

ANNUAL LECTURE 2020

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

Gianni Paganini (Università del Piemonte Orientale, Vercelli)

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 philosophandi*, 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.

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