Facts, Fictions, and Hypotheses: Hume’s Scepticism and Newton’s Method in the Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion

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The experimental theist Cleanthes and the sceptical Philo in the Dialogues, along with Epicurus in the oration of the First Inquiry, all address the same problem and endorse the same epistemology. Both the method and the argument come from Newton’s Principia: the former is derived from the famous regulae philosophandii, while the latter comes from the Scholium generale appended to the third book of the Principia. Both the theologians of the Boyle lectures and Newton himself in the Scholium generale had established a close connection between the use of induction, the rejection of hypotheses, the argument from design or final causes, and the conception of a “living, intelligent, powerful being” that governs the world. It is notable that Newton did not hesitate to include God among the objects of “natural philosophy.” The Dialogues represent a challenge to this Newtonian “experimental theism”, but they also aim at rehabilitating the function of hypotheses in response to Newton’s famous veto, albeit in a new form that is compatible with the scepticism endorsed by the protagonist of the work, Philo. This new reading of the Dialogues centred on Philo’s “hypotheticism” sheds more light on the meaning and scope of the work.