[A review of] Reading Hume's Dialogues: 
A Veneration for True Religion

Kevin Schilbrack

Reading Hume’s Dialogues: A Veneration for True Religion by William Lad Sessions, 

This is the first book length commentary on David Hume's Dialogues concerning Natural Religion. It is welcome in the first place simply because William Lad Sessions is a meticulous reader, and his observations are consistently insightful and profitable. But the approach of this book is distinctive, moreover, in that it pursues what Sessions calls an internal reading of the Dialogues. "External" interpretations use tools drawn from outside the text itself. They are external, for example, in that they address some contemporary philosophical question that was not Hume’s, taking the form of what Sessions calls "mining operations" that extract pithy propositions or argumentative ore while ignoring the literary matrix from which they arise. Or they may be external in the sense that they read the Dialogues in terms of some other extratextual context, such as Hume's life and interests, or eighteenth-century intellectual movements, or the history of skepticism. In contrast, Sessions pursues an internal reading that resolutely interprets the text on its own terms, tracing the connections between the individual parts of Hume’s book and supposing (defeasibly) that the work forms a unity in which nothing is extraneous. By taking this approach, Sessions gives attention not only to the arguments made by the characters, but also to "seeing how what a character says connects with what he and other agents do, with how he speaks and acts, with the dramatic setting, personal relationships, and so on" (3). This is an approach, in other words, that takes the literary form of the dialogue seriously and refuses to reduce Hume’s work to a list of arguments that might be put better by being less literary.

With this agenda, Sessions is careful and exhaustive. He not only comment on each individual paragraph of the Dialogues, but also pays attention to often overlooked parts such as the preface, the title, and the roles of Pamphilus and Hermippus. Sessions will even focus on a mentioned smile or on individual words or phrases. Here is an example. Noticing that the phrase "on a sudden" appears twice in the dialogues, Sessions points out that Philo once makes an
announcement "on a sudden" but then later Cleanthes is unable to respond "on a sudden."
"Here is the contrast between their characters in a nutshell: Philo rushes in where Cleanthes
fears to tell" (245, n. 1). Sessions apparently sometimes fears that he is actually too attentive to
detail, since he moves many speculations to footnotes and, at one spot, tells readers that they
can jump ahead a few paragraphs if his point seems picayune.

Overall, Sessions is a judicious guide to the flow of the interaction between the characters.
Perhaps he misfires only when he reads Demea's admittedly cross and obtuse contributions to
the dialogues as "lashing out with threats," and then reads Philo and Cleanthes as ignoring
Demea's "menace" (63-4). In this vein, Sessions claims that when Demea objects that
Cleanthes' anthropomorphism is "dangerous," Demea at least implicitly means that it is
dangerous to Demea and since he means to retaliate, this is "a clear threat to the one who
threatens him" (89). Perhaps Sessions' strongest claim of this sort is that when Demea says
that he prefers an a priori argument for God's existence because it "cuts off" doubt, Sessions
sees malevolence in this choice of verb: "The martial and potentially violent connotations of
'cuts off' are significant and yield insight into Demea's character. Demea is willing, should
reason fail, to resort to threat and violence in support of what he regards as true religion" (249,
n. 10). The threat of violence seems overstated, though this is not to deny that Sessions has
Demea pegged exactly when he says that "Demea neither comprehends nor experiences equal
friendship; all his personal relations are implicitly conflicts of will, struggles to control others or to
resist their efforts at controlling him" and that "Demea's fearful natural religious piety issues in a
coercive, hierarchical, authoritarian church that chiefly values 'submission and self-diffidence' in
its members" (228, 223).

In my judgment, Sessions' internal reading, his focus on the literary form of the dialogues,
brings two main benefits. First, it turns attention away from the legitimate but tired question of
which of the characters represents Hume's mouthpiece. When one brackets this question, the
dialogues appear much less didactic: they are instead an artful attempt to embody a living
discussion on the issue of natural religion and thereby to stimulate thoughtful reflection in
readers on how best to live it. As Sessions puts it, "Perhaps Hume genuinely thought that
natural religion was so deeply perplexing, so ultimately unfathomable by human thought, that
rather than enforcing his own views on the subject he chiefly wanted to stimulate thought on the
part of his readers. Perhaps Hume wanted an intelligent reader not so much to agree or
disagree with any of the characters as rather to think for herself about these hard subjects"
(212). In this way, Sessions presents the "message" of the dialogues as more open-ended and
more dialogical.

The second benefit of Sessions' approach is that, as Sessions makes clear, natural religion for
Hume includes much more than the design argument--in fact, more than any set of beliefs. In
the Dialogues, natural religion has both a theoretical and a practical dimension: it consists of
both natural theology \textit{and} natural piety, where the latter refers to the practices and attitudes of
true religion. Here Philo and Cleanthes agree with each other, against Demea, for they agree
that true piety permits an openness to inquiry and merely probable arguments. In this light,
Sessions argues that Philo's reversal in Part 12 when he confesses his embrace of the design
argument is explained best not as subterfuge or irony but rather as an honest confession of his
beliefs, made possible by the exit in Part 11 of Demea and his authoritarian piety. Thus Philo
does not dissemble when he and Cleanthes agree that true religion should "regulate the heart of
men, regulate their conduct, infuse the spirit of temperance, order, and obedience." This shared
sense of true piety is what brings Cleanthes and Philo together as friends and this is why true
religion is something for which Philo--of all people--expresses veneration.