuries, became increasingly "scientific"—that is, concerned with being scientific in nature (broadly speaking). Since the dawn of the twentieth century, precision and clarity have become increasingly valued, as is technical work, much of which uses formal languages like logic and mathematics. Indeed, contemporary philosophy is sometimes criticized for being too dry and technical, to the point of being moribund.⁸

There is still a significant proportion of work conducted in the philosophy of religion, more, indeed, than there has ever been. This is because, like nearly all disciplines, philosophy as a whole has massively expanded its output by riding the wave of growth which modern civilization has produced on nearly all fronts. There are more philosophers and associated institutions than ever before. Nevertheless, in relative terms there has been a decline in status: the philosophy of religion does not dominate contemporary practice like it did in Hume's time.

Empiricism, however, remains in favor. As does work on broadly Humean themes in metaphysics* and epistemology* which are a central part of much cutting edge work today. Hume, in the form of Humeans, is still making major contributions to contemporary debates.

Key Questions

Synthesize: what position did John Stuart Mill defend?

Analyze: is the empiricist theory of meaning itself a tautology or empirically verifiable? Either way, is it meaningless?

Apply: can you think of another explanation for the relative decline in the centrality of the philosophy of religion to contemporary philosophy?

Metadata:

People John Stuart Mill, Bertrand Russell, Gottlob Frege, Ludwig Wittgenstein, David Hume
Places Britain, Europe
Times 1900s, 2000s
Themes Empiricism, Logical Empiricism

¹ John Stuart Mill, *Three Essays on Religion* (Bristol: Thoemmes Press, 1993), 176-95.

² *Ibid.*

³ Stephen P. Schwartz., *A Brief History of Analytic Philosophy* (London: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 46-101.

⁴ More exactly, tautologies are compounds which come out true regardless of what propositions it is composed of.

⁵ Schwartz, 50-62.

⁶ Schwartz, 64-70.

⁷ Peter Forrest, "The Epistemology of Religion", in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Stanford: Metaphysics Research Lab CSLI, 2014), <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2014/entries/religion-epistemology/>>, *passim*, but esp. §7.

⁸ Or contemporary philosophy of the dominant variety, at least. See Hans-Johann Glock, *What is Analytic Philosophy?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 1-4, & *passim*.

Module 11: Impact and Influence Today

“The *Dialogues* are currently recognized as both a literary and a philosophical masterpiece—some Hume scholars even suggest that they are his finest work. They are praised both for the wit and style of the writing and for their serious philosophical message, which is, in a single word, *empiricism*.”

Andrew Pyle, *Hume's Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*

Key Points

- The *Dialogues* is considered to be a masterpiece.
- Efforts are ongoing to try and respond to Hume's arguments, including by moving away from a reliance on natural theology* towards alternative epistemologies apparently more hospitable to religious belief.
- One such effort has been to develop a response to criticisms of the argument from design.*

Position

The *Dialogues* serves many functions today. It stands, in its own right, as a *tour de force* of philosophical argument, and as a work of enormous literary significance. It also contains many canonical statements of arguments which are still debated in one form or another today. That this is so is a testament to Hume's genius, and demonstrates the extent to which he was ahead of his time,

The *Dialogues* is a seminal work which looks destined to achieve even greater longevity as a classic on attempts to justify belief in God. The debates that it provoked in the period after its publication laid the groundwork for major discoveries which built the modern world, such as Darwin's theory of evolution, and the rise to dominance in human society of empirical methods of knowledge gathering. And the Humean empiricist principles upon which the *Dialogues* is based remain of central interest to philosophers working at the leading edge of the discipline today.

And, as the quote by Andrew Pyle at the beginning of this module states, if one word can sum up Hume's legacy, the “empiricism” is it; and the *Dialogues* exemplifies Hume's commitment to the doctrine, and the philosophical fruits the approach can bear.

Interaction

Modern theists, deists, and others who tend to reject Hume's views on religion have moved the debate on in important ways. In particular, philosophers of religion like Alvin Plantinga* have produced sophisticated epistemologies in order to respond to critiques such as Hume's.

For example, a current topic of significant interest which Hume touches on in the *Dialogues* is the question of the epistemic status of religious beliefs.* One popular avenue of response to objections like Hume's to the theistic position is to try and move the debate out with the terms of natural theology, which have not proven helpful in the eyes of many theists, and back to questions about the rationality of faith and other forms of belief which don't seem directly supported by rational argument. One important focus of much discussion in the contemporary philosophy of religion literature has been on reformed epistemology, which endeavors to articulate a sense in which religious beliefs are “warranted” even if they are not justified in the sense in which Hume thought they weren't.¹ In exploring such approaches, theists appear to be tacitly admitting that the old concerns of revealed theologians were justified. Namely, that for theism, and related positions, trying to win on the terms of natural theology was not a prudent move.

It remains to be seen how successful this work will be.²

The Continuing Debate

The debate on reformed epistemology and related approaches in the epistemology of religion is complex. But there have been more straightforward attempts to counter Hume's arguments too.

For example, one way to defend the argument from design is to point to the “fine-tuning” that appears in the laws of nature. If gravity, for example, were slightly stronger, or slightly weaker, then there could no be stars, planets, and thus life. And many laws of nature seem to be “just right” like this. Proponents of this fine-tuning argument then make the classic move: challenge their opponent to come up with a “natural” explanation of this fine-tuning, and in the absence of a plausible one say that appeal to a designer best explains the fine-tuning.

There is some merit in this line of thought, although at best it seems to support a form of deism. Yet Hume’s arguments in the *Dialogues* still have purchase here. Why infer a designer from apparent design, when infinite time and chance can do the rest? Once one allows infinite time, then every possibility might ultimately be realized, including our universe. Also, arguments like the argument from evil are simply left untouched by this fine-tuning response. When assessing the complex debate concerning the existence of God, it is important to do so holistically. The cut and thrust of one argument is not enough to settle the issue, one must see the wider debate play out. This, indeed, is something that the *Dialogues* itself exemplifies.

Key Questions

Synthesize: what is the best way to sum up Hume’s legacy?

Analyze: how plausible is the claim that natural theology is not the best way to defend belief in God?

Apply: what is the best example you can come up with to *support* the fine-tuning argument?

Metadata:

People Alvin Plantinga, David Hume

Places Britain, Europe

Times 2000s

Themes Empiricism, Natural Belief, Argument From Design, Fine-Tuning Argument, Empirical Justification, *A Priori* Justification, Revealed Theology, Natural Theology, Reformed Epistemology

¹ See Peter Forrest, "The Epistemology of Religion", in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Stanford: Metaphysics Research Lab CSLI, 2014),

<<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2014/entries/religion-epistemology/>>. §7.

² See *ibid*, *passim*.

Module 12: Where Next?

“It’s often said that Britain’s church congregations are shrinking, but that doesn’t come close to expressing the scale of the [decline]. Every ten years the census spells out the situation in detail: between 2001 and 2011 the number of Christians born in Britain fell by 5.3 million — about 10,000 a week. If that rate of decline continues, the mission of St Augustine to the English, together with that of the Irish saints to the Scots, will come to an end in 2067.”

Damian Thompson, *The Spectator*

Key Points

- The *Dialogues* will remain a classic text for some time to come.
- Many of its arguments retain their relevance.
- The *Dialogues* is arguably the best work by the Anglophone world’s greatest ever philosopher.

Potential

In the immediate future, it seems likely that the text will continue to occupy its place as a *locus classicus* in the philosophy of religion specifically, and philosophy more generally. One of the main reasons for this is that although nearly 250 years have passed since its publication, decisive refutations of many of its central contentions have yet to be achieved. Thus, the influence of the *Dialogues* is of the most deserving sort: the work remains relevant because its arguments still stand.¹

The ball, then, is in the court of those who wish to knock Hume’s arguments down, and although there is ongoing work in the philosophy of religion towards that end, it should be noted that the opinion of the wider philosophical community is that Hume was essentially correct in his central contentions in the *Dialogues*.² It is unusual for philosophers to reach a consensus, or even a majority opinion on any matter of philosophical interest, so the degree of agreement regarding the essentials of Hume’s conclusion is striking: nearly three quarters of contemporary philosophers identify as atheists.³ There is no other major position in

contemporary philosophy which produces such widespread agreement.⁴ In short, defenders of belief in God appear to be losing the argument.

Future Directions

Given the relative decline in the philosophy of religion, relative to its centrality to the academy at least, the most promising future lines of enquiry are certainly those which bear the name “Humean” in contemporary metaphysics* and epistemology.* Such views are stereotypically strongly empiricist in character, and express suspicion towards obscure metaphysical posits. Such metaphysical posits are found increasingly frequently in contemporary philosophy, since the resurgence in metaphysics that began in the 1970s (and continues).⁵

For example, one Humean preoccupation is with the question of whether not distinct concrete entities (roughly: things that exist in time and space) can stand in necessary connections to one another. Examples of variations of this claim abound in classical metaphysics: God necessarily being the cause of the universe is one such claim pertinent to our discussion, but there are many others. And such claims of “necessary connections” have been put to a wide variety of uses in contemporary metaphysics: to capture the relationship between mind and body, for example. But Humeans are suspicious of such posits, for, following Hume, who held that “necessity” was a relation that held only between ideas in our minds, Humeans hold that these necessary connections lack proper empirical support, and are too strongly *a priori* in character.

This general debate about necessary connections between distinct concrete entities is not likely to be resolved in the near future.

Further strides are also being made in trying to develop naturalistic explanations of the prevalence of religious belief. Daniel Dennett, for example, has proposed that religious belief arises through a kind of evolutionary process acting on ideas (as opposed to genes).⁶ Dennett is one member of a group sometimes known as the “new atheists”, a loose connection of strident atheists who have put forward confident criticisms of religious belief and its influence on society.⁷

Summary

Students should read the *Dialogues* because it is one of the great classic works of modern philosophy. The *Dialogues* contains canonical statements of central arguments concerning God's existence, and revealed versus natural theology, many of which remain highly relevant today.

The work made contributions to the debate on God's existence, and how that existence should be justified, which were ahead of their time and, ultimately, had an impact on the overall debate which is possibly unmatched. The subtle and sophisticated way in which *Dialogues* critiqued orthodox belief in God set the standards for the debate for a long time; and Hume's criticism of the argument from design and the cosmological argument are even considered by some to amount to a refutation.⁸ Moreover, the *Dialogues* remains an exemplification of the enlightenment ideals of civil rational inquiry into even the most difficult of subjects.

Hume's overall marshalling of the debate is of a standard only a philosopher of his stature could achieve. Many consider him to be the greatest philosopher ever to have written in English, and some consider the *Dialogues* to be his finest work. If such considerations are correct, then the *Dialogues* is the greatest philosophical work ever to have been written in English. One might debate such an assertion, of course, for there are many candidates which compete for that accolade. But that the *Dialogues* is one of those candidates demonstrates that it deserves its place in the modern philosophical canon.

Key Questions

Synthesize: what proportion of contemporary philosophers identify as theists?

Analyze: what are Humeans suspicious of in contemporary metaphysics?

Apply: how well do you think the enlightenment ideals exemplified in the *Dialogues* are represented in contemporary public discourse?

Metadata:

People	David Hume
Places	Britain, Europe
Times	2000s
Themes	Empiricism, Revealed Theology, Natural Theology, Atheism, Humeanism,

¹ Or more precisely: many of the *Dialogues*' arguments still stand in their essential form. The debate has of course moved on significantly since Hume's time.

² David Bourget, and David J. Chalmers, "What do philosophers believe?" *Philosophical Studies* 170 (2014): 470.

³ Ibid, 465-500.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ See Stephen P. Schwartz., *A Brief History of Analytic Philosophy* (London: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 201-238.

⁶ See Daniel Dennett, *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon* (London: Penguin, 2006).

⁷ See James E. Taylor, "The New Atheists", in *The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, eds. J. Fieser and B. Dowden (2015), < <http://www.iep.utm.edu/n-atheis/>>.

⁸ See Simon Blackburn, interview by Nigel Warburton, *fivebooks.com*, July 8th, 2013, <<http://fivebooks.com/interviews/simon-blackburn-on-david-hume>>.

GLOSSARIES

Glossary of Terms

Abrahamic monotheism: monotheistic religions which trace their origin to the prophet Abraham. Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are the three main variants of Abrahamic monotheism. See also *monotheism*.

Advocate: the highest class of lawyer in Scots law. Equivalent to a barrister in English law.

Ad hominem: literally “to the man”. A kind of fallacy of reasoning whereby one contends that a person’s arguments should be rejected in virtue of some feature of the arguer rather than some feature of the argument.

Agnostic: an adherent of agnosticism. See *agnosticism*.

Agnosticism: the view that one cannot know whether God does, or does not, exist.

Argument from evil: also known as the “problem of evil”. In simple form, the argument proceeds as follows. God is omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent. If God is omnipotent, then he can eliminate evil wherever he finds it. If God is omniscient, then he knows where all evil is. If God is omnibenevolent, then he desires to eliminate all evil. Thus, if God exists, there can be no evil in the world. There is evil in the world. Thus, God does not exist. See also *omnipotent; omniscient; omnibenevolent*.

Argument from design: also known as the “teleological argument”. In its simplest form, the argument proceeds as follows. The universe appears designed. If the universe appears designed, then the universe is designed. If the universe is designed, then the universe had a designer. If the universe had a designer, then that designer is God. Thus, there is a God.

A posteriori justification: see *empirical justification*.

A priori justification: see *empirical justification*.

Atheism: the view that God does not exist, or lacks the belief that God exists. See *theism*.

Atheist: an adherent of atheism. See *atheism*.

British Empiricism: a powerful philosophical school which arose in Britain during the Enlightenment. The school held that the source of knowledge is sensory experience, and denied such things as the existence of innate ideas. See also *empiricism*.

Calvinist: an adherent or example of Calvinism. Calvinism is a major variant of Protestantism, based on the work of John Calvin (1509-1564) and other protestant theologians of the Reformation era. (The Reformation was the schism that occurred in western Christianity in the sixteenth century which created Protestantism.) Calvinism is characterized by an austere form of worship which rejects the typical adornments and accompaniments of Catholic worship. Thus, to describe *x* as “Calvinist” is often taken to imply that *x* is severe, rigid, and lacking in color and humor.

Church of Scotland: is Protestant and Presbyterian, and is the established church of Scotland.

Cosmological argument: a simple version of the argument proceeds as follows. The universe has a cause. That cause cannot be contingent. If that cause cannot be contingent then it must be a necessary. The only necessary entity is God. Thus, God exists.

Culture wars: the ongoing contest, particularly in the Anglophone world, between two sets of cultural values, often characterized as traditional or conservative versus progressive or liberal. The “culture wars” is a catch-all term which can be used to denote many disputes, in academia, politics, or wider society.

Darwinian revolution: see *Charles Darwin*.

Deism: Deists view God as the architect of the universe. According to deism, God is the creator of the universe, but it runs itself perfectly in His absence, and He does not interfere in that universe, including the events of human history. Deism was perhaps the most intellectually respectable theological position for scholars to take in the Enlightenment period. There has been some debate about the compatibility of deism and Christianity. See also *theism*.

Deist: an adherent of deism. see *deism*.

Dialogue: a kind of play in which different characters debate each other. Many works of philosophy, particularly ancient works, are written as dialogues.

Dialectic: the term “dialectic” is broadly synonymous with “debate”.

Enlightenment: that period from the early seventeenth century to the late eighteenth century when a series of major revolutions took place in Europe. This involved dramatic progress in science and philosophy, which drove the associated changes in wider society. Sometimes known as the “Age of Reason”, the Enlightenment is often characterized as the period when rational inquiry came to

dominate the workings of European societies, overthrowing superstition and religious belief.

Empirical justification: to justify a proposition empirically, one justifies it by appeal to sensory experience. The term "*a posteriori*" is often used in place of "empirical", and denotes one half of the *a posteriori/a priori* distinction, which distinguishes two kinds of knowledge. *A posteriori* roughly means "after experience" and *a priori* "before experience". Mathematics is often taken to be the canonical example of *a priori* knowledge. For example, " $2 \times 6 = 12$ " seems knowable independently of experience, i.e. *a priori*, just by using one's faculty of reason. Whereas, say, "water is H_2O " does not seem knowable independently of experience. Instead, the chemist Henry Cavendish had to run an experiment to discover the fact—thereby using sensory experience to justify the proposition that water is H_2O . Thus "water is H_2O " is *a posteriori*.

Empiricism: is either a theory of meaning, or knowledge. The empiricist theory of knowledge is the view that the ultimate source of all knowledge is sensory experience. In contrast, rationalism denies this, instead holding that we gain at least some knowledge independently of sensory experience, with mathematics being rationalist's favorite example. The debate between empiricists and rationalists is a central philosophical dispute of the modern period. The empiricist theory of meaning, in its simplest form, is the view that a statement is meaningful if and only if it is a statement which reports a sensory experience, or an idea built out of sensory experiences. See also *empirical justification*.

Epistemology: the study of knowledge; its nature, its source, its structure, and its limits.

Fideism: is the view that to demand reasons in support of a religious belief which is held on the basis of faith—i.e. a special kind of believing in the absence of reason—is simply to demand something which is irrelevant.

Fideist: see *fideism*.

Intelligent design hypothesis: is a contemporary version of the argument from design. See also *argument from design*.

Intelligentsia: the class of individuals in a society who, through their mental labor, shape that society. In modern societies, the intelligentsia are largely constituted by academics, politicians, journalists, some business figures, and other educated members of society who contribute to the debates of the day.

Logic: the study of reason. A logic is a codification of rules of inference and truth conditions for a language.

Metaphysics: the study of the ultimate features of reality, such as time, space, events, objects, properties, relations, and modality.

Natural religion: see *natural theology*.

Natural theology: is the doctrine that the logical claims should be justified by rational argument as opposed to an appeal to authority. There are two kinds of "natural theology", either justifying the logical claims *a priori*, or *a posteriori*. Natural theology is to be distinguished from "revealed theology" which endeavors to justify the logical claims by an appeal to authority, either special experiences (revelations) or texts. Examining natural theology forms a major part of the *Dialogues* (hence 'natural religion' in the title). See also *empirical justification*.

Rationalism: see *empiricism*.

Revealed theology: see *natural theology*.

Monotheism: belief in a single god. See also *Abrahamic monotheism*.

Omnibenevolent: perfectly good. If x is omnibenevolent, then x has all moral perfections and no moral failings (to the extent that is logically possible).

Omnipotent: all powerful. If x is omnipotent, then there is nothing that x cannot do. It is usually granted that this only includes that which is logically possible. So, for example, an omnipotent God could not create a stone heavier than He could lift, or make it true that $2+2=34$, or that triangles have four sides.

Omniscient: all knowing. If x is omniscient, then there is nothing that can be known which isn't known by x .

Ontology: the study of what exists.

Problem of evil: see *argument from evil*.

Skeptic: someone who adheres to skepticism. See *skepticism*.

Skepticism: the doctrine that knowledge of a certain subject matter is possible.

Socratic method: also known as the "elenctic method", is the process of engaging in logic-governed examination of a particular belief, or theory through a process of question and answer. The method is named after its most famous exponent, Socrates, who practices the method as a character in the works of Plato. Plato's many works take the form of a dialogue, and Socrates appears frequently therein, critically examining the beliefs of the other characters, asking after the nature of such things as beauty, truth and justice.

Succès de scandale: French for “success from scandal”. Many successes are the result of scandal, particularly when it comes to selling things, as scandal attracts attention. Hence the phrase “no such thing as bad publicity”.

Theism: Theists believe that God is the omnipotent, omniscient, omnibenevolent, eternal, creator/sustainer of the universe, who intervenes directly in human affairs.

Theist: an adherent of theism. See *theism*.

Traditionalism: the doctrine that any change which threatens long-standing values and social structures should be resisted.

People Mentioned in the Text

George Berkeley (1685–1753) is best known for his defense of idealism, the thesis that all that exists are minds and the ideas in them. His most famous works are *Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge* (1710), and *Three Dialogues between Hylas and Philonous* (1713).

Cleanthes one of the three main characters in the *Dialogues*. In many respects Cleanthes represents liberal theology, defending empiricist natural theology, and anthropomorphism about God. Possibly named after Cleanthes of Assos (c. 331–232 BCE).

Charles Darwin (1809–1882): British naturalist and geologist, who made revolutionary contributions to biology by proposing the theory of evolution by natural selection. His most famous work is *On the Origin of Species* (1859).

Demea one of the three main characters in the *Dialogues*. In many respects, Demea represents conservative theology, in particular by defending revealed theology.

Epicurus (341–270 BCE) had a wide ranging philosophy involving contributions to ethics, empiricist epistemology, and materialism. Sadly, the only written record we have of his views are in three “letters” that he wrote to his followers, reproduced in Diogenes Laertius' *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, from the third century BCE.

Adam Ferguson (1723–1816) was a moral philosopher and historian often credited with being the father of modern sociology. His most famous work is *An Essay on the History of Civil Society* (1767).

Robert Fitzroy (1805–1865) pioneering meteorologist, hydrographer, and long-standing officer in the Royal Navy, Fitzroy is perhaps best known for his journey with Charles Darwin aboard HMS *Beagle* which led Darwin to form his famous ideas on evolution.

Gottlob Frege (1848–1925) German mathematician and logician who is often considered to be one of the founders of the school of analytic philosophy. His best known work is *Begriffsschrift, eine der arithmetischen nachgebildete Formelsprache des reinen Denkens* (1879).

Edward Gibbon (1737–1794) famous historian, best known for his great work: *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776).

Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679) was a major philosopher in the early modern period. Known today primarily for his contributions to political philosophy, in his day his

controversial materialism and atheism were also much discussed. His magnum opus is *Leviathan* (1651).

Francis Hutcheson (1694–1746) is known primarily for his work on moral philosophy and aesthetics. His more notable works include: *An Inquiry into the Original of our Ideas of Beauty and Virtue* (1725), and *A System of Moral Philosophy* (1755).

Thomas Henry Huxley (1825–1895) English biologist and public intellectual perhaps best known for his forceful defense of Darwin's ideas. His most famous work is *Evidence as to Man's place in Nature* (1863).

Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) German philosopher of major importance, Kant is considered by some to be the most important philosopher of the modern period. His most famous work is the *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781).

John Locke (1632–1704) is often viewed as being the founder of the school of British empiricism. His *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1689) is considered as one of the first, and most significant defenses of empiricism.

Philo one of the three main characters of the *Dialogues*. Philo is the sceptic who many see as the character closest to expressing Hume's views; although whether this is the case is controversial. Possibly named after Philo of Larissa (c. 154 – 84 BCE).

Alvin Plantinga (b. 1932) American philosopher best known for his contributions to epistemology and philosophy of religion. His works include *God and Other Minds* (1967), *The Nature of Necessity* (1974), and *Warranted Christian Belief* (2000).

Allan Ramsay (1713–1784) a famous Scottish painter, known for his portraits, and friend of David Hume.

Bertrand Russell (1872–1970) British philosopher regarded as one of the founding fathers of the school of analytic philosophy. His *Principia Mathematica* (1910) is considered a foundational work of the analytic tradition.

Thomas Reid (1710–1796) made major contributions to epistemology, philosophy of perception, the debate about free will, and philosophical methodology—Reid is a leading figure of the “commonsense” school. His major works include: *An Inquiry Into the Human Mind on the Principles of Common Sense* (1764), and *Essays on the Active Powers of Man* (1788).

Adam Smith (1723–1790) is the moral philosopher generally credited as the father of modern economics. His two most famous works are: *The Theory of Moral*

Sentiments (1759), and *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (1776).

Baruch Spinoza (1632–1677) a major philosopher of the early modern period. Known for his contributions to metaphysics and the philosophy of religion. Famous works include: *Ethics* (1677), and *Theological-Political Treatise* (1670).

Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889–1951) Austrian philosopher who worked in Britain, making major contributions to the development of the school of analytic philosophy. His most famous works are the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1921), and *Philosophical Investigations* (1953).

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