

# Libertas philosophandi and liberty of hypothesising. Newton's method and Hume's turn in the Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion

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*The experimental theist Cleanthes and the skeptical Philo in the Dialogues, Epicurus in the oration of the First Enquiry, all deal with the same problem and endorse the same epistemology. Both the method and the argument come from Newton's Principia: the former derives from the famous regulae philosophandi and the argument from the Scholium generale appended to the third book of the Principia. Not only the theologians of the Boyle lectures, but 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 as a Lord. It is notable that Newton did not hesitate to include God among the objects of "natural philosophy". The Dialogues represent a challenge to this "experimental theism" inspired by Newton, but they also aim at rehabilitating the function of hypotheses, against Newton's famous veto, albeit in a new form, compatible with the scepticism endorsed by the protagonist of the work, Philo. This new reading of the Dialogues centred on Philo's "hypotheticism" also sheds light on the meaning and scope of the work.*

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In a famous essay dedicated to freedom of the press, Hume affirmed that "nothing surprises the foreigner more than the extreme freedom we enjoy in this country"<sup>1</sup>, meaning England. In his view political freedom originates from the mixed form of government, neither wholly monarchical nor entirely republican. This situation has not only prevented England from falling back into "arbitrary power"<sup>2</sup>, but has also positively evolved from the opposition between Court-Party and Country Party to that between Tories and Whigs. On the

<sup>1</sup> D. Hume, *Essays, Moral, Political, and Literary*, Part 1, II *Of the Liberty of the Press* (*Essays moral, political, and literary*, edited and with a foreword, notes and glossary by Eugene F. Miller; with an apparatus of variant readings from the 1889 edition by T.H. Green and T.H. Grose, Indianapolis, Liberty Classics, 1987, vol. I, p. 9.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 10.