

11 Hume on religion

Hume's critique of religion and religious belief is, as a whole, subtle, profound, and damaging to religion in ways which have no philosophical antecedents and few successors. Some of the damage and a little of the subtlety will, I trust, become evident in Part II of this essay, where Hume's seminal discussions of the design argument for the existence of God, miracles, morality, and natural belief are examined. Before this, however, certain preliminaries need attention. First, there is the difficulty caused by the old-fashioned or unfamiliar terminology used by Hume and his commentators in describing and assessing what he has to say. Second, although the scale of Hume's writing on religion is reasonably obvious (it exceeds his output concerning any other subject except history), the fact that it is dispersed over a number of publications and partly embedded (sometimes none too clearly) in several more, as well as having to be drawn from essays, letters, and minor writings, needs to be understood before any informed discussion is possible. Third, there is the problem of seeing what he wrote not as ad hoc criticisms turned out piecemeal, but as a comprehensive critical strategy. Finally, a problem of interpretation results from Hume's "abundant prudence" in covering his real opinions with ambiguous irony and even, on occasions, with denials of his own apparent conclusions.

I shall attempt some clarification of these four preliminary issues in Part I of this essay, beginning with the terminology, a matter which infects and informs all else that can be said.

I. TEXT AND CONTEXT

Terminology

A basic classification of religious information according to its source in reason or in historically particular disclosures has long been established in the contrast between *natural theology* or *natural religion*, on the one hand, and *revelation* or *revealed religion*, on the other. *Natural religion* (the phrase usually does duty in the eighteenth century for the now more common term *natural theology*) is the system of conclusions about God's (or the gods') existence and nature supposedly attainable from evidence and by reasoning accessible to any intelligent person irrespective of any special information conveyed in the Bible, Koran, or other revelatory source. For example, the conclusion that a designing agent, not chance, is needed to explain the order of the cosmos is part of natural not revealed religion. *Revelation* or *revealed religion*, on the other hand, is the body of alleged truths about the divine which can only be obtained from particular historical and supposedly inspired sources such as the Bible or Koran. For example, the claims that an individual human person can expect resurrection after death, or that God once sent his son into the world, are parts of a revelation. A distinction is sometimes made between *particular revelation* and *general revelation*. *Particular revelation* is revelation as just described. *General revelation* is the supposed general experience of the presence of God in the religious life of each believer.

Within natural religion, two types of argument in various versions are, and always have been, conspicuous. Hume (and some others who use the pre-Kantian terminology) calls these *the argument a posteriori* and *the argument a priori*, respectively. *The argument a posteriori* is the phrase by which Hume usually refers to versions of what we would normally call the design argument, that is, the argument that God exists because His creative intelligence can be observed in the order or purposiveness to be found in the natural world (DNR 2, 143; 9, 188, for example). *The argument a priori*, in Hume's usage (DNR 9, 188), refers to his paraphrase of the particular cosmological argument to be found in Samuel Clarke's Boyle Lectures for 1704, later published as *A Discourse concerning the Being and Attributes of God*. The argument in Hume's words begins "Whatever

exists must have a cause or reason of its existence" and concludes with the claim, "We must, therefore, have recourse to a necessarily existent Being, who carries the REASON of his existence in himself; and who cannot be supposed not to exist without an express contradiction" (DNR 9, 188–9).

Both the positive rejection of revelation as a source of religious knowledge and one of the possible conclusions attainable from the arguments and evidence of natural religion can be referred to as *deism*. Thus, the term *deism* was widely used in the eighteenth century, but with vague meaning, to indicate a view of religion which held that our reliable knowledge of God is based upon reason alone (that is to say, upon natural religion and not upon revelation). The term is not much used by Hume except to reject its application to himself.¹ It is also a term used to indicate belief (arrived at from reasoning alone) in a god who set the universe in motion or caused the universe to exist and then left it alone. Another way of expressing this limited view is to say that deism is the claim to rationally substantiated belief in a god lacking *providence*. *Providence*, while sometimes used as a synonym for God, is more particularly used to refer to that aspect of God's (or the gods') nature which consists in exerting control, guidance, or forethought in the moral affairs of mankind or the physical processes of the world. Hume uses *providence* in just this sense in Section 9 of the *Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*, where he argues that there is no evidence for God's providence.

When the God (either on the evidence of revelation or natural religion, or in some other way) is held to be a single and eternal God who created all things (possibly *ex nihilo*) and continues to sustain and work within his creation (that is, to exercise providence), the belief is usually called *theism*. Thus, the common root of the Judaic, Christian, and Islamic religions is theism.

Two corruptions of religion were of great concern to Hume and other eighteenth-century writers. These corruptions were *superstition*, usually associated with idolatry and with the Church of Rome, and *enthusiasm*, usually associated with the newly converted and with extreme Protestant sects. *Superstition* is the state in which "unknown evils are dreaded from unknown agents." Its source is "weakness, fear, melancholy, together with ignorance," and it manifests itself in "ceremonies, observances, mortifications, sacrifices,

presents" directed towards the unknown agent. *Enthusiasm* is religion corrupted by emotional fanaticism or religious mania: "raptures, transports, and surprising flights of fancy" that are "attributed to the immediate inspiration of that Divine Being, who is the object of devotion" (E-SE, 73–4).²

An attitude to religion often associated in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries with enthusiasm, but also having a pedigree which includes Tertullian, Pascal, and possibly St. Paul, was sometimes referred to by Hume's near contemporaries as "implicit belief" or "blind belief" or "the submission of reason to faith." In the nineteenth century, this attitude was developed into the position known since about 1870 as *fideism*. This is the view, argued by some Christian apologists to be reinforced by Hume's scepticism, that religious belief is justified by faith alone, quite apart from reasons or evidence, because *all* knowledge rests upon premises accepted by faith.

Finally there are two confusing terms which both contain the word *natural*, but which are used in different senses: the eighteenth-century term *natural history* and the twentieth-century term *natural belief*. *Natural history* (as in Hume's *Natural History of Religion*) indicates an account of something as a natural phenomenon. In the title of Hume's work, the account is of the cause and conditions which "naturally" produce religion (as, for example, the presence of air and water "naturally" produce rust on iron) without reference to any reasons which can be produced in favour of or against the religion in question. The phrase *natural belief*, on the other hand, is not to be found in Hume's own writings. It was introduced by Norman Kemp Smith,³ and has been much used since, to indicate basic or indispensable beliefs.

The works

Hume's two main works directly on religion are the *Natural History of Religion* (1757) and the *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion* (1779, but first written in the 1750s). The former deals with religion's natural origins in human nature and society – its causes. The latter examines the supposed rational grounds for belief in God or gods – its reasons. Parts of the latter examination had already been given a preliminary run in Section 11 of the *Enquiry concerning*

Human Understanding (1748), in which there also appeared the chapter "Of Miracles," Hume's celebrated onslaught on the credentials of the Christian revelation. But the *Enquiry* as a whole also develops an epistemological attack on metaphysics and "philosophical religion" whose final outcome is not unlike the conclusions of twentieth-century logical positivism (EHU 12.3, 165). Less obviously, the second *Enquiry*, the *Enquiry concerning The Principles of Morals* (1751) is also concerned with religion. In it, Hume gives an account of a morality in which what is added by religion to the secular core all too often amounts to spurious virtues and imaginary crimes which result in cruel, bigoted, and anti-utilitarian interferences in human affairs. Some of these interferences are chronicled in his *History of England* (published between 1754 and 1762).

Among Hume's fifty or so individual essays, there are numerous reflections on religion. These range from the lengthy footnote on the hypocrisy of the clergy, which is attached to "Of National Characters," to the damaging duality developed in "Of Superstition and Enthusiasm." This duality would seem to leave little of true religion once the corruptions of religion have been understood. But by far the most important essays are the two which ought to have appeared in 1757 along with the *Natural History of Religion*. These are "Of Suicide" (which argues that suicide is neither immoral nor irreligious) and "Of the Immortality of the Soul" (which argues that there is good evidence for man's mortality). Both essays were withdrawn by Hume before publication after threats against him or his publisher, although copies of both survived to be reprinted in modern editions.

Finally, letters and short documents apart, there is the *Treatise of Human Nature* (1739–40). The *Treatise*, Hume's first work, is, to our eyes, not overtly concerned with religion. Part of the reason for this is that Hume excised some of its "nobler parts" before publication, including some version of "Of Miracles" (which could have been located in Book 1, Part 3, between sections 13 and 14),⁴ and possibly some version of "Of the Immortality of the Soul" (which could have formed the concluding pages to the section of Book 1 entitled "Of the Immateriality of the Soul"). But a more important reason that the *Treatise* as published does not seem to us much concerned with religion is that our sensitivities to what would constitute an attack upon religion are much weaker than those of

Hume's contemporaries. The nature of their sensitivities is illuminated by the pamphlet *A Letter from a Gentleman*. The text is drawn from a letter by Hume and was rushed into print on his behalf in 1745 when he was a candidate for the Chair of Moral Philosophy at Edinburgh University. In it, Hume is defended against six "charges" that the *Treatise* subverts religion. To us, the most obvious charge is that some of his arguments about causation (particularly the section in Book 1 entitled "*Why a cause is always necessary*") constitute a significant criticism of the *a priori* argument for God's existence.

The structure of Hume's critique

Suppose we put the fundamental question thus: Why does anyone believe in God or gods, or cleave to the teachings of such theistic religions as Christianity or Islam? The answer may be given (non-exclusively) in terms of either reasons or causes, and it is under this division that Hume's examination of religion begins to look like a comprehensive critique rather than a collection of challenging but discrete sections.

In traditional (and particularly eighteenth-century) religious apologetics, the reasons for belief in God usually took the form of appeals to arguments and revelation. The appeal to revelation was neither to the general revelation associated with dedicated religious practice nor to individual claims to have direct information about the Divine, but specifically to the particular revelation of Christianity as set out in the New Testament. This, it was supposed, carried with it certain guarantees of its own authenticity. These guarantees were that the revelation fulfilled prophecy and was attended with miracles. Miracles could only be brought about by God (and not any god, but the one true God). Therefore a rational man had *grounds* for accepting the Christian revelation as genuine. It is, of course, precisely these grounds which Hume set out to undermine in Section 10 of the first *Enquiry*, where, incidentally, he treats fulfilled prophecy as a species of miracle (EHU 10.2, 130).

The appeal to arguments to support belief in God was most commonly an appeal to those types of argument which Hume calls the argument *a priori* (cosmological arguments) and the argument *a posteriori* (design arguments). These were the traditional core of natural

religion. The former is dismantled by Hume in the *Treatise*, the first *Enquiry*, and again in Part 9 of the *Dialogues*. The latter is subjected to a uniquely thorough and hostile examination in Section 11 of the first *Enquiry* and again throughout the *Dialogues*.

But if, as Hume contends, the arguments of natural religion do not establish the existence of any deity which could be an object of religious belief, and if revelation is not authenticated in any way which could convince a rational man, then it might seem that the only answer which can be given to the question "Why does anyone believe in God or gods?" is that the belief has natural *causes*. An investigation of these is Hume's subject in the *Natural History of Religion*. At the heart of his analysis is the contention that the origin of belief in gods is to be found in fear of the unknown causes of the sometimes malevolent, sometimes benevolent, and frequently capricious events which govern human life.

That, I think, is the main structure of Hume's critique of religion, but its details extend vastly further: to a "mitigated scepticism" (carefully developed in the first *Enquiry*) which would put religious metaphysics beyond our understanding; to a sharpened theological dilemma (EHU 8) between God's omniscience and man's moral answerability; to an analytic separation of morality and religion (implied in the *Treatise* and emphasized by the second *Enquiry*) with comments on particular issues such as suicide; to a philosophical account of personal identity and of the soul (T 1.4.5–6), which invites the rejection of immortality contained in "Of the Immortality of the Soul"; to an exposé in the *History of England* of the misery produced by religious fanaticism and superstition; and on to letters which contain all manner of detailed comments and criticisms (note, for example, his remarks on the psychology of worship and the inappropriateness of prayer in NHL, 13).

Hume's stance and the problem of interpretation

The problem with Hume's interpretation is that, although his actual arguments and the facts he adduces are regularly highly critical of religion and damaging to any belief in the divine, his affirmations (and sometimes the conclusions which he seems to draw) do not always look like the real outcome of his criticisms. Thus, for example, the *Natural History of Religion* reads like a reduction of religion

to its causes in human nature, but in his brief "Introduction" to the work Hume remarks: "The whole frame of nature bespeaks an intelligent author; and no rational enquirer can, after serious reflection, suspend his belief a moment with regard to the primary principles of genuine Theism and Religion" (NHR Intro, 4: [309]).

Similar affirmations appear at least five times in the main text. Seventeen years earlier, in a footnote to the Appendix to the *Treatise*, Hume had unequivocally countermanded whatever damage to belief in God the *Treatise* might have been supposed guilty of: "The order of the universe proves an omnipotent mind; that is, a mind whose will is *constantly attended* with the obedience of every creature and being. Nothing more is requisite to give a foundation to all the articles of religion" (T App, 633). And yet the argument to God's existence from the order of the universe, described in the first *Enquiry* as the "chief or sole argument for a divine existence" (EHU 11, 135) is there, and again and most celebratedly in the *Dialogues*, subjected to devastating criticism. Most paradoxically of all, this criticism is itself followed by an affirmation from the sceptic Philo that "a purpose, an intention, or design strikes everywhere the most careless, the most stupid thinker" (DNR 12, 214). Another instance of Hume's arguments apparently being at odds with his conclusion is in his onslaught upon miracles. There his attack upon the credentials of revelation concludes with a direction to faith: "Our most holy religion is founded on *Faith*, not on reason" (EHU 10.2, 130). Somewhat similarly, his aphoristic demolition of the grounds for believing in immortality in "Of the Immortality of the Soul" begins and ends with a direction to "the gospel alone, that has brought life and immortality to light" (E-IS, 590).

It is not possible within present constraints of space to discuss these issues in full. They are complex and have, moreover, already been examined at depth in recent Humean exegeses.⁵ But an outline interpretation will be useful. In the first place, neither Hume nor any other writer in eighteenth-century Britain (or elsewhere in Europe, for that matter) was free to express atheistical or anti-religious views without the threat or actuality of prosecution or social penalties of a very nasty sort. Hence, we would expect Hume to cover his apparently sceptical views with protestations of orthodoxy with which he could defend himself when need arose. In this he is in company with most other eighteenth-century expressions of reli-

gious scepticism or atheism.⁶ His isolated direction to faith as the foundation of "our most holy religion" is thus almost certainly a defensive irony following upon his attack on miracles, or a rueful acknowledgement of the ultimate irrationality of religious belief, not a sincere fideistic defence of what religious belief "really" is. It would also be possible to construe some of his blander affirmations of belief in God as the designer in this way, particularly the fulsome and then highly qualified concession by the sceptic Philo in the *Dialogues*, Part 12.

But having acknowledged the prudential irony, there remains an impression, both from the careful complexity of his arguments, from his scepticism about metaphysical arguments, and from letters and anecdotal evidence, that Hume really was unwilling to deny the existence of God and all lesser supernatural agents in the unequivocal sense now conveyed by the notion of atheism. It is as if he was too consistent a sceptic to pronounce positively on any "remote and abstruse subjects" (EHU 1, 12), atheism included; and, moreover, it is as if the closer he looked at the defects of the design argument, the more something of it remained unrefuted, so that, at the end of the *Dialogues*, in a paragraph added just before his death, he can write, surely without hint of irony:

If the whole of natural theology, as some people seem to maintain, resolves itself into one simple, though somewhat ambiguous, at least undefined proposition, *that the cause or causes of order in the universe probably bear some remote analogy to human intelligence*: If this proposition be not capable of extension, variation, or more particular explication: If it afford no inference that affects human life, or can be the source of any action or forbearance: And if the analogy, imperfect as it is, can be carried no farther than to the human intelligence; and cannot be transferred, with any appearance of probability, to the other qualities of the mind: If this really be the case, what can the most inquisitive, contemplative, and religious man do more than give a plain, philosophical assent to the proposition, as often as it occurs; and believe that the arguments, on which it is established, exceed the objections which lie against it? (DNR 12, 227)

So I would suggest for working purposes that one should take as prudential irony Hume's affirmations where they are blandly at variance with any straightforward reading of what precedes or follows them. But one should also acknowledge that his regard for the limitations of human understanding, and his caution concerning "so extra-

ordinary and magnificent a question" as the being and nature of God (DNR 12, 227), make him genuinely unable to advocate straightforward atheism of the sort later associated with d'Holbach or Russell. Thus, his scepticism about all theological and other claims based upon "abstruse metaphysics" does not at the end permit him to reject *in toto* "obvious" claims based upon the order apparent in the universe. But these "obvious" claims amount to very little, as far as any real religion is concerned. They imply no duties and no action or forbearance from action. They involve no devotion. I have elsewhere suggested that such an emasculated concession to the proposition "there is a god" should be called "attenuated deism."⁷ This is deism in which such evidence and reasons as remain uncontroverted add up to no more than a dim possibility that some non-providential god exists, a possibility too ill-understood to be affirmed or denied by a "wise man."

But whether the designation "attenuated deism" is appropriate or not, it is Hume's actual arguments which contribute to the philosophy of religion, together with the excitement of the challenges which he brings to bear on questions concerning religion and the existence of God or gods. These arguments and challenges for the most part stand or fall on their own philosophical merits without need to refer to Hume's own hard-to-identify stance. In what follows, and for present purposes, I shall therefore take Hume to be identified with any interesting position set out in his own works.⁸

II. ARGUMENT AND OUTCOME

The core of natural religion

In the first *Enquiry* Hume refers to the design argument as "the chief or sole argument for a divine existence" (EHU 11, 135). He is here not making a judgement but reporting a fact. There are strong hints of the argument in the Bible.⁹ It played a significant part in Greek philosophical monotheism.¹⁰ In its teleological version, it appears as the Fifth Way of Aquinas. In eighteenth-century literature, its soundness is virtually taken for granted and the same applies for much nineteenth-century literature. It has even enjoyed some rehabilitation in the twentieth century.¹¹

Apart from numerous short references, Hume attempts three statements of the argument.¹²

1. [The religious philosophers] paint, in the most magnificent colours, the order, beauty, and wise arrangement of the universe; and then ask, if such a glorious display of intelligence could proceed from the fortuitous concourse of atoms, or if chance could produce what the greatest genius can never sufficiently admire. (EHU 11, 135)
2. The curious adapting of means to ends, throughout all nature, resembles exactly, though it much exceeds, the productions of human contrivance; of human design, thought, wisdom, and intelligence. Since therefore the effects resemble each other, we are led to infer, by all the rules of analogy, that the causes also resemble; and that the Author of nature is somewhat similar to the mind of man; though possessed of much larger faculties, proportioned to the grandeur of the work, which he has executed. (DNR 2, 143)
3. Consider, anatomize the eye: Survey its structure and contrivance; and tell me, from your own feeling, if the idea of a contriver does not immediately flow in upon you with a force like that of sensation. (DNR 3, 154)

In effect (although I do not think it can be shown that Hume intended anything so systematic), these three statements show the design argument in distinct versions. In (1), the argument is presented as what I have elsewhere suggested should be called the nomological argument,¹³ namely, as the appeal to the inexplicability of natural *order* if this is not accounted for as the outcome of intelligent design. In (2), Hume makes a careful attempt to represent the form of what is usually called the teleological argument: the appeal to the significance of the *purposes* supposedly evident in natural phenomena. In (3), Cleanthes, the advocate of the argument in the *Dialogues*, is not so much presenting a new version of the argument as suggesting that its conclusion is something verging upon the perceptually obvious. We cannot see the structures of nature, or become *aware* of the all pervading regularities we express as laws of nature, without “feeling” their source as intelligent. The question then becomes whether this “feeling” is justifiably related to what elicits it (like our feeling of fear about atomic radiation) or unjustifiably related (like some people’s feeling of fear about darkness *per se*).

In the *Dialogues* and the first *Enquiry*, Section 11, Hume subjects these arguments to an intricate and cumulatively devastating series

of objections, the majority of which apply to both the nomological and the teleological arguments. His main objections are as follows:

a. If we suppose God (or gods) to be the cause of order in the world, then since all that we can infer about God (or gods) is inferred from the world, we can *only* attribute to God (or the gods) whatever degree of power, intelligence, foresight, and so forth is sufficient to produce what we actually find in the world (EHU II, 136–42). In particular, Hume argues, when applied to divine providence, it is impossible to *infer* from the world infinite or even very great benevolence in its designer (DNR 10–11). As Philo in the *Dialogues* puts it, “The whole presents nothing but the idea of a blind nature, impregnated by a great vivifying principle, and pouring forth from her lap, without discernment or parental care, her maimed and abortive children” (DNR 11, 211). Hume is also at pains to point out in the *Dialogues* and first *Enquiry* that we may “torture our brains” into *reconciling* the suffering of living things with the presupposition that God is perfectly benevolent; what we cannot do is justify that presupposition by *inference* from the given suffering.

b. If valid, the inference from design could equally well establish a number of conclusions incompatible with monotheism; for example, that the universe, like most human contrivance, is the product of co-operating designers; that it is a discarded experiment in universe making or the product of a second-rate god; that it is the creation of a deistic god, that is, one who has set it all going and then let it run on at its own devices, and so on (DNR 5, 166–9).

c. If, as Hume argues extensively in his general philosophy, the concept of cause only applies to *species* of objects (*Cs*, whenever they occur, cause *Es*), then it makes no sense to talk about a unique object such as “the universe as a whole” being causally produced by a unique and otherwise unknown entity “outside” (in the sense of not being one among) the repeating causal sequences of the universe itself (EHU II, 148; DNR 2, 149–51).

d. The analogy, Hume contends, between artifacts – objects known to proceed from design – and natural objects is too weak and remote to suggest similar causes. (This objection is developed almost throughout the *Dialogues*).

e. The relation between order and design is experience based: “order, arrangement, or the adjustment of final causes” is not *a priori*

proof of design, it is indicative of design “only so far as it has been experienced to proceed from that principle” (DNR 2, 146).

f. If an intelligent agent is required to explain the order in nature, then the intelligent agent will in turn need to be explained (DNR 4, 160–4). “But if we stop [at the agent explanation] . . . why go so far? Why not stop at the material world?” (DNR 4, 161).¹⁴

Each of the above requires, and is given by Hume and the secondary literature which follows his agenda, detailed philosophical discussion which cannot be attempted here. But at least one other important and highly original counter to the design argument is suggested by Hume. We can all agree that the inference to a designer depends upon the assumptions that the order in nature *needs* explanation, and that no explanation is possible other than by reference to some designing intelligence. In Part 8 of the *Dialogues*, both these assumptions are questioned.

The first had been classically challenged by a tenet of the Epicurean (or Greek Atomist) system which attracted much ancient ridicule and criticism. This was Epicurus’s contention that the world just happened by the unguided collision and grouping of numberless primary particles taking place over an infinite time in infinite space. Thus, Balbus, a Stoic, one of Cicero’s characters in his dialogues in *De Natura Deorum* (2.37), derides the Epicureans:

Should it not astound me that anyone . . . can persuade himself . . . That a world of the utmost splendour and beauty is created by an accidental combination of those [primary particles]? I do not see how the person who supposes that this can happen cannot also believe that if countless instances of the twenty-one letters were thrown into a container, then shaken out onto the ground, it were possible they might form a readable version of the *Annals* of Ennius. I’m not sure that luck could manage this to the extent of a single line!

The fundamental claim against the Epicureans is that order, beauty, and the arrangement of the universe *need* explanation, and random collisions of infinite numbers of primary particles do not provide a probable one. The same claim is elicited by the seventeenth-century revival of Epicurean atomism.

In 1682, at Oxford, a translation into English verse of Lucretius’s “six books of Epicurean philosophy” appeared, to be followed by

paraphrases by Dryden and others. An angry reaction to the popularity of such an irreligious work followed, and in 1712 there appeared an answer on an epic scale: *The Creation* by Sir Richard Blackmore. At several points, Blackmore confronts the Epicurean account of the origin of the *ordered* universe in precisely the manner in which it had been confronted by Balbus in Cicero's dialogue seventeen hundred years earlier:

Could Atomes, which with undirected flight
Roam'd thro' the Void, and rang'd the Realms of Night;
Of Reason destitute, without Intent,
Depriv'd of Choice, and mindless of Event,
In Order march, and to their Posts advance
Led by no Guide, but undesigning Chance?

The challenge is again clear: the order manifested by the universe *needs* explanation. But does it? Hume is inclined to answer – see (f) above – that it does not; or rather, if we think it does, then having traced its origin to a divine orderer, the order in *that* ought just as much to require explanation as the order in matter:

To say, that the different ideas, which compose the reason of the supreme Being, fall into order, of themselves, and by their own nature, is really to talk without any precise meaning. If it has a meaning, I would fain know, why it is not as good sense to say, that the parts of the material world fall into order, of themselves, and by their own nature? Can the one opinion be intelligible, while the other is not so? (DNR 4, 162)

Hume adds that we have indeed “experience of ideas, which fall into order, of themselves, and without any *known* cause” (presumably our own ideas) but “we have a much larger experience of matter, which does the same.” A reply to Hume is that the reduction of two sorts of autonomous order, material and mental, to one, mental order, effects a desirable elimination of a superfluous explanatory entity.¹⁵ The problem for the theist, however, is to show, against the ever-rising tide of scientific evidence, that mental order, and not material order, has explanatory primacy: that material order is explainable in terms of mental order and not vice versa, and that mental order and material order are genuinely different categories.

But there is a further reason to think that the order manifested in the universe is *not* in need of special explanation. The point is that Cicero's Balbus, and Blackmore, and others who have walked in

their footsteps, have assumed that in some sense a chaotic universe is more probable, at least would be less in need of explanation, than the orderly cosmos we find. But this assumption is in need of justification. Why? Because the assumption implies that we can compare the ordered cosmos which actually exists with a chaos which does not exist, and find the existent cosmos less probable than the non-existent chaos. But the crucial point is that we cannot make such a comparison. We have absolutely no grounds for supposing that what actually exists has any probability at all by comparison with anything else, since in this special instance *there is nothing else*. Similarly, we have absolutely no grounds for holding that order in nature is more (or less) in need of explanation than chaos would have been. Order is what we have got, and there is nothing else by contrast with which that order is in any sense probable or improbable.

Even if at best Hume himself can do no more than shed doubt upon the need to explain natural order, or upon the usefulness of doing so, the second assumption required for inference to a designer remains, namely, that there can be no other explanation of natural order if we do not attribute it to a designing intelligence. However, we (but not Hume) might be able to argue, in the light of the big bang theory favoured by modern cosmology, that the initial event out of which all subsequent sequences of events emerged could (at least we have no reasons to think that it could not) have set absolutely any sort of universe developing. But having set going this universe, those first developments were continuous with what we subsequently read as the laws of nature. The initial event having set things going in *one* way (that is, the way it actually did), that *one* way is what we see as natural order, and indeed no existent things can develop in any other way given the initial event. There is even a hint of this type of thinking in the *Dialogues* (although it is arrived at in a somewhat different way): "Instead of admiring the order of natural beings, we should clearly see, that it was absolutely impossible for them, in the smallest article, ever to admit of any other disposition" (DNR 6, 175). But in the pages of the *Dialogues* which follow this remark, Hume develops without aid from our big bang theory an extensive reply to the traditional Stoic and Christian assumption that order *could not* have emerged from chaos without intelligent design.

Hume's "new hypothesis of cosmogony" (DNR 8, 183) is a form of the Epicurean theory revised by the assumption that the number of

primary particles of matter is very large but not, as Epicurus supposed, infinite. Suppose, says Hume, in a passage of remarkable insight, “matter were thrown into any position, by a blind, unguided force” and that this force was not exhausted at the moment of the first throw, but remained active in every part of matter so that movement continued (DNR 8, 184). Is what we actually find – namely, stable structures composed of disorderly primary particles – not a possible outcome of such a finite amount of matter undergoing transpositions over a very long period of time? In particular, will not certain structures and sequences, once struck upon, be of a character that enables them to endure?

In effect, Hume is suggesting that given an initial blind force (a big bang?), subsequent random movements of a large but finite amount of matter *could* produce the stable entities and sequences we now observe in the universe. Laws of nature and inorganic structures, just as much as natural species, *could* be arrived at by a process akin to that of natural selection: “It is in vain, therefore, to insist upon the uses of the parts in animals or vegetables, and their curious adjustment to each other. I would fain know how an animal could subsist, unless its parts were so adjusted?” (DNR 8, 185)

Even if the best reading of the available evidence would now seem to show that the most fundamental laws of nature have not evolved, but have operated uniformly from the remotest accessible past, Hume’s “new hypothesis” remains astonishingly impressive as an attempt to provide an alternative to the “religious hypothesis” (EHU II, 139). It is, moreover, an attempt which, when fleshed out by Darwin’s observations, vastly devalues the teleological argument even if the nomological argument partly escapes.

What, then, is Hume’s achievement in this area? At the very least he put a massive and permanent question mark against a crucial piece of religious apologetics previously taken as unquestionable. In the process, he brilliantly anticipated later ideas and established the grounds on which all subsequent philosophical discussions have taken place.

The credentials of revelation

Two-and-one-half centuries after its publication, “Of Miracles,” Section 10 in the first *Enquiry*, is still spawning book-length responses together with an unabated stream of discussion articles.¹⁶ Indeed, “Of

Miracles" is manifestly one of those rare philosophical pieces whose very inconsistencies and ambiguities are more fruitful than the cautious balance of a thousand lesser works. Its main structure is simple.

In Part 2, a number of case histories and what have been called *a posteriori* arguments are reproduced (for the most part, they are not original to Hume) to show that "there never was a miraculous event established on so full an evidence" (EHU 10.2, 116). In effect, Part 2 is concerned with the criteria for good evidence, with the significance of incompatible religious claims based upon rival miracles,¹⁷ and with the general conclusion Hume draws from his arguments – that "a miracle can never be proved, so as to be the foundation of a system of religion" (EHU 10.2, 127). Given the contemporary background of controversy concerning miracles,¹⁸ and the use of miracles to validate the particular revelation of Christianity, I have suggested that this guarded conclusion should be unpacked as "The Resurrection can never be proved in such a way that it can function as a good reason to accept the Christian revelation."

In Part 1, an *a priori* argument (so called by commentators on Hume) is produced to act as a "check" on superstition. The argument purports to show that no "wise man" (that is, one whose belief is proportioned to the evidence) could believe reports of miracles. A paraphrase of Hume's argument is as follows:

1. A weaker evidence can never destroy a stronger.
2. A wise man proportions his belief to the evidence.
3. Some things happen invariably in our experience, for example, that men die. In matters of fact these invariable experiences constitute certainties and are called, or form the basis of, laws of nature – "a firm and unalterable [unalterable because *past*] experience has established these laws" (EHU 10.1, 114).
4. Other things happen less than invariably in our experience, for example, that one will survive a heart attack. In matters of fact these variable experiences constitute probabilities which admit of degrees ranging from strong (almost always happens) to weak (very seldom happens).
5. The veracity of human testimony is, from experience, normally a strong probability and as such amounts to a proof that what is reported took place. But sometimes the veracity of human testimony is a weak probability (as is always the

case, according to Hume's arguments in Part 2, with reports of miracles). *Therefore*, from 3 and 4, when testimony is given which is contrary to our invariable experience, a probability, whether weak or strong, is opposing a certainty and (from 1 and 2) the wise man will believe the certainty.

6. But a miracle is "*a transgression of a law of nature* [see 3] *by a particular volition of the Deity*" (EHU 10.1, 115n). *Therefore*, "There must . . . be a uniform experience against every miraculous event, otherwise the event would not merit that appellation. And as a uniform experience amounts to a proof, there is here a direct and full *proof*, from the nature of the fact, against the existence of any miracle" (EHU 10.1, 115).

The above argument has provoked many questions. Among them the following have been conspicuous: (i) What is meant by a law of nature, and how can one distinguish between an event which falsifies a law (shows that it is an inaccurate description of the way things are in the natural world) and an event which results from a suspension of the law or an intrusion into the natural world by a supernatural agent such as a god or other invisible spirit? (ii) Can Hume, on the basis of what he says elsewhere in the *Treatise* and first *Enquiry*, formulate any concept of natural causation strong enough to give content to the notion of its violation? (iii) Is Hume's definition of a miracle (which is entirely reportive) in need of supplementation, particularly by the qualification "of religious significance," so that mere inexplicable freaks of nature do not get counted as miracles? (iv) Is Hume correct in implying (EHU 10.1, 114–16) that in order for something to be called a miracle it must not happen more than once? And if, as biblical reports would seem to suggest, he is not correct, at what stage will repeated "miracles" become clusters of "paranormal" phenomena in need of explanation *within* the natural world? (v) Can Hume, or anyone arguing on his behalf, or on behalf of those who need such a concept in their definition of what a miracle is, give adequate content to the notion of a physically impossible event? (vi) With what justification can we use the exceptional nature of an event as grounds for rejecting testimony that the alleged event took place? It is this final question which is crucial in assessing and understanding Hume's *a priori* argument since the argument is addressed to *reports* of events, not to our own eye-witnessing of them.

The position I would defend with regard to question (vi) is this: Hume's argument is an accurate formal representation of the norm of rationality we all in fact apply, or try to apply, in our search for historical truth. Furthermore, when applied to the reports to which Hume has to apply it in order to damage the credentials of the Christian revelation – namely, to the biblical reports of miracles in general and to the Resurrection in particular – the norm is successful in showing that these reports would be rejected for the reasons he gives, if they occurred in contexts in which religious faith was not involved.

Consider a non-biblical example. Towards the end of his dialogue *Agricola*, the august Roman historian Tacitus describes a decisive battle with the aboriginal tribes north of Perth in Scotland at "Mount Grampius." The location of the battle has never been identified, but supporting archaeological traces of Agricola's campaign have been discovered, and there is nothing improbable about a battle, in the circumstances Tacitus describes, that would invite the application of Hume's argument. Hence we accept the testimony. Now at the end of the same historian's account of Germany, when he surveys the land to the east, he concludes: "What comes after them is the stuff of fables: Hellusii and Oxiones with the faces and features of men, but the bodies and limbs of animals. Concerning such unverifiables I will express no opinion." Since the judicious Tacitus merely itemizes fables and then suspends judgement, we are not faced with a report to assess, however far-fetched. But suppose he had written:

In the borderlands of the world to the east of the Dneiper there are human-like creatures who (A) have a single eye in the middle of their skulls, and (B) do not move as other creatures do, but when they desire to traverse a distance they merely wish it so, whereupon they disappear in the place they were in and reappear in the place where they wish to be. These creatures are called cycloids.

What would be the result of applying Hume's norm of historical rationality to this supposed report? Item (A) has some trace of corroboration in the *Odyssey* but lacks any zoological or archaeological support, and never has occurred in our experience. Hence, despite Tacitus's reputation, we are unlikely to accept as true the report I am supposing him to have given. It is too *improbable*. Item (B) is of a

different order. Like the reconstitution of a dead body into a living man, such wish-locomotion would be violation of a whole cluster of what we are justified in taking as laws of nature, and as such there is a “direct and full *proof*, from the nature of the [alleged] fact” against its existence. Cycloids (B) just do not exist. The report is at variance with the norm of historical rationality formalized in Hume’s argument because the report concerns *the impossible* as that concept would normally be understood and is commonly applied.

Now it is largely agreed that despite his obvious *inclination* to regard miracles as impossible, Hume did not put forward the official version of his *a priori* argument in order to *prove* that miracles are impossible. What he set out to show was that it would never be reasonable to believe on the basis of reported evidence that a miracle had taken place. But once it is granted that he, and you and I, never have ourselves experienced a miracle in the sense of something which is clearly at variance with what we call laws of nature, the effective *practical* difference between “never reasonable to believe” and “impossible” becomes negligible. In terms of what we have rational warrant to believe, there is no difference between rejecting ancient testimony to cycloid (B) – or the Resurrection – on the grounds that it conflicts with all our experience as codified in the laws of nature, and saying that cycloid (B) – or the Resurrection – is “impossible” as that word is commonly employed. It is this, I suggest, which gives Hume’s *a priori* argument, his “check to all kinds of superstitious delusion” (EHU 10.1, 110), its peculiarly sharp ambiguity in which one feels, and is, taken to a more radical conclusion than one believes to be warranted.¹⁹

The “preposterous distribution . . . of praise and blame”

The attention justly given to the *Treatise* as, among other achievements, Hume’s main contribution to analytic moral philosophy has tended to eclipse his other account of social and personal morality in the second *Enquiry*.²⁰ This account, supplemented by the final part of the *Dialogues* and the essay “Of Suicide,” has two things to say about religion which to many people are as unacceptable at the end of the twentieth century as they were when Hume first published his ideas in the middle of the eighteenth. The first is that the pre-

cepts of morality and our practical obligations to observe them are independent of religious beliefs and religious sanctions. The second is that when religion does intrude into morality, it serves only to distort natural morality by the introduction of “frivolous species of merit” and the creation of artificial crimes. This distortion results in “a preposterous distribution . . . of praise and blame” and in gratuitous human suffering (DNR 12, 222).

1. The independence of morality. It is a matter of fact everywhere observable, Hume contends in the second *Enquiry*, that normal human beings are not absolutely indifferent to the weal and woe of others physically or imaginatively near to them. This responsiveness to other people is, according to Hume, ultimately traceable to the operation of “sympathy,” the natural trait by means of which we actually share in, or are directly moved by, the feelings of others. Now, continues Hume, since human beings have to a certain extent a common nature, what is misery to one, is misery to most; and what produces happiness in one, produces happiness in most. Thus it is that certain devices and doings attract our *general* condemnation because they commonly produce misery, while others attract our *general* approval because they commonly promote happiness. This generality of approval for whatever promotes happiness in human society is, according to Hume, the ultimate source of moral discriminations. On this showing, moral rules (and the particular laws of a state) will, in the absence of distorting prejudices or misinformation, express the general policies which have been found to promote the objectives of minimizing misery and maximizing happiness. The sources of moral rules are thus located in the good of society and its members, and not in man’s relation to God or to some other non-worldly or “spiritual” entity. The point was well made by the Emperor Julian in A.D. 361 when he rejected the Judeo-Christian claim to have had a special moral revelation in the Ten Commandments: “Except for the commandment ‘Thou shalt not worship other gods’ and ‘Remember the sabbath day,’ what nation is there . . . which does NOT think it ought to keep the other commandments?”²¹ Hume would have agreed. The *other* commandments commend themselves to us quite apart from religion because they are perceived to codify some of the conduct generally needed to ensure

the happiness of any society, and this perception is true, as a matter of common human experience, not as a result of surprising information conveyed by a God on Mount Sinai.

But even if it is conceded that moral rules have, or need have, no source beyond our open-minded and “natural” (I return to this word shortly) approval of what is generally useful in promoting happiness, surely our commitment to observing them depends upon religion? Do we not to this day, and not infrequently, come across utterances by politicians, religious believers, and laymen, blaming the increase of crime and the drop in standards of behaviour upon *lack* of religious belief and teaching? And if religious teaching (as Hume and the Emperor Julian would have it) is not a necessary precondition for “discovering” that, for example, stealing and murder have to be prohibited, then it must at least be the case that religion is a necessary condition for our enforcement of these commandments upon ourselves as individuals when we are disinclined to obey them. In short, religion is the source of moral *obligation*.

Hume would disagree: “the *moral obligation* holds proportion with the *usefulness*” (EPM 4, 206). Yes, but that is to assert a proportion between obligation and usefulness, not to give an account of the source of the obligation. We may agree that the more something contributes happiness to individuals or to society, the more we ought to do it. But the nature of “ought” is not thereby explained.

Hume’s explanation, his highly distinctive secular analysis of obligation, is for the most part located in the conclusion to the second *Enquiry* (EPM 9.2). What he there produces is an account of what he calls “our interested *obligation*” to virtue. It is “interested” because it is a combination of all the factors which press upon us, as mentally normal people in our normal social relations. These factors include our self-interest in doing to others what we would wish others to do to us; our natural interchange of sympathy; our desire to be well thought of by our neighbours; our wish to live at ease with ourselves when “inward peace of mind, consciousness of integrity, a satisfactory review of our own conduct” is part of what is required to be a happy person (EPM 9.2, 283). But if these are some of the factors which interest us in what is called morality, how do they add up to an *obligation*? Because, apart from being understandable and capable of analysis into separate influences, they constitute something naturally *felt*, and feelings, unlike thoughts or facts in Hume’s estima-

tion, constitute direct sources of action. Feelings, or, in Hume's preferred term, "passions," are the mainsprings of action.

Now, clearly, a lot more deserves to be said and will no doubt be said about Hume's account of social morality, but for present purposes the point is that however debatable the outcome, what Hume offers is a serious account of morality that makes no reference whatsoever to God, or to religious belief or teaching. But Hume goes further than a separation of religion and morality. He also holds that the input of religion into morality is positively mischievous in the sense that religion invents crimes (such as suicide or the use of contraceptives) which are not natural crimes, that is, are not activities which normally produce misery; and it invents virtues (such as self-mortification or doctrinal orthodoxy) which are not natural virtues, that is, are not activities which normally promote happiness in oneself or others.

2. The religious distortion of morality. The key to the point Hume is making is to be found in my insistent use of such phrases as "in the absence of distorting prejudices," "natural approval," and "normal people." The point is that Hume is attempting to characterize morality as it is or would be when it operates between *normal* people in *natural* conditions: "normal" in the sense (a) that the person or persons concerned are not pathologically defective (from whatever cause) in their emotional responses, feelings, or levels of intelligence, and "natural" in the sense (b) that the conditions do *not* include special influences which overcome normal feelings. Item (a) will make a special case of, for example, the criminally insane, or those whose conduct is explainable in terms of their real lack of the feelings which commonly operate between persons (for example, the person whose hurt to children really does not feel to him or her as a hurt because that was the way they themselves were treated). In such cases, those who follow the direction of Hume's thought would conclude that special treatment, not *moral* disapproval, is called for: *moral* disapproval being reserved for the voluntary actions of people who are normal in the sense just given. Item (b), vastly more serious because capable of vastly more general operation than (a), attempts to single out as "unnatural" conduct which over-rides the natural system of morality (based upon happiness) in the interests of non-moral "superstitions." The superstitions Hume was thinking about

as over-riding natural morality were religious, those in which the commitment to the religion overcame all sense of natural good, for example, in the burning of witches and heretics and the righteous infliction of pain on others for their (non-natural) good, or for the good of the religion per se. But the twentieth century could add political superstitions – National Socialist and Marxist – in which all feelings of natural good have given way (and have *really* given way in the feelings of the many concerned) to the non-natural good which consists of loyalty to the party or state irrespective of the happiness resulting, or the misery caused to actual men and women.

Hume's substantial account of secular, this-worldly, utilitarian morality in the second *Enquiry* is certainly polished literature, but it is also, as I hope to have shown, revolutionary thought of ever-widening application. The revolution is still going on, and the thought is still contentious.²² If it were not, it is difficult to see why so often religion and morality are still popularly linked, or how, for example, a major religion can still stigmatize as sinful the natural (Hume's sense) good inherent in effective family planning.

Natural belief

If, as Hume maintains, the evidence of natural religion is at best highly problematic and ambiguous, if the evidence of revelation is such as would not be accepted if it came from a non-religious source, if we can both understand the natural causes of religion and deplore its unnatural effects upon conduct, and if, as seems to be Hume's argued position at the beginning and end of both the first *Enquiry* and the *Dialogues*, all speculations about "the powers and operations of one universal spirit" are beyond our understanding (DNR 1, 135), why is it that religious belief persists, even among well-informed people?

One possible answer is that which seems to be implied by a full reading of Hume on religion: that belief in the Divine retains just enough wisps of rational support for our propensity to see the world as intelligible, in conjunction with the still-operating causes of religion, to sustain religion despite philosophical criticism. Another answer, not strictly an answer at all, is characterized by the gesture of astonishment with which Hume ends his essay on miracles in the first *Enquiry*: the gesture which has led some apologists into the

false view that Hume is advocating fideism as a defensible account of how we do, and why we should, retain religious belief. But a third, and potentially fruitful answer, is sometimes given on Hume's behalf: that belief in the Divine is a natural belief.

The concept of a natural belief is assembled from the characteristics of those few and very general beliefs which Hume identifies as ultimately resistant to all sceptical argument – belief in the continuous existence of an external world independent of our perception of that world, belief that the regularities of the past will continue into the future, that our senses are normally reliable, are examples. The characteristics of these “instincts and propensities of nature,” as Hume sometimes calls them, are

- a. That they are arrived at prior to any process of reasoning, and cannot for long be dislodged by any process of sceptical reasoning because:
- b. They are indispensable as presuppositions of knowledge and conduct for any sentient being who lives in a coherent relation to the given appearances of things. In practical terms, no one can act in the world unless he has these beliefs. Hence:
- c. These beliefs are universal – not merely the cherished or dominant or unquestioned assumptions of a particular culture or of a learned or unlearned population, but such as all human beings always and everywhere have.

Set out thus, it is all but obvious that belief in the Divine does not have the characteristics of a natural belief.²³ Even if it could be shown that for most, or at least for many people, religious belief is attained and retained according to (a), it is an incontrovertible matter of fact that religious belief is not universal in the manner of (c). It is also evident that individuals can and do act perfectly adequately in the world without religious belief, and that religious belief is not an epistemic requirement for any coherent relation to the given appearances of things, that is, (b) does not hold either.

There is, moreover, no clear evidence that Hume ever seriously entertained the thought that belief in the Divine might be an instinct of nature impervious to scepticism in the way that our belief in an external world is. The nearest we get to such a thought is Cleanthes' restatement of the design argument in which there is an

appeal: “tell me, from your own feeling, if the idea of a contriver does not immediately flow in upon you with a force like that of sensation” followed by a reference to the universal and “irresistible” influence of the argument (the design argument) for theism (see DNR 3, 154, quoted as (3) in Section II above). The force of Cleanthes’ point seems to be that our natural propensity to see and expect order in nature is so close to seeing an *orderer* that our natural belief in the former brings with it the latter. But even if Cleanthes, contrary to the majority view among commentators, can be taken to be speaking for Hume, his view is defective in this matter. In the first place, as Philo points out near the end of Part 4 of the *Dialogues* and again in Part 7, the activity of an ordering agent is not the only possible explanation of order; and second, even if the *feeling* that “a contriver” is responsible for the ordered universe is difficult to keep at bay with sceptical argument, it is not “irresistible” because it is resisted, and it is not “universal” because at least some people do not succumb to the influence of the argument for theism. That something is widely felt, influential, and difficult to dislodge by argument is not of itself sufficient to give it the exceptionally privileged status of a natural belief. But this still leaves Hume with the difficulty – which he partly faces in the *Natural History of Religion* – of explaining the persistence of religious belief once the arguments and evidence for it are shown to be all but negligible.

Hume did not and perhaps could not have anticipated the nineteenth-century explanation for this persistence developed by Schopenhauer, Feuerbach, and above all by Freud: namely, that we are so constituted that emotionally and psychologically (but not rationally and epistemically) we *need* some sort of religious belief. Nor could Hume have expected that his sceptical philosophy of religion would lead to a re-deployment of fideism or that his “natural belief,” counter to extreme scepticism, would suggest the development of other and new defences of Christianity. How did this come about?

In the first place Hume’s undermining of the traditional rational grounds for belief in God was so thorough that once his position had been absorbed into the mainstreams of European thought (via, among others, d’Holbach, Kant, and Shelley) a fundamental re-appraisal of the nature of religion commenced. Thus, first Schleiermacher (1768–1834) and later Kierkegaard (1813–55) sought to make religion rely less on evidence and reason, and more upon feel-

ing, subjective experience, and faith. Such a fideistic reliance largely evades Hume's rationalistic critique, but it does so at the risk of making religious belief arbitrary, while at the same time both inviting Hume-type accounts of its "natural history" and leaving intact his criticism of its moral and social effects.

Theological fideism has a philosophical counterpart in what Terence Penelhum has called "The Parity Argument."²⁴ The argument can be used by someone who agrees, as Hume does, with the sceptical tradition "that at least some of the fundamental philosophical commitments of secular common sense are without rational foundation" but who nevertheless yields to our natural tendency to believe them: "The Parity Argument suggests to such a person that he is inconsistent if he refuses to yield also to the demands of religious belief merely because he considers that it, too, does not have a rational foundation."²⁵

The core objection to this argument is that the inconsistency claimed is not an inconsistency unless it can be shown that the pressure to yield to religious belief is *equal in all respects* to the pressure to yield to natural beliefs. But set against the criteria (a), (b), and (c) mentioned earlier in this section, we have already seen that the meta-rational demands to believe in the Divine are in many respects *not* equal to the demands to believe in, for example, an external world. An additional objection to the Parity Argument is that if it justifies belief in the Divine, it also justifies *any* cherished personal or group belief for which there is no rational foundation, for example, that there are witches with diabolical and supernatural powers. It will be noted that Hume's account of "natural beliefs" cannot be used to justify such cherished irrationalities because the criteria for a natural belief are enormously tougher than the irrationality criterion appealed to in the Parity Argument.

Despite the failure to identify belief in the Divine as a genuine natural belief, modern philosophical theology is marked with attempts to employ some notion of natural belief for apologetic purposes. Thus, for example, John Hick asserts an analogy between "the religious person's claim to be conscious of God and any man's claim to be conscious of the physical world as an environment, existing independently of himself."²⁶ The same thought turns up in the writings of John Macquarrie: "It is not inappropriate to compare the conviction of the independent reality of God to the convic-

tion of the independent reality of the world or of other selves,"²⁷ and again, more recently, in the writings of Hans Kung: "The history of modern epistemology from Descartes, Hume and Kant, to Popper and Lorenz, has – it seems to me – made clear that the fact of any reality at all independent of our consciousness can be accepted only as an act of trust"; hence a like act of trust is appropriate to belief in God.²⁸ A similar move, but differently presented, is evident in the American school of "Basic Belief Apologists," associated with Alvin Plantinga.²⁹

These moves derive from Hume's "natural belief" counter to excessive scepticism, but the derivation is less acceptable than Hume's original counter for the two reasons already identified in connection with the Parity Argument; namely, the derivation admits *any* belief which one may choose to assert baselessly, and it fails to differentiate between an optional belief like belief in God (optional since plainly some of us do not have it) and a non-optional belief like belief in an external world:

To whatever length any one may push his speculative principles of scepticism, he must act, I own, and live, and converse like other men; and for this conduct he is not obliged to give any other reason than the absolute necessity he lies under of so doing. (DNR I, 134)

No such absolute necessity attaches to any particular belief in the Divine.

I said above that there are three possible ways in which Hume could have responded to the puzzle about the resistance of religious belief to sceptical reasoning. He does not take the way of natural belief. He works at the way of causal explanations for religion coupled with a vestigial rationality. The third way, characterized by the gesture of astonishment with which Hume ends his essay "Of Miracles," is perhaps a very realistic perception of the fundamental irrationality of man concerning those specially cherished beliefs called religious: "So that, upon the whole, we may conclude, that the *Christian Religion* not only was at first attended with miracles, but even at this day cannot be believed by any reasonable person without one" (EHU 10, 131). This is not, as some would have it, to clear the way for fideistic Christianity – a conception alien both to Hume's mitigated scepticism and to his worldly morality. It is simply to note

the “continued miracle” by which religious faith survives in the secular world against all the intellectual odds.

NOTES

- 1 See my “Hume’s Attenuated Deism,” *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie* 65 (1983): 160–73.
- 2 For more on Hume’s distinction between superstition and enthusiasm and true religion, see his unpublished Preface to the *History of England*, quoted in full in Ernest Campbell Mossner, *Life of David Hume* (Edinburgh, 1954) pp. 306–7. For a discussion of the political dimensions of the distinction, see Knud Haakonssen, “The Structure of Hume’s Political Theory,” in this volume.
- 3 Norman Kemp Smith, *The Philosophy of David Hume* (London, 1941), particularly chaps. 5 and 21.
- 4 The suggestion is endorsed in David Wootton’s important article “Hume’s ‘Of Miracles’,” in *Studies in the Philosophy of the Scottish Enlightenment*, ed. M. A. Stewart (Oxford, 1990), p. 199. Wootton is mainly concerned with the background influences on Hume.
- 5 For a full development of the interpretation that follows, see my *Hume’s Philosophy of Religion*, 2d ed. (London, 1988). For further works in the same area and other recent exegesis of the *Dialogues*, see note 8.
- 6 The matter is well documented by David Berman in his *A History of Atheism in Britain* (London, 1988).
- 7 See my *Hume’s Philosophy of Religion*, pp. 219–23.
- 8 The only case where this may need special justification is the *Dialogues*, where the three speakers are in evident conflict and it is not always clear who has the better of the argument. Given that Hume’s model is Cicero, and the balanced presentation exemplified by *De Natura Deorum*, and not Plato, with (generally) his pro-Socratic yes-men, it is still possible to say that (a) Demea speaks very little for Hume and in good part for both the high rationalism of Samuel Clarke and, somewhat perversely, for such “blind belief” as Hume admits into the discussion; (b) Cleanthes speaks somewhat more for Hume, especially when he opposes Demea, but mostly for the moderate rationalists and users of the *a posteriori* arguments whose best-known representative is Joseph Butler; (c) Philo is closest to Hume’s mouthpiece but inclined to overstate his position so that retreat is occasionally possible. There is a considerable literature on the interpretation of the *Dialogues*. See, in particular, Norman Kemp Smith’s introductory material to his edition of the *Dialogues* (Oxford, 1935); James Noxon, “Hume’s Agnosticism,” *Philosophical Review* 73

- (1964): 248–61; my *Hume's Philosophy of Religion*, chap. 12; *Hume's Dialogues concerning Natural Religion*, ed. Nelson Pike (New York, 1970); *Hume: Dialogues concerning Natural Religion*, ed. Stanley Tweyman (Toronto, 1990); Stanley Tweyman, *Scepticism and Belief in Hume's Dialogues* (The Hague, 1986).
- 9 Note, for example, Psalm 19; 2 Maccabees 7:28; Romans 1:20.
 - 10 See, for example, Xenophon: *Memorabilia*, 1.4, 6–7; Plato: *Timaeus*, 47; Cicero: *De Natura Deorum*, 2, 34–5.
 - 11 Note particularly the remarkably modern sounding *The Fitness of the Environment* by L. J. Henderson (New York, 1913), and, among more recent books, Alvin Plantinga, *God and Other Minds* (Ithaca, 1967), and R. G. Swinburne, *The Existence of God* (Oxford, 1979), chap. 8.
 - 12 It is difficult even now to identify any definitive statement of the design argument, and we know Hume encountered the same problem. See HL 1: 155.
 - 13 See *An Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*, ed. G. H. R. Parkinson (London, 1988), pp. 339–42.
 - 14 For a critical discussion of this and some of Hume's other objections to the design argument, see "The Argument from Design," R. G. Swinburne, *Philosophy* 43 (1968): 199–212. See also L. Dupre, "The Argument from Design Today," *Journal of Religion* 54 (1974): 1–12; Gary Doore, "The Argument from Design: Some Better Reasons for Agreeing with Hume," *Religious Studies* 16 (1980): 145–61; and my *Hume's Philosophy of Religion*, chaps. 2–3.
 - 15 This and related matters were investigated in the Swinburne – Olding exchange in the early 1970s. See A. Olding, "The Argument from Design – a Reply to R. G. Swinburne," *Religious Studies* 7 (1971): 361–73; R. G. Swinburne, "The Argument from Design – a Defence," *Religious Studies* 8 (1972): 193–205; A. Olding, "Design – A Further Reply to R. G. Swinburne," *Religious Studies* 9 (1973): 229–32.
 - 16 The first book-length reply was William Adams, *An Essay on Mr. Hume's Essay on Miracles* (London, 1752). George Campbell's reply, *A Dissertation on Miracles* (Edinburgh, 1762), elicited from Hume one of his rare philosophical replies: see HL 1: 348–51. The latest that I have seen are R. A. H. Larmer's *Water into Wine?* (Montreal, 1988) and Michael Levine's *Hume and the Problem of Miracles: A Solution* (Dordrecht, 1989).
 - 17 See my "Contrary Miracles Concluded," *Hume Studies* (Supplement 1985): 1–14.
 - 18 The controversy is most readably documented by Sir Leslie Stephen in his *History of English Thought in the Eighteenth Century*, chap. 4, sec. 4 (originally published in 1876). The area has been more thoroughly and

more recently worked over by R. M. Burns in *The Great Debate on Miracles* (London, 1981). For the interpretation of "Of Miracles" as a comment on the evidential significance of the Resurrection, see my "David Hume and the Eighteenth Century Interest in Miracles," *Hermathena* 99 (1964): 80–92. See also note 5 here.

- 19 As already indicated, the literature is very extensive. Among modern discussions of the logic and the interpretation of Hume's argument, the following provide some of the basic discussion: Antony Flew, *Hume's Philosophy of Belief* (London, 1961), chap. 8; *David Hume* (Oxford, 1986), chap. 5; my *Hume's Philosophy of Religion*, chap. 8. The above paraphrase of Hume's *a priori* argument is drawn from this latter work, pp. 152f. A useful collection of highly relevant articles (including Hume's essay) is provided in *Miracles*, ed. R. G. Swinburne (New York, 1989). Recent additions to the article literature include Dorothy Coleman, "Hume, Miracles and Lotteries," *Hume Studies* 14 (1988): 328–46; Robert J. Fogelin, "What Hume Actually Said about Miracles," *Hume Studies* 16 (1990): 81–6. See also notes 16–18 here.
- 20 For example, in *Hume's Moral Theory* (London, 1980), J. L. Mackie mentions the second *Enquiry* in his first sentence and then continues an otherwise admirable book as if only the *Treatise* existed. Similar treatment of the two works is evident in Jonathan Harrison's *Hume's Theory of Justice* (Oxford, 1981). Both Mackie and Harrison typify the standard and disproportionate emphasis on the *Treatise* as the only worthwhile source for Hume's contribution to ethics. A recent and useful study that gives some attention to *An Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals* is Nicholas Capaldi, *Hume's Place in Moral Philosophy* (New York, 1989). For further discussions of Hume's ethics, see, in this volume, Terence Penelhum, "Hume's Moral Psychology," and David Fate Norton, "Hume, Human Nature, and the Foundations of Morality."
- 21 The Emperor Julian, *Against the Galilaeans*, 152D (Spanheim-Neumann pagination).
- 22 For further discussion, see David Fate Norton, "Hume, Atheism, and the Autonomy of Morals," in *Hume's Philosophy of Religion*, ed. M. Hester (Wake Forest, N.C., 1986), particularly pp. 120–33.
- 23 For a thorough examination of this thesis, see my *Hume's Philosophy of Religion*, chaps. 6–7.
- 24 See Terence Penelhum's important work, *God and Skepticism* (Dordrecht, 1983), particularly chaps. 2, 5, and 6.
- 25 Penelhum, *God and Skepticism*, p. 139.
- 26 John Hick, *Arguments for the Existence of God* (London, 1970), p. 110.
- 27 John Macquarrie, *God-Talk* (London, 1967), p. 244.
- 28 Hans Kung, *Eternal Life* (New York, 1984), p. 227. See also his *Does God*

Exist? (London, 1980), pp. 568–83. I am indebted to Philip Barnes for these references.

- 29 See particularly Alvin Plantinga, "Rationality and Religious Belief," in *Contemporary Philosophy of Religion*, ed. S. Kahn and D. Shatz (New York, 1982); and *Faith and Rationality: Reason and Belief in God*, ed. Alvin Plantinga and N. Wolterstorff (Notre Dame, 1983).