

# HUME, BOLINGBROKE AND VOLTAIRE: *DIALOGUES* *CONCERNING NATURAL RELIGION*, PART XII<sup>1</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

Part XII of the *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion* offers to the reader a wide range of philosophical positions, depending also on the stratification of the text, which underwent various revisions by the author. Some of Hume's manuscript interventions can be dated, as M.A. Stewart has shown, but their context has not been investigated yet. In particular, the revision of 1757 has a secret source (Bolingbroke) that allows Hume to discuss the possibility of a deistic alternative to atheism and Christian theism. But deism (or philosophical theism) could not represent a real solution for Hume: while defending himself under that cloak in Part XII, he actually arrives at far more radical conclusions. As for the revision of 1776, it bears the mark of the recent debates following the publication of Baron d'Holbach's *Système de la nature*. Hume is here close to Voltaire in arguing that the division between atheism and deism (or philosophical theism) can be recomposed, but only if the concept of God is resolved into that of the mere existence of an eternal order of things – a point that most atheists would have admitted without any scruple.

## KEYWORDS

Atheism – Bolingbroke – Deism – *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion* – God – Pierre Bayle – David Hume – Evil – Theism – Voltaire

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Part XII of the *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion* is one of the most controversial pieces of philosophy of Hume's entire production. And it is certainly an enigmatic composition, tormented by readers but first and foremost by Hume himself, who intervened many times on the text with various revisions, additions and deletions (still visible on the autograph manuscript) until shortly before his death<sup>2</sup>. These are the pages in which Philo, the character who bears most – at least quantitatively – of the philosophical weight of the *Dialogues*, abruptly backs off and seems to concede to his rival Cleanthes almost all that he could require. Indeed, after having argued decisively throughout the eleven previous parts of the text the inanity of any attempt to give a solid philosophical foundation to “natural religion” (i.e., rational theology, as opposed to positive theology based on revelation), Philo becomes a last-minute “experimental theist”, if not a Christian fideist, and subscribes to a reduced variant of the *design* argument. In practice: he seems to forget almost everything he had said before. Hume himself, writing to his publisher Strahan in June 1776, says, speaking of Philo, that he eventually surrenders, or rather, that he “gives up the argument”, but not before advancing “several topics, which will give umbrage, and will be deemed very bold and free, as well as much out of the common road”<sup>3</sup>.

Thus, in Hume's words, the “argument” of the *Dialogues* and the topics supposed to be deemed “very bold and free” and “out of the common road” are to be found in the first eleven parts, while Part XII should be considered as an appeasing conclusion, in which Philo declares that “he was only amusing himself by all these cavils”<sup>4</sup>. But in Part XII there is also something else: Philo

2 For the history of the manuscript of the *Dialogues* (Edinburgh, NLS, ms. 22162 [<https://davidhume.org/texts/d/0/>]), see M.A. Stewart, *The Dating of Hume's Manuscripts*, in P. Wood, *The Scottish Enlightenment: Essays in Reinterpretation* (University of Rochester Press, 2000), p. 267-314. The quotations from the printed version are taken from D. Hume, *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion*, ed. by N. Kemp Smith, Edinburgh, T. Nelson, 1947 [= KS], text available online in a revised version by P. Millican [<https://davidhume.org/texts/d/full/>].

3 See D. Hume to W. Strahan, 8 June 1776, in *The Letters of David Hume*, 2 vols. ed. by J.Y.T. Greig, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1932, vol. II, p. 323.

4 It should be noted, however, that Philo's recantation begins to manifest itself at the end of Part X: “In many views of the universe, and of its parts, particularly the latter, the beauty and fitness of final causes strike us with such irresistible force, that all objections appear (what I believe they really are) mere cavils and sophisms; nor can we then imagine how it was ever possible for us to repose any weight on them” (KS 202). It is not to be excluded that Hume actually had this passage in mind when writing to Strahan, perhaps associating it with a line of Cleanthes in Part XI on Philo *amusing himself* (but in a different sense: “Believe me, Demea;

maintains, on the one hand, that an agreement between Cleanthes (the “philosophical theist”) and himself (the “philosophical sceptic”) is possible if “the whole of natural theology” is reduced to the simple thesis of a “remote analogy” between the mind of God and that of man; on the other hand, more generally, he argues that the entire debate between atheists and theists on the existence of God is a mere “verbal dispute” and as such insoluble, and thus substantially futile<sup>5</sup>. But these are philosophical conclusions, and do not at all resemble the modest capitulation of a sceptic having suddenly discovered himself to be a believer. It follows that the report that Hume communicates to Strahan does not correspond entirely to the substance of Part XII, at least in its final version<sup>6</sup>. And this impression, as we shall see, will be confirmed by many other clues.

Before broaching these, however, we need to clear the ground of a number of issues that the fideistic utterances of Philo have raised from the date of their publication. It is useless to ask whether they are, or are not, representative of the “true” Hume (as if there somewhere existed another Hume, different from the one who wrote his texts); whether Philo’s recantation is “sincere” or not; whether Hume was a theist, a deist, a sceptic or atheist, etc. Even these, perhaps, are basically “verbal disputes”. However, they are also questions that cannot simply be dismissed: sooner or later they always come to the surface, as happens perhaps with many other verbal disputes. Be they “verbal” or not, if readers continue to discuss them, it is perhaps because, for some reason, they are still worthy of discussion (at one point Hume claims, or pretends to claim, that even the dispute between sceptics and dogmatists is merely “verbal”)<sup>7</sup>.

your friend Philo, from the beginning, *has been amusing himself at both our expence*, and it must be confessed, that the injudicious reasoning of our vulgar theology has given him but too just a handle of ridicule” – KS 212). On scepticism as a kind of “philosophical amusement”, see also Hume’s *Letter of a Gentleman* (1745): “Tis evident, that so extravagant a Doubt as that which Scepticism may seem to recommend, by destroying *every Thing*, really affects *nothing*, and was never intended to be understood *seriously*, but was meant as a *mere* Philosophical Amusement, or Trial of *Wit* and *Subtilty*”.

<sup>5</sup> See respectively KS 227 and KS 218.

<sup>6</sup> It should be remembered here that Hume had tried since 1751 to mitigate the impact of the *Dialogues*, even claiming that Cleanthes was “the hero” of the work, and declaring that “any propensity you may imagine I have to the other side crept in upon me against my will”. See Hume to Elliot of Minto, March 1751, in *Letters*, I, p. 71.

<sup>7</sup> The reduction of many discussions on single definitions (or oppositional pairs) to “verbal disputes” is characteristic of Hume, as Emilio Mazza pointed out to me. I would like to thank him here for the following references (and for many other suggestions): *Treatise*, 1.4 .6.21; SBN

We need to answer the following questions:

1) first, what is the relationship between Part XII and the eleven preceding parts, since it is Hume himself who opposes them in the aforementioned letter to Strahan.

2) Secondly, leaving out all that is high (or low) rhetoric, what is Philo's position in Part XII, or, rather, what are *the* positions that are exhibited there, what are their sources and to which moment of the composition of the manuscript text do they belong? In particular, the consideration of the successive states, or layers, of the text is decisive for understanding Part XII, and an effort to distinguish these layers conceptually has not yet been made<sup>8</sup>.

3) Finally, it should be made clear whether the "definitive" conclusion of the *Dialogues*, i.e. the final state of Part XII as published in the 1779 edition, is a purely literary-philosophical construction, or whether it is not also a historical diagnosis, not only on theism, but above all on the outcome of the theist's

262: on the notion of personal identity; *Of the Dignity or Meanness of Human Nature*, in *Essays*, ed. Miller, p. 81, 84, on "dignity or misery" of human nature; *Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*, 8.22-3; SBN 94-5: on freedom and necessity; *Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals*, Ap.3.9n.64; SBN 307-8n.64: on "natural" and "artificial" virtues; *ibid.* 9.4; SBN 270-1: on "benevolence" and "self-love"; *ibid.* 3.19, Ap.3.9n.64, SBN 191, 307-8n.64: on reason in animals; and finally *Dialogues*, Pt. XII, KS 219, on dogmatic and sceptical philosophy.

8 For clarity, we list here (following Stewart, *Dating*, cit.) the three main additions to Part XII (AA, BB and XX) that will be discussed later, and the corresponding pages in Kemp Smith's edition. The first two abbreviations are taken from Hume's original manuscript, the third is coined here for want of a better one:

(AA) ca. 1757, see ms. p. 87 [<https://davidhume.org/assets/img/87.jpg>]. The insertion point in the main text is referred to by the abbreviation "AA" on p. 79 [[../img/79.jpg](https://davidhume.org/assets/img/79.jpg)]; this text appears as a footnote in the first printed edition (= KS 219, note).

(BB) ca. 1776, see ms. p. 87-88 [<https://davidhume.org/assets/img/87.jpg> and [../img/88.jpg](https://davidhume.org/assets/img/88.jpg)]. This addition is referred to in the text by the abbreviation "BB" on p. 79 (= KS 217-8, from "All men of sound reason [...]" to "[...] cure yourself of your animosity" [[../img/79.jpg](https://davidhume.org/assets/img/79.jpg)]).

(XX) ca. 1757. The new text begins with the words "To Know God" (underlined) on p. 84 of the manuscript [<https://davidhume.org/assets/img/84.jpg>], then continues through p. 85-86 [[../img/85.jpg](https://davidhume.org/assets/img/85.jpg) and [../img/86.jpg](https://davidhume.org/assets/img/86.jpg)]. This addition is composed of three parts: the first one (KS 226-7, from "To Know God is [...]" to "[...] such extraordinary subjects") was already present in the margin of the first version of the text and has been later deleted and then restored at the beginning of p. 85; the second (KS 227-8, from "If the whole of natural theology [...]" to "[...] instruction of his pupil" [[../img/85.jpg](https://davidhume.org/assets/img/85.jpg)]) is dated to 1757 by Stewart on the basis of its spelling; the third (KS 228, from "Cleanthes and Philo pursu'd [...]" to "[...] nearer to the truth. Finis" [[../img/86.jpg](https://davidhume.org/assets/img/86.jpg)]) reproduces the last lines of the first version of the *Dialogues*, deleted on p. 84 to make room for the new insertion and then reinserted at the end.

battle against atheism – in Great-Britain but also in France, where Baron d’Holbach had published his *Système de la nature* in 1770.

## I

The first eleven parts of the *Dialogues* have been more than sufficient for Hume to resolve the question of the existence of God, at least in the terms in which it was discussed in early-modern times (from Bayle onwards). From this point of view, the *Dialogues* end at a precise point: paragraph 17 of Part XI. Here Philo concludes decisively that, if at least one case of moral evil is given in the universe, the existence of a first cause endowed with goodness becomes impossible. This is basically the proof of God’s non-existence first advanced by Bayle and later adopted by Collins and in more or less equivalent terms by a large number of eighteenth-century atheists. The proof, in Philo’s version, is based on a dilemma: either God is the first cause of the universe, and therefore he is also the cause of evil, or God is not the first cause and therefore there is an infinite regress of causes in the universe. In both cases, the natural conclusion of Philo’s argument is atheism (as Bayle had pointed out, a God which is the cause of evil is not a God). But this obvious consequence is prudently replaced in the autograph manuscript of the *Dialogues* (and in the 1779 printed edition) by six low dashes, as if the reader were invited to draw his own conclusions<sup>9</sup>.

Philo’s implicit position is “atheistic”, not “sceptical” (unless we consider the two terms to be substantially synonymous, as Hume does in the *Dialogues*)<sup>10</sup>. The existence of God is indeed denied without any form of suspension of judgment or *asthenia*, and this denial is presented as a necessary conclusion drawn from the principle of causality<sup>11</sup>. Here Philo shows in full light his most

9 “So long as there is any vice at all in the universe, it will very much puzzle you Anthropomorphites, how to account for it. You must assign a cause for it, without having recourse to the first cause. But as every effect must have a cause, and that cause another; you must either carry on the progression *in infinitum*, or rest on that original principle, who is the ultimate cause of all things \_ \_ \_ \_ \_” (KS 212).

10 See KS 139. On this point, see G. Mori, “Bayle et Hume devant l’athéisme”, *Archives de philosophie*, 2018, under press.

11 See the passage quoted *supra*, footnote 9 (KS 212): “As every effect must have a cause...”, etc. Notwithstanding his celebrated polemic against the metaphysical conception of causality, Hume never denied the “necessity” of this principle (see for instance *Treatise*, T 2.3.1.18, SBN 407: “necessity makes an essential part of causation”).

secret face. And if Demea, the third protagonist of the *Dialogues*, abandons the field at this point, it is because he has discovered that Philo is a false friend whose purpose is very different from his own, and that Philo's purpose has been fully achieved. The departure of Demea, in short, could itself be a sign for the reader: the die is cast and all that is "very bold and free" has already been said; the time has now come for disclaimers and professions of faith<sup>12</sup>.

The atheistic conclusion of Part XI is a sort of "first conclusion" of the *Dialogues*. This is clearly confirmed by the fact that the only positive theory (not mere objection) that remains standing at the end of Parts I-XI – although accompanied by many complaints on the weakness of human mind and a prudent declaration on the substantial equality of the different hypotheses on the origins of things – is that which considers the order of nature as not created by an intelligent mind but eternal. According to Philo, matter, on the basis of its initial arrangement, passes through infinite and continuous revolutions and alterations which necessarily give rise to different states of the universe. In some sense, the order of the universe can even be said to be necessary, or "absolutely" necessary (given that any other disposition of "natural beings" is said to be "absolutely impossible")<sup>13</sup>. No objections are raised against this theory; indeed, according to Philo, "this at once solves all difficulties"<sup>14</sup>. This atheistic theory of the eternal order of matter – potentially opposed to the (fairly rare) forms of evolutionary atheism that had sought to emerge between the 17th and 18th centuries – is to be found in Hume's Philo as in many other masks of early modern atheism: Bayle's Strato, Toland's "Pantheist", Fréret's Thrasymbule, Diderot's Oribaze, up to d'Holbach, who will

12 It should be noted, for example, that the extensive and detailed review of the *Dialogues* in the *Critical Review, or Annals of Literature* (Vol. XLVIII, September 1779, p. 161-172) only takes into account the first 11 parts and ends precisely with Demea's departure from the scene (see p. 170-172).

13 See KS 175: "Chance has no place, on any hypothesis, sceptical or religious. Everything is surely governed by steady, inviolable laws. And were the inmost essence of things laid open to us, we should then discover a scene, of which, at present, we can have no idea. Instead of admiring the order of natural beings, we should clearly see, that it was absolutely impossible for them, in the smallest article, ever to admit of any other disposition".

14 See KS 174: "[...] Were I obliged to defend any particular system of this nature (I never willingly should do) I esteem none more plausible, than that which ascribes an eternal, inherent principle of order to the world; though attended with great and continual revolutions and alterations. This at once solves all difficulties; and if the solution, by being so general, is not complete and satisfactory, it is, at least, a theory, that we must, sooner or later, have recourse to, whatever system we embrace".

be the first to substantially do away with such subterfuges (the false attribution of the *Système de la nature* to Mirabaud was one of the worst-kept secrets of the French Enlightenment).

In contrast to this atheistic conclusion to the main debate of the *Dialogues*, Part XII completely reshuffles the cards. A new line of reasoning is launched surreptitiously, with a new topic: after Demea's departure, Philo and Cleanthes no longer speak of the opposition between atheism and theism as Hume – just like Cudworth, Locke, Bayle and Clarke before him – intended, i.e. as a philosophical discussion which, starting from the topic of *design* as a necessary condition for theism, necessarily led to the definition of God's moral attributes (wisdom, goodness, providence). The focal point of the dispute, since the beginning of Part XII, has moved. And this for a reason which remains implicit and is not immediately obvious, but is decisive: the only philosophical question concerning the attributes of the first cause to be seriously discussed in Part XII is that of God's intelligence. This is surprising – although this point is generally overlooked – since Hume had always and tenaciously denied that the question of the “intelligence” of God could be separated from that of his goodness, or in general of his “moral attributes”: the latter, for him, are as “equally essential” as the former to the definition of God. This is clearly stated in the so-called *Fragment on evil* (ca. 1740)<sup>15</sup>, but can be observed also in the first *Enquiry* (1748), in the *Dialogues* themselves and later in the *Natural History of Religion* (1757)<sup>16</sup>. Clarke had also advanced a similar theory in his *Demonstration* (section XII)<sup>17</sup>, and can be considered as Hume's direct source here – even if the question of God's goodness was notoriously at the heart of Bayle's theological thought too.

15 See D. Hume, *Fragment on Evil* (ed. M.A. Stewart) in *Hume and Hume's Connexions*, ed. M.A. Stewart and J.P. Wright, The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994, p. 165: “The fourth objection is not levelled against the intelligence of the deity, but against *his moral attributes, which are equally essential to the system of theism*” (*italics mine*).

16 See *Enquiry concerning Human Understanding* (SBN 137): “Allowing, therefore, the gods to be the authors of the existence or order of the universe; it follows, that they possess that precise degree of *power, intelligence, and benevolence*, which appears in their workmanship”. Cf. *Dialogues*, KS 199: “[Cleanthes:] For to what purpose establish the natural attributes of the Deity, *while the moral are still doubtful and uncertain?*”; *Natural History of Religion* (ed. Beauchamp, 60-61): “theism [...] supposes one sole deity, the perfection of *reason and goodness*” (*italics mine*).

17 See S. Clarke, *A Demonstration of the Being and Attributes of God*, London 1705, p. 246-7: “justice, goodness and all the other moral attributes of God, are as essential to the divine nature as the natural attributes of eternity, infinity, and the like”.

Thus, the strategic move made by Hume in Part XII of the *Dialogues* (both in the original body of the text, which goes back to about 1751, and in the two important revisions of 1757 and 1776, to which we will return) consists precisely in considering God as a “Supreme intelligence”<sup>18</sup> – nothing more and nothing less. Cleanthes is the only one who, while praising “true” religion against Philo’s excessive zeal in fighting the “false” one, still speaks of God’s “goodness” (but only in words, without new arguments)<sup>19</sup>. In his last intervention, Cleanthes also adds some wishful thinking about the immortality of the soul, and even on the eternal bliss of men in Paradise – all things in which Hume, as is widely known, did not believe in the least<sup>20</sup>.

## II

In Part XII of the *Dialogues*, the reduction of God to a supremely intelligent being (with the exclusion of all moral attributes) was already apparent in the first draft of 1751, even if the passage concerned is rather cryptic:

And here I must also acknowledge, Cleanthes, that, as the works of Nature have a much greater analogy to the effects of *our* art and contrivance, than to those of *our* benevolence and justice; we have reason to infer that the natural attributes of the Deity have a greater resemblance to those of man, than his moral have to human virtues. But what is the consequence? Nothing but this, that the moral qualities of man are more defective in their kind than his natural abilities. For as the Supreme Being is allowed to be absolutely and entirely perfect, whatever differs most from him departs the farthest from the supreme standard of rectitude and perfection. (KS 219)

18 See *Dialogues*, KS 215.

19 See KS 224-7. Despite this, Cleanthes’ true religion has received a certain amount of attention by scholars, especially in recent times: see W. Lad Sessions, *Reading Hume’s Dialogues: A Veneration for True Religion*, Bloomington and Indianapolis, Indiana University Press, 2002; D. Garrett, “What’s True About Hume’s ‘True Religion?’”, *The Journal of Scottish Philosophy* 10.2 (2012), p. 199–220; A.C. Willis, *Toward a Humean True Religion: Genuine Theism, Moderate Hope, and Practical Morality*, The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2014; T. Black - R. Gressis, “True Religion in Hume’s *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion*”, *British Journal for the History of Philosophy*, 25(2), 2017, 2, p. 244-264.

20 See KS 224-25: “genuine Theism [...] represents us as the workmanship of a Being *perfectly good, wise, and powerful*, who created us for happiness, and who, having implanted in us immeasurable desires of good, will prolong our existence to all eternity, and will transfer us into an infinite variety of scenes, in order to satisfy those desires, and render our felicity compleat and durable” (*italics mine*).



Here the hypocrisy / irony lies in the fact that – as Hume knew very well – the classic objection made by Bayle with regard to the goodness of God was not based at all on the fact that man, being imperfect and exposed to sin, is unable to understand the sublime goodness of God, but rather on the fact that every human being perfectly understands, with full evidence, that God cannot be “good” in any sense consistent with the human concept of goodness<sup>21</sup>. Thus, it is not man, but God, being the inevitable author of evil, who is far below “the supreme standard of rectitude and perfection”: in the *Dictionnaire historique et critique*, article “Pauliciens” (rem. E), Bayle compares God to a mother who lets her daughters go out in the evening knowing full well that they will lose their virginity (and it should be remembered that, since the so-called *Early Memoranda*, Hume considers Bayle’s objections on the topics of evil as simply insoluble – “no solution”)<sup>22</sup>.

The fact, however, that the analogy between man and God concerns only the attribute of intelligence and cannot in any way be extended to other attributes (including obviously goodness) is specified by Hume in addition (XX) of 1757<sup>23</sup>, where things are said in a slightly more comprehensible way even for those not used to reading between the lines:

the analogy, imperfect as it is, can be carried no farther than to the human intelligence; and cannot be transferred, with any appearance of probability, to the other qualities of the mind (KS 227)

In other words: in Part XII of the *Dialogues* Hume makes a concession that he had never made before – i.e. the conceivability of a God without moral attributes – in order to start a discussion with those who were convinced that such a God existed and could be known. Who were the latter? Some of the (so-called) “deists”. From this point of view, the novelty of Part XII is to be found

21 See Bayle, *Œuvres diverses*, La Haye 1727-31, vol. III, p. 853 *b*: the theological difficulty of the problem of evil does not derive “de ce qu’il nous manque de lumières”, on the contrary: “elle vient principalement des lumières que nous avons, et que nous ne pouvons accorder avec les mystères”.

22 See E. Mossner, “Hume’s Early Memoranda, 1729-1740: The Complete Text”, *Journal of the History of Ideas*, Vol. 9, No. 4, 1948, p. 492-518, Pt. II, n° 26: “The Remedy of every Inconvenience wou’d become a new one. No Solution”. On the dating and sources of Hume’s manuscript *memoranda* see: E. Mazza and G. Mori, “‘Loose bits of paper’ and ‘uncorrect thoughts’: Hume’s *Early Memoranda* in context”, to be published in *Hume Studies*, 42 (2016).

23 See *supra*, note 8.

in the fact that here, for the first and perhaps last time, Hume confronts in philosophical terms deism – to which he had always felt perfectly alien<sup>24</sup>.

“Deism” is a typical eighteenth-century position, characterized precisely by its considering God’s preeminent attribute to be intelligence, while conceiving benevolence, or “goodness” – if goodness means anything similar to human goodness – to be foreign to God’s essence. This is particularly clear in the writings of the *maître à penser* of early modern deism: Voltaire. Yet Voltaire’s philosophical position on this point (like that of many others) did not derive from any deep and heartfelt religious motivation. Instead, it was determined by a substantially opportunistic reason: if “goodness” were reputed essential in God, “natural religion” (i.e. the rational theology of deists) would be just as vulnerable as revealed religion to the radical objection founded on the existence of evil in the world and therefore would encounter the same fate as the latter. In short, the accent put on God’s intelligence amounted to the avowal that, on the classic question of evil as it had been re-launched by Bayle, there was, conceptually, nothing to be done, and that, despite Leibniz’s powerful efforts, Christian theology was bound to fall victim to Bayle’s objections. All this had opened the way to what Collins had called – as early as 1710 – Bayle’s “triumph”<sup>25</sup>. That same “triumph”, literally, was to be mentioned by Philo in Part X of the *Dialogues* (KS 201). Kant would then brand it as “the failure of all philosophical attempts in theodicy”<sup>26</sup>.

Voltaire’s move was perhaps a forced one but nonetheless effective: by expelling goodness (and in general all moral attributes) from God’s essence, and by making God an eternal but impersonal principle, unknowable in his essence and substantially indifferent to the miserable suffering of men, he

24 See above all Lord Charlemont’s testimony: “I never saw him [Hume] so much displeased, or so much disconcerted as by the Petulance of Mrs. Mallet, the pert and conceited Wife of Bolingbroke’s Editor. This lady, who was not acquainted with Hume, meeting with him one night at an Assembly, boldly accosted him in these ‘Mr. Hume, Give me leave to introduce myself to you. We Deists ought to know each other.’ – ‘Madam,’ replied He, ‘I am no Deist. I do not style myself so, neither do I desire to be known by that Appellation’” (Royal Irish Academy, MS 12/R/7, f. 523; cf. E.C. Mossner, *The Life of David Hume*, Edinburgh, T. Nelson & Sons, 1954, p. 395). On Hume’s attitude towards the deistic conception of the social and political function of religion, see especially Emilio Mazza, “The broken brake. Hume and the ‘proper office’ of religion” – also published in this monographic issue.

25 See A. Collins, *A Vindication of the Divine Attributes*, 1710, p. 7-8.

26 See I. Kant, “Über das Mißlingen aller philosophischen Versuche in Theodizee” (1791), in I. Kant, *Werke in sechs Bänden*, ed. W. Weischedel, vol. 6, Frankfurt am Main, 1964, p. 105-24.

opened a way to escape Bayle's dilemma. The result was a minimal theology, reduced to certain basic truths, which gradually abandons the most characteristic attributes of divinity. God is reduced to an intelligent architectural principle widespread in nature but lacking all anthropomorphic features – and for this reason incomprehensible to humans<sup>27</sup>.

The same (progressive) impoverishment of the notion of God is the hidden *Leitmotiv* of Hume's *Dialogues*. At the beginning, the "First cause" is still depicted as infinite, unique, simple, omnipotent, good and immaterial, but then it gradually fades into a finite being, not necessarily single, limited in its power and certainly devoid of moral attributes. These alterations are quite explicit: Cleanthes renounces God's infinity at the beginning of Part XI (but Philo had already noted that the *design* argument implies the finiteness of the first cause)<sup>28</sup>; the simplicity of God's mind is rejected in Part IV<sup>29</sup>; the possibility of a plurality of "first causes" is advanced in Part XI<sup>30</sup>, and we have seen the fate of moral attributes in Part XII. In short, Hume's *Dialogues* begin with the God of Cudworth (or Clarke) and end with the God of somebody else, or the God of "some people", as specified in the central additional passage (XX) of 1757, which brings to its natural conclusion the process of theological impoverishment which runs throughout the *Dialogues*. These "some people" argue that "the whole natural theology" may be "resolved" into the bare affirmation of the existence of a "remote analogy" between human intelligence and the cause (or causes) of the order of the universe:

If the whole of Natural Theology, as some people seem to maintain, resolves itself into one simple, though somewhat ambiguous, at least undefined proposition, *That the cause or causes of order in the universe probably bear some remote analogy to human intelligence*: If this proposition be not capable of

27 See, for instance, Voltaire, *De l'âme* (1774): "Le vulgaire imagine Dieu comme un roi qui tient son lit de justice dans sa cour. Les coeurs tendres se le représentent comme un père qui a soin de ses enfants. Le sage ne lui attribue aucune affection humaine. Il reconnaît une puissance nécessaire, éternelle, qui anime toute la nature, et il se résigne" (éd. Moland, vol. XXIX, p. 342).

28 See KS 203, where Cleanthes speaks of a "finitely perfect" God, and KS 166 [Philo:] "by this method of reasoning you renounce all claim to infinity in any of the attributes of the Deity".

29 See KS 159: "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 a word, is no mind at all".

30 See KS 212.

extension, variation, or more particular explication: If it affords no inference that affects human life, or can be the source of any action or forbearance: And if the analogy, imperfect as it is, can be carried no farther than to the human intelligence; and cannot be transferred, with any appearance of probability, to the other qualities of the mind: If this really be the case, what can the most inquisitive, contemplative, and religious man do more than give a plain, philosophical assent to the proposition, as often as it occurs; and believe that the arguments, on which it is established, exceed the objections, which lie against it? (KS 227)

Who are these “people” who think that “the whole of natural theology” is constituted by the “proposition” that the first cause of the universe is intelligent, but in a way only remotely analogous to human intelligence, and excluding all moral attributes? A few Hume scholars have attempted to answer this question. Some of them attribute such a “proposition” to Cleanthes<sup>31</sup>. But Cleanthes could hardly be a supporter of it: just three pages before, in the same Part XII, he follows Clarke’s position and argues that moral attributes are fundamental in God<sup>32</sup>. Others have set their eyes on Philo<sup>33</sup>. But it is precisely Philo who assigns this proposition to “some people”, and why should he do that if it were simply his own opinion? Above all, Philo has denied, at the beginning of the *Dialogues*, the existence of “any analogy” between the human mind and God<sup>34</sup>; then, at the beginning of Part XII, he has disavowed his previous statements and declared that there is a “great analogy” between them<sup>35</sup>. Is it (rhetorically and philosophically) possible to attribute to him a

31 See W.L. Sessions, *Reading Hume's Dialogues*, cit., p. 257, note 42: “who are these people, and why is their position a seeming one? Clearly it is Cleanthes’ position [...]”.

32 See KS 224: “genuine Theism [...] represents us as the workmanship of a Being perfectly good, wise, and powerful; who created us for happiness [...]”. For Clarke, see *supra*, note 17.

33 See D. Garrett, “What’s True about Hume’s ‘True Religion’”, *Journal of Scottish Philosophy* 10 (2):199-220 (2012), p. 217: “Although ascribed only to ‘some people’, the proposition ‘That the cause or causes of order in the universe probably bear some remote analogy to human intelligence’ sounds very much like a conclusion for which Philo himself has been arguing [...]”.

34 See KS 142: “But as all perfection is entirely relative, we ought never to imagine, that we comprehend the attributes of this divine Being, or to suppose, that his perfections have *any analogy* or likeness to the perfections of a human creature”. See also KS 168: “An intelligent being of such vast power and capacity, as is necessary to produce the universe [...] exceeds all analogy and even comprehension”.

35 See KS 216-7: “That the works of Nature bear *a great analogy* to the productions of art is evident; and according to all the rules of good reasoning, we ought to infer, if we argue at all concerning them, that their causes have a proportional analogy”.

third, intermediate position? Finally, other scholars remark that the position of these “people” who conceive the first cause only as a supremely intelligent mind with no moral attributes has much in common with the position previously attributed in Part XII to “the atheist” (or, rather, with a position such that even an atheist could admit it)<sup>36</sup>. This, in some sense, could be true, but it would of little use from a historical, or genetic, point of view, because this passage on the “atheist” belongs to the addition (BB) of 1776<sup>37</sup>, and therefore can hardly explain what Hume wrote in 1757, and even less why he wrote it. In short, despite these different interpretative attempts, the origin of Philo’s “proposition”, which would sum up “the whole rational theology”, still remains obscure.

In France, Voltaire asserted something similar, and in very similar terms, though perhaps more concisely: “*mens agitat molem* [mind moves matter], we must limit ourselves to that, everything else is mere *afflictio spiritus* [affliction for the soul]”<sup>38</sup>. But Voltaire, in 1757, had not yet expressed this position clearly in public works: he would only start doing so with the *Philosophe ignorant* (1766), where he quotes for the first time the same dictum by Virgil (*mens agitat molem*) which was later to become the banner of his deism<sup>39</sup>. We must therefore return to the British context and look for a real author, because Hume presents Philo’s words as a quotation (underlined in the autograph manuscript, in italics in the printed version of 1776), or at least as a more or less precise account of a position historically attested (“as some people *seem* to maintain”).

Now, as far as the British context is concerned, we should take into account the posthumous publication in five volumes, in 1754, of the *Philosophical Works* by Henry St. John, better known as Viscount Bolingbroke. Bolingbroke was a “radical” deist, as historians would call him today; a deist who in fact

36 See N. Pike, in D. Hume, *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion*, Indianapolis 1970, p. 218; A.G. Vink, “Philo’s Final Conclusion in Hume’s ‘Dialogues’”, *Religious Studies*, Vol. 25, 1989, n° 4, p. 489-499 (p. 495); S. Tweyman, *David Hume: Dialogues concerning Natural Religion in Focus*, London, Routledge, 2013, p. 93.

37 See KS 218: “I ask [the Atheist], if it be not probable, that the principle which first arranged, and still maintains order in this universe, bears not also some remote inconceivable analogy to the other operations of Nature, and among the rest to the oeconomy of human mind and thought. However reluctant, he must give his assent”.

38 See Voltaire’s annotations (ca. 1772) on d’Holbach’s *Le Bon Sens*, in Voltaire, *Œuvres*, éd. Moland, t. 31, p. 153: “*Mens agitat molem*; il faut s’en tenir là: toute le reste est *afflictio spiritus*”.

39 See Voltaire, *Œuvres*, ed. Moland, vol. 26, p. 60.

denies the reality of the creation *ex nihilo* (he speaks of a “creation, or formation of the world” starting from an original chaos)<sup>40</sup>; who holds, concerning the ultimate matter of which the universe is composed, an intermediate position between atomism and hylozoism<sup>41</sup>; who excludes, or tends to exclude, the existence of a thinking substance different from bodily matter<sup>42</sup>. Moreover, in 1754, his philosophical writings appear exactly halfway between the first draft of the *Dialogues* (1751) and the addition (XX) of 1757 in which Philo maintains that “the whole of rational theology” consists in positing a vague analogy between human and divine minds.

On p. 5 (the first page) of the first volume of his *Philosophical Works*, Bolingbroke discusses a position which he ascribes to Hobbes. The latter had been accused of atheism by Cudworth for arguing that God’s will is only “something analogous” to that of man<sup>43</sup>. In his original text quoted by Cudworth, Hobbes also added that “in like manner, when we attribute sight, and other sensations, or knowledge, or intelligence, to God, which are in us nothing more than a certain tumult of the mind excited by the pressure of external objects on our organs, we must not imagine that anything like this happens to God” (*Leviathan*, chap. XXXI). Contrary to Cudworth, Bolingbroke does not think that by these words Hobbes wanted to argue that in God there is no knowledge, or intelligence; for him, Hobbes simply meant that God’s cognitive powers differ from human faculties not only “in degree” but also “in kind”. This would be enough to avoid the accusation of atheism: God is certainly intelligent, but in a way which “we cannot conceive”<sup>44</sup>. Likewise, in the addition (BB) of 1776 to Part XII of the *Dialogues*, Hume was to write that our analogous concept of God is “inconceivable”<sup>45</sup>.

40 See *The Philosophical Works of the Late Honorable Henry St. John, Lord Viscount Bolingbroke*, in five volumes, published by David Mallet, Esq., London, [s.n.], 1754, vol. V, p. 288.

41 See *Philosophical Works*, vol. I, p. 226.

42 See *Philosophical Works*, vol. I, p. 20-21 (with a reference to Locke’s thesis of thought *superadded* by God to matter), and also vol. I, p. 220, in which it is argued that thought is neither essential to matter nor incompatible with its essence.

43 See *Philosophical Works*, vol. 1, p. 5. Cf. R. Cudworth, *The True Intellectual System of the Universe*, London 1678, p. 730; T. Hobbes, *Leviathan*, chapter XXXI (in *English Works*, ed. Molesworth, vol. III, p. 352). It should be noted that neither Cudworth nor Hobbes use the expression “something analogous”. It is Bolingbroke – and only him – who introduces this reference to analogy in order to interpret Hobbes’ position.

44 See *Philosophical Works*, vol. 1, p. 6.

45 KS 218.

In the course of his various and often chaotic reflections on this subject, Bolingbroke expresses himself with great clarity on another point, which brings him even closer to Part XII of the *Dialogues*. For him, the vague analogy between man and God is only valid for the so-called “natural” attributes (according to Clarke: omnipotence, wisdom, intelligence), not for the “moral” attributes such as goodness or justice. Analysing with perfect clarity – here at least – the situation which had arisen after Bayle’s campaign on the problem of evil, Bolingbroke rejects the position taken by theologians such as Clarke, who argued the case for a full moral univocity between God and man. For Bolingbroke, this amounted to giving an undue advantage to atheists. Indeed, he argues, theists and theologians “amicably” agree on the (anthropomorphic) definition of the moral attributes of God; they also agree that in the world there is more evil than good. Only their conclusions diverge: “a Collins concludes, that there is no God; and a Clarke, that there is a future state of rewards and punishments”<sup>46</sup>. Bolingbroke will instead argue, against both, that the goodness of God has nothing to do with that of man, and by consequence he will no longer have the problem of explaining (from a human point of view) why there is more evil than good in the world, nor of postulating an afterlife to make that evil compatible with God’s existence. Deism, in Bolingbroke’s view, should be opposed to the scandalous “confederacy” of atheists and theologians who stubbornly believe that God has to be considered “good” and “holy” in the same sense as a human being<sup>47</sup>.

To sum up, the two main elements of the position which Philo – in addition (XX) to Part XII of the *Dialogues* – attributes to “some people” are clearly to be found in Bolingbroke’s posthumous writings: (1) the existence of a vague, or “remote” analogy between human and divine minds; (2) the opposition between God’s natural and moral attributes and the limitation of this vague analogy to the former, with the explicit rejection of the latter. But the conclusive evidence that Bolingbroke is the hidden source of this passage of the *Dialogues* lies in the fact he also maintains that (3) this remote analogical knowledge of the intelligence and wisdom of God constitutes “the whole of natural theology”<sup>48</sup> – which is exactly the same (unusual)<sup>49</sup> expression ascribed by Philo to “some people” in addition (XX).

46 See Bolingbroke, *Philosophical Works*, vol. IV, p. 322.

47 See Bolingbroke, *Philosophical Works*, vol. V, p. 2, 3, 305, 348-9, 393.

48 See Bolingbroke, *Philosophical Works*, vol. V, p. 76-7: “[the Divines] prove the existence of an all-perfect Being, the creator and governor of the universe; and to demonstrate his infinite

Hume knew the *Philosophical Works of the Late Right Honorable Henry St. John* quite well. The five volumes had been edited by his correspondent David Mallet, to whom in his will Bolingbroke had left all his manuscripts. In October 1754, Hume promptly signals the publication of Bolingbroke's *Works* in a letter to the Abbé Le Blanc (he also shows some contempt, in a way which is perfectly understandable and probably sincere)<sup>50</sup>. But the link of the *Dialogues*, in their final version, with Bolingbroke is even stronger, although this time not from a philosophical point of view but from the more elusive perspective of rhetorical and communicational strategies. The publication of Bolingbroke's *Philosophical Works* constitutes indeed a paradigmatic case for Hume, allowing him to put directly to the test the barrier of censorship in contemporary British culture. A barrier that, in the end, turned out to be porous enough to allow the (posthumous) publication of openly anti-Christian, materialistic, deterministic and sometimes libertine propositions. Compared with Bolingbroke's explicit expressions – philosophically fragile but certainly aggressive – the cautious anti-theistic conclusions of the *Dialogues* appear quite inoffensive. This explains why, near the end of his life, Hume remembered – first in a letter to Adam Smith and soon after in another to his publisher Strahan – that the works of Bolingbroke had appeared without consequences for their editor and that therefore the *Dialogues* could follow the

wisdom and power they appeal to his works. But when they have done this, which includes *the whole of natural theology*, and serves abundantly all the ends of natural religion, they parcel out a divine moral nature into various attributes like the human, and determine precisely what these attributes require that God should do, to make his will conformable to the eternal ideas of fitness, which are so many independent natures. Thus they assume that God knows after the manner of men, by ideas, that his moral attributes are not barely names that we give to various manifestations of the infinite wisdom of one simple uncompounded being, but that they are in him, what they are in us, distinct affections, dispositions, habitudes; that they are in him the very same that they are in our ideas, being derived from the same eternal natures, and known by the same eternal reason; in fine, that we have no need to judge of his moral attributes as we judge of his physical, but are able to determine what they require that he should do, without any regard to what he has done" (*italics mine*).

49 According to *ECCO – Eighteenth Century Collections Online*, only three occurrences of the expression "the whole of natural theology" are to be found between 1700 and 1799: one in Bolingbroke's *Philosophical Works* (1754), one in Hume's *Dialogues* (1779), and the third in a polemic writing by Warburton, who quotes directly from Bolingbroke's *Philosophical Works* (W. Warburton, *A View of Lord Bolingbroke's philosophy*, London 1756, p. 48).

50 See Hume to Le Blanc, 24 October 1754, in D. Hume, *Letters*, vol. I, p. 208: "never were seen so many volumes, containing so little variety and instruction, so much arrogance and declamation".



same path after the death of their author, without any prejudice either to the deceased or to executors of his will<sup>51</sup>.

Hence a first historical explanation can be advanced in order to explain the function of Part XII, in its definitive form, in the context of Hume's *Dialogues*. Instead of completely abjuring his positions – as happens in the first version of the work – Philo now seeks to find a point of agreement between theism and atheism by referring to Bolingbroke's vague analogy between divine and human minds. By this move, Hume was seeking to calibrate his work in such a way as to make it more or less compatible with the maximum level of tolerance admitted by the censorship of his time: whereas atheism was always to be left in the shadows of the implicit, a radical deism like that of Bolingbroke had obtained a kind of cultural citizenship thanks to Mallet's edition, and could be exploited quite safely as a smokescreen for an even more radical position. In this way, Hume thought also that he could allay the fears of Smith and Strahan, to whom he intended to entrust the mission to deliver to the public the *Dialogues* after his death (but things went differently, as it is widely known).

### III

Philo's crypto-quotation from Bolingbroke's *Philosophical Works* is not literal and is certainly integrated with conceptual elements of different origin: for instance, Bolingbroke makes no mention of the possible plurality of the causes of the universal order, while this thesis occurs in Hume's *Dialogues* and later also in the *Natural History of Religion*<sup>52</sup>. However, the implicit reference – in what was to become the definitive conclusion of the *Dialogues* – makes blatantly obvious that the position taken by Philo in 1757 is in no way reassuring. Indeed, it is precisely in the light of this hidden source, deliberately left in the background, that Hume's shows the depth of his perfidious irony. He proposes, as a reconciliation and meeting point between atheism and

51 See Hume to A. Smith, 3 May 1776, in *Letters*, vol. 2, p. 316: "Was Mallet any wise hurt by his publication of Lord Bolingbroke?"; see also Hume to Strahan, 8 June 1776, in *Letters*, vol. II, p. 324, and cf. E. Mazza, *La peste in fondo al pozzo. L'anatomia astrusa di David Hume*, Milano-Udine, Mimesis, 2012, p. 138.

52 See D. Hume, *The Natural History of Religion*, in Id., *A Dissertation on the Passions; The Natural History of Religion*, ed. by Tom L. Beauchamp, Section 2, p. 37-38 (on the origin of polytheism).

theism, the position of a politically incorrect Tory (a Jacobite, Bolingbroke had been exiled for years in France), who was generally considered to be atheist<sup>53</sup>, or at least – to be more charitable – the position of a deist who constantly fought against Scriptural revelation and official Christian theology. So, rather than a reconciliation, Philo's conclusion – however philosophical and undogmatic it might appear – is a declaration which situates him decisively outside the mainstream of Christian theology.

Moreover, even assuming for a moment that Philo's final declarations have a conceptual substance, it would still be true that a position like that of Bolingbroke, as reported and reinterpreted by Philo, does not resolve anything very much in the context of the early modern debate between atheism and theism. Neither Bolingbroke in his *Philosophical Works* nor Philo in Part XII of the *Dialogues* try to specify the kind of intelligence which they attribute to God. If God is infinitely perfect by definition, if his being is “uncompounded”, that is simple and timeless, if his will is “necessarily” determined by his intellect, as Bolingbroke admits<sup>54</sup>, it is of little use that his mind may be depicted as “intelligent” in some remotely analogous meaning of this word, because it will lack all the elements which makes a human mind intelligent, such as empirical consciousness, power of deliberation or freedom of choice<sup>55</sup>. The only example used by Philo – in addition (BB) of 1776 – to illustrate the “inconceivable” analogy between the intelligence of God and the mind of man is a natural phenomenon such as “the rotting of a turnip”<sup>56</sup>. This is reminiscent

53 See W. Warburton, *A View of the Lord Bolingbroke's philosophy*, p. 49. As Montesquieu wrote to Warburton (about Bolingbroke): “celui qui attaque la religion révélée n'attaque que la religion révélée; mais celui qui attaque la religion naturelle attaque toutes les religions du monde” (*Œuvres complètes de Montesquieu*, ed. A. Masson, Paris, Nagel, 1950-1955, vol. 3, *Correspondance*, No. 714, p. 1509). See also G. Anderson, *A Remonstrance against Viscount's Bolingbroke Philosophical Religion*, Edinburgh, 1756, p. 129.

54 See Bolingbroke, *Philosophical Works*, vol. IV, p. 33 (“[God's] will is necessarily determined by His wisdom”); vol. V, p. 76-7 (God as a “simple uncompounded being”).

55 Cf. Clarke, *Demonstration*, Prop. VIII, p. 102: “[...] A mere necessary agent must of necessity either be plainly and directly in the grossest sense unintelligent; which was the ancient atheists' notion of the self-existent Being, or else its intelligence (which is the assertion of Spinoza and some moderns) must be wholly separate from any power of will or choice, which in respect of any excellency and perfection, or indeed to any common sense at all, is the very same thing”.

56 See Hume, *Dialogues*, KS 218: “I next turn to the Atheist, who, I assert, is only nominally so, and can never possibly be in earnest; and I ask him, whether, from the coherence and apparent sympathy in all the parts of this world, there be not a certain degree of analogy among all the operations of Nature, in every situation and in every age; whether the rotting of a

of a similar position taken by Bolingbroke on the “remote connection” between all living systems, including vegetables and human minds, all endowed with some sort of organization (an instance of which is given by the plants which “ripen, flourish for a time, wither and die”)<sup>57</sup>. But the simple existence of ordered events in nature was not questioned by any of the protagonists of the *Dialogues*: what was in question was the link between these ordered events and an intelligent cause which was supposed to have *designed* them. Yet, far from discussing this point, Philo only requires the atheist to accept that “the principle which first arranged, and still maintains order in this universe, bears [...] also some remote inconceivable analogy to the other operations of Nature, and among the rest to the œconomy of human mind and thought” (KS 217-19). In other words, here the “atheist” is only required to admit the existence of an immanent (and uncreated) order in the first cause of things – a point that Toland, Diderot, and d’Holbach would have admitted without any scruple.

In conclusion, Part XII of the *Dialogues* is certainly a laborious rhetorical apparatus put in place to limit the impact of the work on its readers; but it is also an attempt, from Hume’s point of view, to deal with the new brand of deism which was emerging, especially in France, under the influence of Voltaire. Such a new brand of deism had recently manifested itself, in a manner as clamorous as it was philosophically unsound, with Bolingbroke, whose links with Voltaire are known (these links have been perhaps exaggerated by some, as Norman Torrey has tried to show, but remain unquestionable)<sup>58</sup>. It is only from an anti-Christian, radical deistic point of view, that of Bolingbroke, that the *Dialogues* open the way for a sort of

turnip, the generation of an animal, and the structure of human thought be not energies that probably bear some remote analogy to each other: It is impossible he can deny it: He will readily acknowledge it”.

<sup>57</sup> See Bolingbroke, *Philosophical Works*, vol. IV, p. 378-9.

<sup>58</sup> Voltaire mentions Bolingbroke almost two hundred times in his writings (excluding the correspondence – source: ARTFL [<https://artfl-project.uchicago.edu/voltaire-search/>]). Among the various texts in which Voltaire explains the influence of Bolingbroke on his own thought, see this passage of 1774: “Le théisme [= *deism*] est embrassé par la fleur du genre humain, je veux dire par les honnêtes gens, depuis Pékin jusqu’à Londres, et depuis Londres jusqu’à Philadelphie. L’athéisme parfait, quoi qu’on en dise, est rare. Je m’en suis aperçu dans ma patrie et dans tous mes voyages, que je n’entrepris que pour m’instruire, jusqu’à ce qu’enfin je me fixai auprès du lord Bolingbroke, le théiste le plus déclaré” (Voltaire, *Œuvres*, ed. Moland, t. 31, p. 113). After Torrey’s excessive undervaluation of Bolingbroke’s influence on Voltaire (see N.L. Torrey, “Bolingbroke and Voltaire – A Fictitious Influence”, *PMLA*, Vol. 42, 1927, n° 3, p. 788-797), see the new and convincing evidence found by A. McKenna, “La Moïsade: un manuscrit clandestin voltairien”, *Revue Voltaire*, 8, 2008, p. 67-97.

“compromise” between the various contenders of the debate on “natural religion”. Indeed, not so much the *theist*, as generally understood (although Hume uses this ambiguous word)<sup>59</sup>, but rather the *deist* and the *atheist* are concerned by the final agreement. After clashing throughout the *Dialogues*, and for most of the century, under the eyes of Christian theologians, the atheist and the deist are suddenly left alone, only to discover that they speak the same language. But it is a language now impoverished in content, based only on fragile oxymorons, such as the “inconceivable analogy” between God and man, and remote similarities which turn out to be evanescent.

This feeling of a possible convergence between *frères ennemis* was widespread, from the 1760s onwards, in both camps. In 1776, a few weeks before his death, Hume added to Part XII of the *Dialogues* the insert (BB), in which the whole debate between atheists and deists is downgraded to a mere “verbal dispute”:

The Theist allows, that the original intelligence is very different from human reason: The Atheist allows, that the original principle of order bears some remote analogy to it. Will you quarrel, Gentlemen, about the degrees, and enter into a controversy, which admits not of any precise meaning, nor consequently of any determination? (KS 218-19)

One year later, in 1777, Voltaire published in his turn a work written in dialogical form, which was to be one of his last philosophical productions: the *Dialogues d'Évhémère*. In this late work, quite tame in its literary expression when compared to the rest of his production, but philosophically interesting, Voltaire tries *in extremis* to attain reconciliation with the atheists, so cordially detested until that time. Perhaps he has Diderot in mind, rather than d'Holbach: for the “Spinozist” Diderot thought is inherent in matter, and is not the product of a slow evolution of matter. Voltaire does not see any difference with his own position: Spinoza also believes that there is an intelligence in the world, eternal and necessary, and on this basis an agreement is possible between people of “common sense”, because only an eternal and intelligent (in some sense) first cause can be the cause of intelligent

<sup>59</sup> In the eighteenth century, “theist” may mean, in a broad and generic sense, “supporter of the existence of a God” (therefore including Christian theologians *and* deists), but at times, as also shown by Voltaire’s text quoted in the preceding footnote, it is synonymous with “deist”, and it means (more or less) “a supporter of the existence of a supreme intelligence, based on rational arguments, who denies any revelation, or anthropomorphic representation of God”.

beings. Nature is thus ordered by a “secret power”, eternal and invisible, which everyone should admit<sup>60</sup>.

Hume and Voltaire thus drew up, in the same years, perhaps the very same year, the same diagnosis, which was possibly a proclamation of death for seventeenth- and eighteenth-century rational theology, and consequently, however paradoxical it may seem, also for early modern atheism, which depended parasitically on that rational theology. The fundamental question raised by all those who had taken part in the debate was an epistemological one: it concerned the way in which it is possible to know God. The epoch of rational theology (and of philosophical atheism), which had begun with the luminous appearance of Descartes’ *idea Dei*, praised as *maxime clara et distincta* in the 3<sup>rd</sup> Meditation, ends with the low-profile utterances of Dondindac, a man certainly not educated at the best schools but certainly wise and open-minded, whom Voltaire introduces in the article “Dieu” of the *Dictionnaire philosophique*. To those who ask him about God and his attributes, Dondindac always answers “I do not know” (or “I do not understand”)<sup>61</sup>: one word more would have been too much.

The agreement between Philo and Cleanthes in Part XII of Hume’s *Dialogues* is thus the final evidence of the renunciation by early modern theists of their fundamental dogma, i.e. the univocity of divine and human attributes. Until then, their enemy had been whoever denied the possibility of a rational knowledge of God’s essential properties. Instead, with the progressive weakening of the early modern myth of a full-fledged rational theology under the blows of Bayle and of the vast cohort of his British and French followers (from Toland and Collins to Fréret and d’Holbach), and then with the diminished deism (or “theism”) of Voltaire, the differences between deism and atheism dissolve. In the end, the atheist and the deist only seem to diverge on a question of emphasis or other superficial rhetorical ornaments.

60 See Voltaire, éd. Moland, t. 30, p. 475: “*Callicrate*. J’ai parlé à nos bons épicuriens. La plupart persistent à croire que leur doctrine au fond n’est guère différente de la vôtre. Vous admettez également un pouvoir éternel, occulte, invisible: mais comme ils sont gens de bon sens, ils avouent qu’il faut que ce pouvoir soit pensant, puisqu’il a fait des animaux qui pensent. // *Évhémère*. [...] À l’égard des bons épicuriens, qui ne placent le bonheur que dans la vertu, mais qui n’admettent que le pouvoir secret de la nature, je suis de leur avis, pourvu qu’ils reconnaissent que ce pouvoir secret est celui d’un Être nécessaire, éternel, puissant, intelligent: car l’être qui raisonne, appelé homme, ne peut être l’ouvrage que d’un maître très-intelligent, appelé Dieu”.

61 See Voltaire, ed. Moland, t. 18, p. 381-3 (1761).

Voltaire was fully aware of this turning point, especially in the last years of his life, as were d'Holbach and his followers when they accused Voltaire of “playing with words”<sup>62</sup>. The *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion*, as the evidence found in the additions of 1757 and 1776 makes manifest, attest that Hume too was no stranger to this widespread awareness.

62 See especially the review of Voltaire's *Philosophe ignorant* published in the *Correspondance littéraire* by Grimm, 1 June 1766: “Vous convenez ailleurs que le passage du néant à la réalité est une chose incompréhensible, que tout est nécessaire, et qu'il n'y a point de raison pour que l'existence ait commencé; et puis, vous venez me parler d'ouvrage et d'ouvrier : vous voulez sans doute jouer avec les mots. Une production naturelle n'est point un ouvrage; c'est une émanation nécessaire. Vous n'êtes pas l'ouvrage de votre père, parce qu'en vous faisant il ne savait pas ce qu'il faisait. Vous dites que, puisque tout est moyen et fin dans votre corps, il faut qu'il soit arrangé par une intelligence. Moi j'en conclus simplement que le mouvement et l'énergie de la matière sont des qualités certaines, existantes, agissantes, quoiqu'elles soient réellement incompréhensibles [...]” (*Correspondance littéraire, philosophique et critique de Grimm et de Diderot depuis 1753 jusqu'en 1790*, t. 5 [1766], p. 109-110 – *italics mine*).