

Hume's Views on Religion: Intellectual and Cultural Influences

TERENCE PENELHUM

All major philosophers transcend the influences that help to form their views. But a knowledge of those influences will often assist us in understanding what those views were. This is especially true when we consider Hume's philosophy of religion. He often expresses his opinions on religion in guarded and indirect ways, and he chose not to publish his most important work on this subject during his lifetime. These facts alone suggest that a knowledge of the context of his thinking is an important aid in the determination of his opinions.

For all their clarity of presentation, Hume's writings on religion present some puzzles. There can be no doubt that Hume is for the most part hostile to religion in general and to the Christian religion in particular. He uses his superlative critical skills to emphasize what he sees as the intellectual baselessness of faith. He also offers an account of the nature of morality that leaves no role for the belief in Providence or for the promise of divine rewards and punishments. But he also seems from time to time to express concurrence with some of the teachings that his arguments undermine. More importantly, his system has, as one of its core epistemological results, the claim that our basic secular common sense beliefs (in real objects, causal regularity, and self-identity) are not due to rational argument, and cannot be successfully defended by such argument against skeptical doubts; they are due to fortunate instincts that supply us with doxastic commitments that fit us for the needs of common life. Yet Hume does not seem to accord the same status to religious beliefs, even though common life seems full of them, and his occasional protestations of religious conformity seem insincere. The crowning example of his apparent ambivalence on the subject is to be found in the concluding part of the *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion*, where Philo, the character whom most consider to represent Hume himself, seems to concede the theism to which he has been raising objections throughout the work, while suggesting that the right preparation for this form of religion is philosophical skepticism!

In these circumstances it is not surprising that there is disagreement on what Hume's ultimate judgments on religion are. A look at his relation to the society in which he lived and worked, and at the controversies about religion to which he responded, may help to make the nature of these judgments clear. So, at least, I shall suggest.

Hume in Scotland

In the quadrangle of New College, on the Mound in Edinburgh, there is a statue of John Knox, the famous Reformer. It has been there since 1895. Knox's effect on Scots life has been very great, and he was arguably the most important personal influence in the forging of the modern Scottish identity. A few hundred yards away, at the top of the Royal Mile, there is a statue of David Hume. It has been there only since 1997. The sculptor has carved him in classical attire, as if to emphasize the distance that has always separated him from the mainstream of the culture of which he is arguably the most famous figure. While Edinburgh's current pride in him is quite real, it is quite recent, and in his own day his opinions put him at odds with the prevailing culture in a way that did him significant damage, and could well have done him more.

Hume might write disparagingly of Knox in the *Natural History* as a "rustic apostle," but there can be no doubt of Knox's success in establishing the dominance of the Calvinist Reformation in Scotland, a success that survived the attempts of the Stuart monarchs to force the Scots into Episcopal conformity. After the accession of William III to the British throne in 1688, the supremacy of the Presbyterian kirk in Scotland was complete, and Hume was born into a world where its teachings and practices were all around him. It taught a dour and largely unlettered form of Calvinism, complete with the doctrines of predestination, election, and the total depravity of fallen human nature, doctrines which of course entail the salvific uselessness of unaided moral effort. Hume appears to have reasoned himself out of these religious teachings during adolescence, and never to have felt anything but hostility towards them afterwards. They caused him to hold a view of popular religion as bigoted, life-denying, and inimical to the social needs of human nature. They were replaced for him, at the moral level, by a desire to return to the classical virtues, which he extols to the detriment of the "monkish virtues" of humility and self-denial. In the second and third books of the *Treatise of Human Nature*, he gives an account of the nature and basis of morality that allows no place for divine commands or for doctrines of ultimate rewards and punishments.

Even though the *Treatise* contains no sections devoted explicitly to religion, Hume's anti-religiousness was widely realized, and led to two important episodes. The first and better-known is his failure to gain appointment to the chair of Ethics and Pneumatical Philosophy at Edinburgh University in 1745 (Mossner 1970). In the anonymous *Letter from a Gentleman to His Friend in Edinburgh* (which, though published without his permission, was clearly written by him) he argues, disingenuously, that the *Treatise* was not religiously objectionable, but his arguments did not move the electors from their determination not to let him teach the young of their city. It must always be remembered that the *Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*, which appeared in 1748, was written in the aftermath of this affair, in which he clearly felt himself to have been the victim of bigotry and superstition. The second episode was an attempt to censure and excommunicate him at the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland in 1755 and 1756. By this date, however, another party in the church was able to exert influence: the group known as the Moderates (Sher 1985).

The Moderates were the inevitable contrast to the popular church party that had dominated the kirk for so long. They were learned, urbane, and anxious to free the church

from narrowness and bigotry. They were also skilled in the art of debate and manipulation, and it was these skills that enabled them to save Hume from the attacks that the popular party (or “High Flyers”) mounted on him at the General Assembly. The Moderates included such personages as Hugh Blair, William Robertson, and Alexander Carlyle, whom Hume numbered among his friends. It was the prominence of these men, as much as that of Hume himself and even of Adam Smith, that sustained the period of cultural development commonly referred to now as the Scottish Enlightenment. Hume’s friendship with them must be taken into account in the understanding of his attitudes toward religion, especially his concept of what he calls “true religion.” The preaching of the Moderates inculcated a form of Christian Stoicism that could not have contrasted more with the fervor of their theological opponents, whose “enthusiasm” they deplored.

It is worthwhile here to take a brief look at one of the sermons of their most famous preacher, Hugh Blair (Blair 1825). In his sermon “On Devotion” he explores the proper Christian religious attitude. He defines devotion as “the lively exercise of those affections which we owe to the Supreme Being,” these affections being veneration of God, gratitude to him, desire for his favor, and resignation to his will. These he recommends as rational attitudes, which are to be carefully distinguished from superstitious attachment to ritual, and enthusiastic obsession with “internal emotions.” He is at pains to emphasize that proper devotion requires neither retreat from the world and contempt for its concerns, nor perpetual rapture or spiritual joy. Blair’s emphasis throughout is on a moderate and restrained attachment to the religious life. Theological underpinnings are hard to find, in spite of the fact that scriptural quotations abound. Religion in such a form was wholly compatible with toleration and freedom of opinion, and was clearly something with which Hume’s skeptical temper and dislike of acrimonious public controversy could easily coexist.

The Enlightenment is commonly thought of as anti-religious; but this cannot be said without heavy qualification of the *Scottish* Enlightenment. It was not even anti-clerical, since so many of its prominent figures were clerics. The Moderates were rather men who attempted to integrate religious life and secular society. They did not find Hume’s views on religion to their liking, but were even more repelled by the stance of those who strove to condemn him. He in his turn allowed them to persuade him to leave the *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion* unpublished during his lifetime, and it is at least in part a result of their influence that his negative views on religion were usually expressed in a way that Norman Kemp Smith describes as following a policy of “stating his skeptical positions with the least possible emphasis compatible with definiteness” (DNR 73).

I also think that his recognition of the value of the Moderates’ influence must be taken into account when we decide how to read the puzzling twelfth part of the *Dialogues*. In this part Cleanthes and Philo argue about the nature and limits of “true religion.” Cleanthes, whose natural theology has been the subject of the previous eleven parts, gives this rather startling account of it:

The proper office of religion is to regulate the heart of men, humanize their conduct, infuse the spirit of temperance, order, and obedience; and as its operation is silent, and only enforces the motives of morality and justice, it is in danger of being overlooked, and

TERENCE PENELHUM

confounded with these other motives. When it distinguishes itself, and acts as a separate principle over men, it has departed from its proper sphere, and has become only a cover to faction and ambition. (DNR 220)

This is a fair enough description of the religion of the Moderates; but for all its doctrinal emptiness, it is clear that Cleanthes does not see it as equivalent to no religion at all, and sets great store by the retention of those institutions that embody it. Philo voices obviously Humean sentiments about the evils of “false” (that is, really religious) religion, but Cleanthes rebukes him, and tells him not to be so concerned about the dangers of false religion that he jettisons “the true.” Hume uses Cleanthes at this point as representative of his Moderate friends, and the deference Philo accords him indicates that Hume conceded that the unbridled questioning of religious credentials in which Philo indulges needed to be kept in check in the face of the ever-present risk of a High-Flying backlash.

This does not mean, however, that Hume thinks, any more than Philo does, that “true religion” is *true*. But having done all he can in the *Dialogues* to drain it of doctrinal content, he settles for having Pamphilus, the supposed narrator, award the official victory to Cleanthes.

Hume, Cicero, and the Skeptical Tradition

The device of having Pamphilus declare Cleanthes “nearer to the truth” than his friends is one that Hume, for his own purposes, copies from Cicero, who has the same thing happen at the close of his dialogue *On the Nature of the Gods* (Cicero 1972). Cicero, who, unlike Hume, reports the conversation in his own person, says that in his view Balbus, the Stoic who propounds the natural theology at issue in the work, rather than Cotta, the Academic skeptic, has the best of the argument. However we are to judge Cicero’s sympathies, we can see that Hume, by copying this formal conclusion, is able to soften the impact of Philo’s skeptical arguments, which most readers agree represent his own opinions.

The importance of Cicero to Hume is very great (Jones 1982). The wider question of the nature and extent of Hume’s skepticism cannot be fully explored here, but is important for deciding how his philosophy of religion is to be interpreted.

Hume himself states in section 12 of the first *Enquiry* that he adopts what he calls “mitigated” skepticism, and he identifies it with “academical” skepticism – the form of skeptic thought which was represented in the Academy in Athens in Cicero’s day, and on which he reported in *On the Nature of the Gods* and the *Academics*. The skeptic tradition of antiquity had a lengthy and complex history, beginning with Pyrrho in the fourth century BC and lasting seven hundred years (Burnyeat 1983). What Cicero reports to us is one of its phases. Many of its representatives are only known to us by report. Aside from the work of Cicero, the most important embodiment of the Skeptic tradition is to be found in the writings of Sextus Empiricus which date from the third century AD, especially his *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* (Sextus Empiricus 1967). The writings of Sextus were rediscovered in the sixteenth century, and became an important intellectual influence, which Descartes tried to defeat. It is not clear how far

Hume made any detailed study of Sextus, as distinct from Cicero, although he was certainly well acquainted with the work of Pierre Bayle, whose writings are full of Pyrrhonian influences. It is important to distinguish between Hume's views about skepticism regarding secular beliefs, and his views about skepticism and religion.

The skeptic tradition of Hellenistic times competed for the allegiance of the intelligentsia with Epicureanism and Stoicism, and like them had a critically important moral dimension. All three Hellenistic traditions sought to provide an antidote to the anxieties consequent upon the demise of the city-state tradition in which the good of the individual and that of the state could be integrated or even identified. Each sought to offer its adherents inner calm in the face of an impersonal world. The Epicureans claimed to provide this by recommending a life devoted to simple pleasures and the avoidance of unattainable objectives. The Stoics argued that it could be found in the practice of virtuous identification with the dictates of cosmic reason and the suppression of desire. The Skeptics saw the source of anxiety as commitment, in particular commitment to dogmas, or theoretical claims about reality that are believed to ground the pursuit of objectives that people judge to be good. They therefore used philosophical reasoning to undermine attempts (especially Stoic attempts) to use the philosophical intellect to prove the existence of a cosmic backing for human opinions. As their techniques are described by Sextus, the Skeptic would examine the philosophical arguments for and against dogmatic opinions, and becoming sated with such arguments, reach a stage of suspended judgment (*epoché*), which would in turn lead to an unperurbed state of mind, called *ataraxia*.

The natural response to this philosophical stance is to say, as opponents of Skepticism have indeed regularly said, that suspense of judgment can only lead to practical paralysis, and that one cannot doubt everything in the way this method seems to suggest one can. As Sextus reports it, the Skeptics had a well-thought-out response to this: that one lives according to appearances (*phainomena*). One reverts to the opinions and ways of life that one has always been inclined to accept, but one now follows them undogmatically – that is, in a way that is freed from the attempt to ground them in some supposed knowledge of ultimate reality. The message here is conservative and relativistic, and implies that the right use of philosophical reasoning is to induce an abandonment of attempts to arrive at final truth. Such a stance is not (or not self-evidently) unlivable, though many would find it morally enervating. It entails a life of external conformity to the beliefs of one's community, without inner commitment to them, and without expectation that philosophy can justify them. The particular modification of this stance that is associated with the Academic version of Skepticism reported by Cicero is the suggestion that among the appearances we encounter some which, though still lacking ultimate justification, can nevertheless be classed as probable, and therefore deserving of something resembling assent.

Hume's attitude to the Skeptic tradition is roughly as follows. He agrees that philosophical reasoning is unable to provide justification for our primary beliefs, but he goes further in one critical respect by denying that the negative arguments of the Skeptic can dislodge them. They can at most weaken them for short periods in the study. Human beings are by nature believing beings, and are therefore incapable of the belieflessness the Pyrrhonian tradition claimed to be a feature of the Skeptic life. Our instinct to believe is human nature's answer to the skeptic, though it is not a philosophical refutation of

his arguments. It is an instinct which saves us from paralysis and anxiety, which would be the actual result of suspense of judgment if it were possible for us. Hume thus rejects what he sees (correctly or not) as the Pyrrhonian form of skepticism, and in his detailed exploration of the concept of probability he embraces and develops what he calls mitigated, or Academic, skepticism. He expounds this most fully in section 12 of the first *Enquiry*, and incorporates into it the crypto-positivist recommendation that the philosopher is best advised not to stray beyond the methodizing and correcting of the beliefs of “common life,” and to eschew attempts to ground them in reason or add to them in metaphysical speculation.

What, however, about religious beliefs? These, after all, seem to be, or to have been, a substantial element in common life. The Skeptics of antiquity were fully conscious of this, and although in our own day the term “skeptic” tends to connote a rejection of religious beliefs, the skeptics of antiquity did not respond to them in this way. For them the wise man would conform to the religious traditions and practices of his own community, but would do this undogmatically: that is, without supposing that they have cosmic backing and without attempting to support them by reason. Cotta, in Cicero’s dialogue, speaks as a practitioner, indeed a functionary, of the state religion. What he rejects is not the religion but the attempt to use philosophy to establish its teachings. Hume is fully cognizant of this strand in the Skeptic tradition, and of the fact that it implied an acceptance of religion as a form of social cement, while keeping one’s inner distance from the doctrines to which one outwardly and verbally conforms. But this raises a difficult question: if the secular beliefs of common life (in the regularity of nature, the existence of physical objects, and the identity of the self) are not beliefs we can detach ourselves from, might not the same be true of religious beliefs? Hume’s response here is a twofold one. He enters into a substantial examination of the origin and place of religious belief in human nature, in *The Natural History of Religion*. He is at pains to separate this enquiry from the philosophical examination of natural theology in the *Dialogues*, where he scrutinizes the attempt to ground religious beliefs in philosophical argument. The upshot of this twofold procedure is a famous statement at the end of part 12 of the *Dialogues*: “To be a philosophical skeptic is, in a man of letters, the first and most essential step towards being a sound, believing Christian.”

The implications of this statement of Philo are complex ones. In the first instance, the sound, believing Christian to whom Philo refers will be the secularized believer whose doctrinal commitments have been reduced to those minimal tenets that Philo has allowed Cleanthes to stay with by the end of part 12 – tenets which Philo summarizes in the notorious statement that “the cause or causes of order in the universe probably bear some remote analogy to human intelligence.” Secondly, the skepticism he refers to will be the Humean mitigated skepticism that Philo explicitly espouses in the first part of the *Dialogues*. It is part of that sort of skepticism to maintain that the philosopher should not investigate vast questions such as the origin of the world because they are beyond the reach of our faculties to determine. The arguments Hume puts into the mouth of Philo do not presuppose the correctness of this view, but are designed to demonstrate its truth. Cleanthes offers, in his version of the Argument from Design, an attempt to establish the reality of God on the basis of observation and experience, and what Philo seeks to show is that it is a bad argument that at best yields a far less nourishing result.

Hume is thus far at one with the classical Sceptics in rejecting the philosophical attempt to ground religious doctrines in argument. The sentence in which Philo speaks of the value of skepticism for the Christian, however, seems to suggest something more: that the Sceptics were right to think of religion as being properly based solely upon tradition, to which the skeptic could undogmatically conform. Is this also Hume's opinion? Or is this sentence of Philo's a merely verbal form of deference to the religion Philo has left over for his friend?

I do not think a full answer to this is possible until we have looked at some of the French influences on Hume's thought. But it is closely allied to another issue we can answer. If skeptical arguments cannot hinder us from believing those things without which we cannot live this life, why suppose they can hinder us from believing those things that we are told we need to believe in order to prosper in the next? Perhaps religious beliefs are as inescapable as the secular natural beliefs. Hume is deeply aware that his system has to confront this issue, and he gives us his answers to it in *The Natural History of Religion*.

The first answer is that although religious beliefs are very widespread among human beings, they are not universal. The second is that religious beliefs vary so much from society to society that they have to be due to "secondary" causes, that is, to environmental or historical factors rather than to basic instincts in our natures. The implication is that it is possible for those who are suitably fortunate to escape them, so that our reasoning powers do not have to be subordinated to religious beliefs in the way that mitigated skepticism tells us they have to be subordinated to our secular natural beliefs. The actual causes of religion, Hume says, are the anxieties that humans suffer in the face of calamitous events, which they ascribe to invisible personal powers that they hope to propitiate. This theory of the origin of religious beliefs locates it in special events whose causes are not understood – the exact opposite of the law-abiding natural uniformity which is the basis of the Argument from Design. An additional implication of this fact is that those who are aware of the orderliness of the natural world will not be plagued by the anxieties that generate religious hypotheses in the first place.

So Hume feels he can deflect the suggestion that since our natures determine our commitment to the secular natural beliefs whose status is the core concern of his epistemology, they must also determine us to hold some form of religious belief. But this could still leave him open to the view of the classical Skeptic that we would be wise to conform to its institutions and practices in a suitably detached fashion. Indeed, Philo's concluding comment on skepticism seems to embody this very suggestion. Is this Hume's own opinion?

Hume and the French

Hume went to France in 1734 and stayed there until 1737, and most of the *Treatise* was composed during these three years. Readers who have viewed him primarily as an empiricist successor of Locke and Berkeley have inevitably overlooked the immense importance of French influences on his thinking. This is especially odd when one considers that the skeptical strand in Hume, which the "Locke–Berkeley–Hume" tradition tends to emphasize, has largely French sources.

One of the many debts philosophical scholars owe to Richard Popkin is his exploration of the influence of the Catholic Pyrrhonists of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (Popkin 1979; Penelhum 1983). The recovery of the writings of Sextus led some to think that they could draw upon his batteries of arguments against the power of human reason and use them in the service of a particular form of Fideism – the view that faith should avoid all attempts to recommend itself by appeals to reason. This form of apologetic was used in the debates between Catholics and Protestants to reinforce the Catholic claim that a traditional authority was necessary to interpret scripture, and was used more generally to reinforce the claims of faith against reason, whose alleged impotence was said to leave a gap that only faith could fill. Forms of this position are to be found in such otherwise opposed thinkers as Montaigne and Pascal, to mention only the most famous and influential figures. Hume will have been familiar with this apologetic tradition, in spite of being unsympathetic to it. He makes use of its language for his own purposes, as when he says at the end of his discussion of miracles that “I am the better pleased with the method of reasoning here delivered, as I think it may serve to confound those dangerous friends or disguised enemies to the CHRISTIAN religion, who have undertaken to defend it by the principles of human reason. Our most holy religion is founded on *Faith*, not on reason, and it is a sure method of exposing it to put it to such a trial as it is, by no means, fitted to endure” (EHU 10.40). He appropriates it further when he makes Philo say that philosophical skepticism is the first step towards sound Christianity.

In this appropriation he is following in the footsteps of a thinker whose influence he acknowledges, namely Pierre Bayle. Bayle’s importance as a source of understanding of the Enlightenment is very great. A French Protestant who had briefly converted to Catholicism and then relapsed, he lived as a refugee from French persecution in Rotterdam. His immense erudition and prolific journalistic and literary writings were a bottomless storehouse of skeptical comment and argument throughout the eighteenth century. He gained notoriety through his *Various Thoughts on the Occasion of a Comet*, which first appeared in 1682 (Bayle 1682). In it he decisively undermined a common assumption of ethical and religious writers of his time, that atheism entailed moral depravity, arguing on the contrary that a society of righteous atheists was indeed a possibility, especially in view of the lack of righteousness in many Christian societies. We can see Hume as the first major moral philosopher to attempt to demonstrate the truth of Bayle’s contention by producing in Book 3 of the *Treatise* an ethic in which religion has no place as a source of moral judgment or moral motivation, and by arguing in section 11 of the first *Enquiry* that the only sort of knowledge of God that natural religion could provide is irrelevant to our moral decisions. Bayle is best known for his *Historical and Critical Dictionary* of 1697, an immense work that is nominally a series of biographies of greater and lesser historical figures, but in which phenomenal learning, skeptical argument, and cynical cunning combine to produce what was regarded by the major figures of the Enlightenment, including Hume, as a mine of anti-religious ammunition. The intellectually exciting material for which the work is known had to be mined from the footnotes, and the footnotes to the footnotes, to the frequently rather bland articles – a device to deflect orthodox authorities from the work’s frequently explosive contents. Bayle’s intentions are in fact a matter of controversy. His stance throughout is that the limitations of reason are such that

faith must sustain itself without philosophical support, since the key teachings of Christianity are not merely beyond, but are frequently contrary to, reason. This apparently extreme form of fideism may in fact have been Bayle's real opinion, and his major motive in scholarship may merely have been that of defusing the religious controversies from which he and his family had suffered by suggesting the faithful had best be content with the sort of conformist religiosity into which the classical Pyrrhonists had retreated. But his obvious relish for exposing the intellectual difficulties in orthodox doctrine, and his aggressively naturalistic readings of classical and biblical history and mythology, were commonly read throughout the succeeding century as anti-religious in their purpose. As far as Hume is concerned, Bayle's influence is to be seen in at least four aspects of his writing on religion: first, as a major conduit of the Skeptic tradition on a multitude of subjects; second, as a source of the naturalistic interpretation of religion that Hume develops in *The Natural History of Religion*; third, as an obvious inspiration for Hume's occasional resort to indirection and nominal reportage in his presentation of some of his key arguments (as in the *Dialogues* and section 11 of the *Enquiry*), and the adoption of a light and bantering manner while dealing with themes on which he felt very strongly; and fourth, as a model for the presentation of unorthodox views in a form that retains at least a verbal conformity with current religious conventions.

One more of the many French influences on Hume's writing must be mentioned here. David Wootton has shown that the form and the content of the famous section "Of Miracles" was determined in large part by the fact that Hume appears to have composed its key argument during his stay at La Flèche, and that its primary target was not (or not initially) any English writers on miracles, but Antoine Arnauld, who had argued in *La logique, ou l'art de penser*, known in English as *The Art of Thinking*, that testimony of high quality could override the intrinsic unlikelihood of miraculous events, and thus justify us in accepting that miracles have occurred. Hume's main argument against miracles is that when the testimony is to an event that is genuinely miraculous, and not merely extraordinary, the reverse is true. The fact that Hume's target was originally Arnauld explains the fact that his essay confines itself to the evaluation of miracle testimony (Wootton 1990; Arnauld 1662; Hunter 1996). It also explains the fact that Hume goes out of his way in a footnote to ridicule a particular miracle story associated with the monastery of Port-Royal, where Arnauld's sister Angélique was abbess, namely the miracle of the Holy Thorn. Marguérite Perrier, the niece of Pascal, was a young pupil at a school attached to Port-Royal, and was afflicted with a tumor in the corner of her left eye, which had grown worse over the years, and on which the doctors were planning to perform a dangerous cauterization. In 1656 Port-Royal received the loan of a holy relic, said to be a thorn from the crown of Christ. Marguerite was told to touch the thorn to her eye, and when she did so, the discharge ceased and the tumor dried up. It would seem that this event was in Arnauld's mind in *The Art of Thinking*, although it is not mentioned explicitly. Hume uses it as an example, which his English Protestant readers would interpret as he did, of a person of the highest intellectual attainments (Pascal) being taken in by collective hysteria (EHU 10.27n25). It is noteworthy also that the other examples of erroneous beliefs in miracles that Hume draws upon from his own time are French.

The Deists and Butler

However much Hume's mind was influenced by French thinkers, he wrote for an English readership. The second part of the Miracles section contains arguments that will have been familiar in type to all those who had followed what R. M. Burns has called the Great Debate on Miracles (Burns 1981). This debate had raged for years among the British intelligentsia, and Hume joined it quite late. It had been dominated by two groups, whom Burns accurately names the orthodox and the deists.

The orthodox took the traditional apologetic position, deriving from Aquinas, in which proofs of the existence of God are followed by secondary arguments designed to show that the God whose being had been demonstrated in the proofs has revealed additional truths about himself in the history of Israel, the events of the New Testament, and the miracles alleged to have attended the history (especially the early history) of the Christian church. In *The Evidences of Christianity*, Paley later complained that Hume had attacked miracles in a manner that ignored the fact that their defenders presupposed the existence of a God who might well reveal himself to us in history (Paley 1794). Hume had in fact carefully confined himself to the claim that testimony can never be enough to establish a miracle so as to make it a "foundation for a system of religion." There is room for debate on how far this fact vitiates Paley's argument, but it is striking that Paley says nothing about Hume's independent attacks on the sort of proof of God that Paley himself uses, but proceeds as though the *Dialogues*, and section 11 of the *Enquiry*, which immediately follows the argument on miracles, had never been written.

It is important, however, to bear in mind that the orthodox use of miracle evidence and testimony did indeed follow on from a supposed demonstration of God's existence and his providence. The deists' role in the miracles controversy was that of separating these two parts of the traditional apologetic, by arguing that the proof of God did not make miracles more likely, but less. Deists believed that God's being had indeed been shown by the Design argument. That argument sought to establish the existence of a Designer of the world, whose *modus operandi* had been shown to us by the labors of Newton. The deists maintained that a being of such intelligence would have no need to intervene in his creation subsequently; and just as his cosmic design was open to the understanding of all, so his moral and spiritual requirements must be open to all and not be known only to those who happen to have lived in or near ancient Palestine.

So they rejected special revelation, believing only in whatever divine message was contained in the order of nature and in the deliverances of the individual conscience. All additional claims to revealed authority were dismissed as mystery-mongering, due to "priestcraft." Many deists claimed to be Christians, and saw their mission as the demonstration that Christianity was, in the words of the title of John Toland's book, not mysterious, and consisted of the sort of natural religion that was, in the words of the title of Matthew Tindal's work, as old as creation (Toland 1696; Tindal 1730). Hume's attack on miracles put him, as far as this ongoing English debate was concerned, on the side of the deists. But only, of course, as far as *this* debate was concerned.

The deists met their intellectual match in Joseph Butler, for whom Hume expressed admiration, and whose support he tried to solicit before the *Treatise* was published.

(He even excised material on miracles from it in order to make it less unpalatable to him.) In *The Analogy of Religion* of 1736, Butler argues with his opponents where they are. He assumes what they assume, namely that there is a God who has created an orderly world and placed us in it. His main argument against them is that they infer too much from this about our ability to decide what God's purposes are, or what they cannot be. His most important apologetic work outside the *Analogy* is his fifteenth sermon, "Upon the Ignorance of Man." The message, both there and in the larger work, is that we should be properly aware of our epistemological limitations. His position, however, owes nothing to skepticism. We know that we live under a providential order, governed by God, but this does not mean that God intends us to understand all the principles of this order, only that we can learn enough to enable us to practice that mode of life to which he calls us. (God may, in fact, conceal from us some features of his plans that we are capable of understanding, but which he thinks it best we should not know.) Butler then proceeds, in the *Analogy*, to argue that there is a probable case for natural religion, and no sound case against revealed religion. On the first, when we reflect that the natural order is the work of God, and that in it we are able to learn from our experience early in life how best to conduct ourselves in later years, so, by analogy we can infer that this life is a training ground, or sphere of "probation," in which we can equip ourselves for whatever God has in store for us in a future life. On the second, he argues that since God may have intentions for us that we do not understand fully, he may "attest" those intentions by prophecies and miracles that authenticate scriptural pronouncements. Even though these phenomena may be exceptions to the natural laws we learn from science, they may well be in accordance with "general laws of wisdom" that will make fuller sense to us in time (Butler 1736).

Butler's arguments have serious force against the deists, and succeed in undermining their confidence that God would not place us in a world that had mysteries in it. But his arguments have their power largely because they assume the common conviction that the being of God has been proved. If one holds this, it follows that apparent evils in the world, or puzzling facts such as the special status Christianity ascribes to a chosen people, must have a reason even though we do not presently see what it is. It is not accidental that Butler, who is praised by Hume at the outset of the *Treatise* for his empirical methods, and certainly seeks to use such methods in the *Analogy*, presupposes that God's being is not only rendered certain by the argument from Design, but accepts the cogency of Samuel Clarke's *a priori* demonstration of it (see *Analogy* 2.6). In section 11 of the *Enquiry*, and later in the *Dialogues*, Hume insists, on the assumption that no matter of fact can be proved *a priori*, that phenomena that may perhaps be reconciled with divine perfection if that is assumed beforehand, have to be weighed in the evidential balance when the nature, and even the being, of God is considered solely in the light of the sort of cosmos we can see ourselves to inhabit. Such a cosmos does not of itself suggest that our life we live here is the prelude to another, or that the deity, if such there be, who governs it, has the power or inclination to produce a world better than we find here and now.

But Hume does not only have negative things to say at the level of philosophical theology. He also pioneers the study of comparative religion, and argues that the deists and (by implication) Butler run afoul of the evidence at that level also. In the

Natural History he distinguishes at the outset between religion's "foundation in reason" and its "origin in human nature." He pays lip-service to the former, which is not to be his topic in this work; he then makes it clear at once that an investigation into the latter shows that it had nothing to do with the contemplation of natural order which is the basis of the Design argument:

It appears to me, that, if we consider the improvement of human society, from rude beginnings to a state of greater perfection, polytheism or idolatry was, and necessarily must have been, the first and most ancient religion of mankind. (NHR Intro.)

He then ascribes the origin of religious belief to human fears arising from special events and calamities such as monstrous births. Such events are ascribed to "invisible, intelligent" powers which resemble the personal forces with which primitive humans are already familiar. Early humans did not have the leisure to contemplate nature as a whole; they merely reacted to aberrant and unpleasant forces in it. Monotheism is a much later development that comes, in Hume's story, from competition between competing groups of devotees.

So idolatry precedes, and does not follow upon, monotheism, which Hume ironically says could never be dislodged once the mind was convinced of its cogency. In this Hume opposes the orthodox view, found famously in the beginning of Calvin's *Institutes*, that humanity began with a clear awareness of the one true God, an awareness that was defaced and corrupted because of the Fall, and was manifested in sinful form in all later history, in which the human soul became a "factory of idols" (Calvin 1536). But Hume also undermines the deists' view that idolatry requires a special explanation in view of the obviousness of God's unity and rationality – a special explanation that often ascribed it to the wiles of priests. Butler, in defending revelation against the deists, also supposes that it took an initially monotheistic form at the time of creation. Hume sweeps all these views aside by an appeal to evidence.

Conclusion

I will take, in order, sections 10 and 11 of the first *Enquiry*, *The Natural History of Religion*, and the *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion*, and indicate how each embodies Hume's responses to the influences described in the preceding sections.

Section 10 of the *Enquiry*, "Of Miracles," opens with a general argument that tries to establish that if we confine ourselves to the evidence, even impeccable testimony to a miracle must contend with the fact that if the event reported is genuinely miraculous in character, all the evidence that established the natural law of which it would be a violation has to be weighed in the balance against the reports of it; so that even the best reports of witnesses can do no more than produce a stalemate in which one "proof" balances an opposite one. It seems that Hume originally developed this argument to respond to the claims for miracle testimony found in Arnauld, though it clearly has wider application. The second part of the section is designed to join the prior English debate on miracles by giving a series of reasons why we should never accept the miracle testimony we actually have, since it has never been

impeccable and has never, therefore, amounted to a “proof” in Hume’s sense. In section 11, “Of a Particular Providence and of a Future State,” one of Hume’s most elegant and carefully-constructed essays, he argues that the Design argument can at most show the reality of a God great enough to produce the world we have. Such a conclusion is irrelevant to our practical decisions. The essay also undermines Butler’s apologetic by showing that the evidence on which the Design argument rests cannot lend support to any theory that draws analogies between this life and another.

The Natural History of Religion is noteworthy for three things. First, by arguing that the forces that lead to religious belief are “secondary” in our natures, so that religion is not universal, Hume seeks to evade the criticism that in tracing our common sense commitments to non-rational instincts in our nature, he has opened the way to a philosophical legitimation of religion. Second, by insisting that religion is initially polytheistic, or idolatrous, Hume undermines both the orthodox and the deistic views of the nature of humans’ initial awareness of the divine. Third, by trying to show how monotheism evolves from primitive polytheism, Hume paves the way for many of the later arguments in the *Dialogues* which make it clear that the evidence on which the Design argument relies is not evidence that naturally suggests its conclusion. The story told in the *Natural History* explains why it is that the monotheism whose origin is described there is ready to hand in our minds as a supposed conclusion from that evidence.

The *Dialogues* is too complex a work for any summary of the influences upon it to be comprehensive. I will try, however, to draw together some of the themes that have arisen earlier.

In part 1, Philo is made to propound the mitigated skepticism of section 12 of the *Enquiry*, and to hold, in opposition to Cleanthes, that our reason, which should be confined to matters of experience and common life, should avoid theological argument. While Cleanthes also thinks that reason should argue from experience, he thinks such reasoning can indeed lead us to knowledge of the being and nature of God. The next ten parts put this matter between them to the test; and Philo’s dialectical victories throughout justify his concluding statement that being a philosophical skeptic is the first step towards “sound” Christian belief. The whole argument, therefore, puts Hume on the side of the Christian Pyrrhonists in maintaining that reason cannot justify religion or provide intellectual foundations for it. It also provides his refutation of Butler’s defense of orthodoxy by showing, against both Butler and his deistic opponents, that if one really does confine one’s reasoning to the analogies and probabilities to which Butler said he was restricting himself, the result, at the very best, is a pared-down recognition that the cause or causes of the world’s order may resemble human intelligence: a conclusion that is less than Butler’s starting-point, and which Philo merely presents as a position that “some people maintain.” Any more doctrinal content in religion must come, as Philo says, from revelation, if any should turn out to be available. It is hard for a reader of the *Natural History* to think that Philo speaks for Hume, or even for himself, in expressing a longing for it.

The Pyrrhonists, and the early modern fideists who followed them and whose language Hume uses, saw revealed and institutionalized religion as a matter of tradition and convention, like Cicero’s Cotta and the fictional Epicurus of section 11 of the *Enquiry*. It is not totally clear that Hume has no sympathy for this view of religion, at least if

the institutions that embody it are in suitably urbane hands, such as those of his Moderate friends. This must be at least part of the reason behind his making Philo, in part 12, talk as though he has been at one with Cleanthes all along in recognizing the divine source of the world's order, and as sharing in spiritual objectives that they can agree upon now that Demea, who represents orthodoxy, has left the scene. He can even live with Cleanthes' continuing and obtuse belief that the theism he represents has rational foundations, since he has long since shown that the price of maintaining this claim is the abandonment of all doctrinal content. At this stage I suggest Philo is no longer Hume, any more than Cleanthes is any longer Butler (if he ever was). Philo is rather the skeptic who concedes as much as Hume's epistemological principles can permit anyone to concede in theology, and in so doing adopts the wording of the secularized religious functionaries of Hume's day as a concession to the value of a tolerant religious establishment. What of Hume himself? He chooses in the *Dialogues* not to speak in his own person; but we can recall that in section 11 of the *Enquiry* the argument that he presents as his own, rather than through his fictional friend or that friend's fictional Epicurus, is the argument that causal reasoning cannot be extended beyond the realm of experience. In the *Dialogues* this appears as one of Philo's earliest objections to Cleanthes, which suggests that Philo speaks for Hume in those negative early arguments, and may well not do so at the close, when he seems to embrace "true religion." If this inference is a sound one, then Hume himself probably does not concede even the little that Philo agrees to. He keeps his atheism in the closet, a closet to which even Philo does not have the key.

See also 18 "Hume on the Nature and Existence of God"; 19 "Hume on Miracles and Immortality"

References

- Arnauld, Antoine and Nicole, Pierre (1662). *The Art of Thinking*, ed. James Dickoff and Patricia James (Indianapolis, IN: Bobbs-Merrill, 1964).
- Bayle, Pierre (1682). *Various Thoughts on the Occasion of a Comet*, trans. Robert C. Bartlett (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2000).
- (1697). *Historical and Critical Dictionary*, trans. Richard H. Popkin (Indianapolis, IN: Bobbs-Merrill, 1965).
- Blair, Hugh (1825). *Sermons*, 2 vols. (Edinburgh: T. and W. Nelson).
- Burns, R. M. (1981). *The Great Debate on Miracles: From Joseph Glanvill to David Hume* (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press).
- Burnyeat, Myles (ed.) (1983). *The Skeptical Tradition* (Berkeley: University of California Press).
- Butler, Joseph (1736). *The Works of Bishop Butler*, 2 vols., ed. J. H. Bernard (London: Macmillan, 1900).
- Calvin, John (1536). *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960).
- Cicero (1972). *The Nature of the Gods*, trans. Horace C. P. McGregor (Harmondsworth: Penguin).
- Clarke, Samuel (1738). *Works*, vol. 2: *A Demonstration of the Being and Attributes of God* (New York: Garland Publishing Inc., 1978).
- Hume, David (1745). *A Letter from a Gentleman to His Friend in Edinburgh*, ed. Ernest C. Mossner and John V. Price (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1967).

- (1779). *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion*, ed. Norman Kemp Smith (Indianapolis, IN: Bobbs-Merrill, 1980). (Cited in the text as DNR.)
- (1757). *The Natural History of Religion*, ed. H. E. Root (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1957). (Cited in the text as *Natural History*.)
- Hunter, Graeme (1996). "Arnauld's Defence of Miracles and Its Context," in Elmar J. Kremer (ed.), *Interpreting Arnauld* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press).
- Jones, Peter (1982). *Hume's Sentiments: Their Ciceronian and French Context* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press).
- Mossner, Ernest C. (1970). *The Life of David Hume* (Oxford: Clarendon Press).
- Paley, William (1794). *The Works of William Paley*, vol. 2: *The Evidences of Christianity* (London: Longmans, 1838), 4 vols.
- Penelhum, Terence (1983). *God and Skepticism* (Dordrecht: Reidel).
- Popkin, Richard (1979). *The History of Skepticism from Erasmus to Spinoza* (Berkeley: University of California Press).
- Sextus Empiricus. *Sextus Empiricus*, trans. Robert Gregg Bury (Loeb Classical Library. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1976), 4 vols.
- Sher, Richard B. (1985). *Church and University in the Scottish Enlightenment* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press).
- Tindal, Matthew (1730). *Christianity as Old as the Creation* (New York: Garland Publishers, 1978).
- Toland, John (1696). *Christianity Not Mystrious*, ed. Gunther Gawlick (Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: Friedrich Frommann, 1964).
- Wootton, David (1990). "Hume's 'Of Miracles': Probability and Irreligion," in M. A. Stewart (ed.), *Studies in the Philosophy of the Scottish Enlightenment* (Oxford: Clarendon Press).

Further Reading

- Fogelin, Robert J. (2003). *A Defense of Hume on Miracles* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press).
- Gaskin, John (1988). *Hume's Philosophy of Religion*, 2nd edn. (London: Macmillan).
- Manuel, Frank E. (1959). *The Eighteenth Century Confronts the Gods* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press).
- Penelhum, Terence (1985). *Butler* (London: Routledge).
- (2000). *Themes in Hume: The Self, the Will, Religion* (Oxford: Clarendon Press).
- Sessions, William Lad (2002). *Reading Hume's Dialogues: A Veneration for True Religion* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press).
- Stewart, M. A. and Wright, John P. (eds.) (1994). *Hume and Hume's Connexions* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press).
- Yandell, Keith E. (1990). *Hume's "Inexplicable Mystery": His Views on Religion* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press).