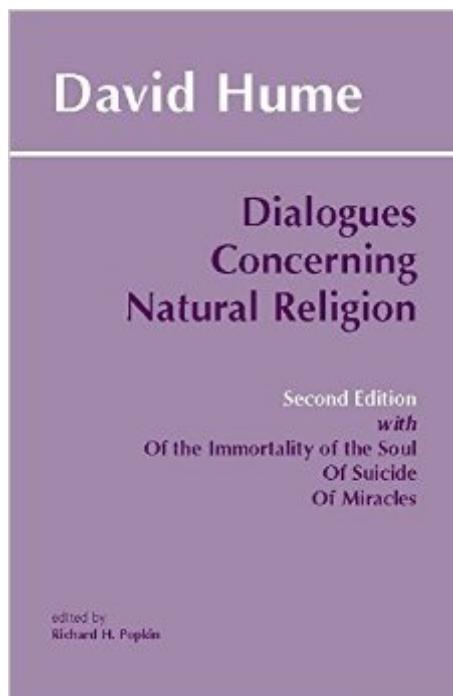


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Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion (Hackett Classics)



Synopsis

Hume's brilliant and dispassionate essay Of Miracles has been added in this expanded edition of his Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion, which also includes Of the Immortality of the Soul, Of Suicide, and Richard Popkin's illuminating Introduction.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

David Hume, a philosopher of the period often classified as British Empiricism, is the intellectual associate of philosophers John Locke and George Berkeley. Born in Edinburgh in 1711, he attended the University of Edinburgh but did not graduate. He went to France during his 20s, and spent time there working on what would become his most famous work, 'An Enquiry into Human Understanding', first published under the title 'Treatise of Human Nature'. However, Hume was a prolific writer, and dealt with many areas of philosophy, including politics and ethics, epistemology, and metaphysics. He wrote in the area of history as well, and had a politic career as British ambassador to France and a post as a minister in the government for a few years. His final work, 'Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion', was published posthumously in 1779, although work had begun on it as early as the 1750s. Hume was very concerned about rationality. Hume was never publicly and explicitly an atheist, but his rational mind, concerned about sensory and intelligible evidence, led him to question and doubt most major systems of religion, including the more general philosophical sense of religion and proofs of the existence of God. The primary arguments in his 'Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion' deal with the Argument from Design, and the Cosmological

Argument. There is an assumed distinction here between natural religion and revealed religion, an especially important distinction in the Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment philosophical structure.

With the possible exception of his incalculably influential *A Treatise of Human Nature*, this, I think, is Hume's finest work. *The Dialogues* is a paradigm of sustained philosophical argumentation on a single subject, and I can't think of a more inspiring work of philosophy. Another reason to read this book is that Hume is one of the few philosophical figures whose work is worth reading as literature. His prose is, of course, lovely and clear as can be; and *The Dialogues* is packed with the sort of evocative passages that readers of Hume expect to find in his work. Furthermore, he's clearly mastered the dialogue format as a way of writing philosophy. He never turns his interlocutors into ciphers spouting the details of their respective positions. Each character has a forceful and distinct personality, and each of them comes to the debate with a well-defined position and adequate means of defending it. In short, I can't recommend this book highly enough. Most of *The Dialogues* is devoted to discussion of *a posteriori* arguments for the existence of God. The main argument considered here is the classical argument from design, which Hume seems to understand as an analogical argument of the following sort: the complexity and order of the universe show that it is similar to artifacts created by human intelligences; similar causes have similar effects; therefore, the universe must have been created by a being with something like a human intelligence; therefore, the universe must have been created by God. Hume's objections to this argument are legion, and many of the individual objections are both ingenious and forceful. He provides reasons for thinking that the universe isn't all that similar to artifacts created by human beings.

I've never really been particularly religious or spiritual, but the argument that the organization of the world seemed to have a tremendous intelligence behind it always bothered me. Dismissive explanations that matter can have its own organizing principle that, through trial and error, could result in what we have today, were never completely satisfying. How does randomness lead to something like, for example, the human eye? (I think this question is supposed to have puzzled Darwin too.) This book doesn't answer those questions, but it does point out that they are incorrectly asked to lead to certain comforting conclusions about the existence of god. The operation of the world doesn't really point to an intelligent creator, the book points out, as much as a self-sustaining vegetable intelligence, the type that allows nutrients to go up the roots of a plant or that controls the cell division of an amoeba. This is presented in an elegant and frankly airtight argument by Philo who, as much as I could tell, is Hume's mouthpiece—even though Hume throws in some lame

sidesteps to pretend that he's actually on the side of natural religion, perhaps to sneak this incredibly dangerous little book into the hands of people who might not otherwise read it. I read this book in one sitting, and my head had a strange throbbing sensation at the end. I actually laughed a couple of times because too many ideas were bouncing around in there at once. I press this book into the hands of all my friends who regard the evidence of god as self-evident, not to destroy their faith but to destroy the foundation of lies that it often rests on. Kant regarded this book as the last word on the subject, and I agree.

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