

## Hume's *Fragment on Evil*

(This version of the article has been accepted for publication, after peer review but is not the Version of Record and does not reflect post-acceptance improvements, or any corrections. It will be published in its final form in an upcoming issue of *Hume Studies*).

### 1. Introduction

Since its relatively recent publication (1995), there has been little sustained analysis of the *Fragment on Evil* (hereafter '*Fragment*').<sup>i</sup> In the secondary literature, references to the *Fragment* tend to be scarce and only parts of the *Fragment* are cited at any time.<sup>ii</sup> Yet, it seems a valuable endeavour to understand the *Fragment* in its entirety – to understand its aims, central theses, core arguments, how each section relates to another etc. That is the aim of this paper. More specifically, this paper aims at providing an interpretation that emphasizes the argumentative features and overall structure of the *Fragment*.

The *Fragment on evil* was acquired by the National Library of Scotland in 1993 (Stewart 1995, 160). It was found in a collection that was owned by Martha More, though it is not clear exactly *how* it came into Martha's possession.<sup>iii</sup> The *Fragment* that we possess is an incomplete work, with a heading "Sect. 7" and the title "Fourth Objection."<sup>iv</sup> The first line of the *Fragment* suggests that Hume was discussing various objections to the 'System of Theism' and here, specifically, the moral attributes of God. Hume's argument only makes sense if we assume that he possesses specific natural attributes (such as his providence).<sup>v</sup> Hume's chief concern in his discussion of the "fourth objection" is with proving the 'benevolence' of God, and, as I will argue,

he discusses three arguments concerning this. Unfortunately, it appears that his final argument is incomplete.<sup>vi</sup> One possible hypothesis is that the *Fragment* we possess is an incomplete version of the 'fourth objection'. [Alternatively, elsewhere, I have suggested that Hume simply did not fully develop the final argument in the \*Fragment\*.](#)<sup>vii</sup>

Scholars generally agree with Stewart's view that the *Fragment* is likely to be a text that was written either around the time of the *Treatise*, or possibly initially intended to be part of the *Treatise* but was eventually removed.<sup>viii</sup> This is due to several reasons, including: Hume's handwriting in the *Fragment* matches his script "from the late 1730s on," a small 'f' that is written in a way that can be found in his letters in 1739 and 1740 and his early memoranda; the watermark "occurs elsewhere... in two letters of the early 1740s." Interestingly, Stewart considers the possibility that Hume's use of 'Section' in the heading suggests that it might have been part of the *Treatise* that was later excised. This roughly narrows the dating to some time within the late 1730s or early 1740s. There is additional evidence, I suggest, that an analysis of the content of the *Fragment* might provide, in support of Stewart's view.<sup>ix</sup>

From the content of the *Fragment*, there is evidence that Hume is likely responding to concerns by contemporaries such as Samuel Clarke, William King and Bishop Butler.<sup>x</sup> There are many overlapping themes between the *Fragment* and the works of these thinkers, including discussions on the relationship between the natural and moral attributes of God, the prevalence of good over evil and the apparently mixed distribution of pain and pleasure.

In fact, I suggest, we have good reason to think that the *Fragment* was likely written with Butler's *The Analogy of Religion, Natural and Revealed, to the Constitution and Course of Nature* in mind.<sup>xi</sup> Butler's *Analogy* was published in 1736. Hume returned from France the following year, and we know from a letter to Henry Home that Hume and Home were comparing notes about

Butler in 1737 (HL 24-25). It thus seems reasonable to think that Hume read Butler's *Analogy* by late 1737.<sup>xii</sup> By this time, we know from his letter to Home that Hume had a deep respect for Butler. In the same letter, Hume spoke of his desire to meet Butler and to put the *Treatise* in Butler's hands. In the first book of the *Treatise*, published in 1739, Hume cites Butler as one of the philosophers who "who have begun to put the science of man on a new footing, and have engaged the attention, and excited the curiosity of the public" (T 0.7).

The circumstantial evidence above suggests that, by 1737, Hume likely read and discussed Butler's *Analogy*, and had deep respect for Butler. In addition to this, several features of the *Fragment* have clear correlations with Butler's *Analogy*.<sup>xiii</sup> Let me provide several examples. Hume follows Butler in describing God as the 'Author of nature'.<sup>xiv</sup> While the distinction between the 'natural' and 'moral' attributes of God was a common one, it was Butler who emphasized the 'intelligence' of God and the 'benevolence' of God as the most relevant attributes for this topic, which are the same attributes that Hume picks out in the *Fragment*.<sup>xv</sup> Further, all three of Hume's arguments in the *Fragment* are clearly discussed in Butler's *Analogy*. In his discussion of the relationship between the moral and natural attributes, Hume's first argument can be reasonably interpreted as a response to Butler's methodology of deriving the moral from the natural, including a similar discussion on the relationship between the degrees of 'virtue' and 'reason'. The scepticism Hume endorses in his second argument, due to our limited capabilities and the vastness of the data required, can be seen in Butler's arguments as well.<sup>xvi</sup> Finally, the third argument on the apparent distribution of happiness and pain can also be clearly found in the same chapter of the *Analogy*.<sup>xvii</sup>

Perhaps most strikingly, in discussing the benevolence of God, Butler writes, "And whether it can be proved or no, is not the thing here to be inquired into."<sup>xviii</sup> There appears to be a clear

resemblance to this phrase in the *Fragment* where Hume announces that this is precisely his aim: “Whether the author of nature be benevolent or not can only be proved by...” (FE 110).

Finally, one more consideration. Suppose that the *Fragment* was written with the *Analogy* in mind. Given this, we might consider the following quote from Hume's letter in 1737: “Your thoughts and mine agree with respect to Dr Butler, and I would be glad to be introduced to him. I am at present castrating my work, that is, cutting off its nobler parts; that is, endeavouring it shall give as little offence as possible, before which, I could not pretend to put it into the Doctor's hands” (HL 24-25). Given Hume's respect for Butler, it would be unsurprising that the ‘nobler parts’ that Hume decided to excise include the parts where he discusses topics that has clear disagreements with Butler, such as the *Fragment*. If this is correct, it supports Stewart's hypothesis that the *Fragment* was one of the nobler parts that was removed and it narrows down the dates that Hume may have written the *Fragment* to after 1736/1737.<sup>xix</sup>

One might be concerned that because the *Fragment* remained unpublished (for unknown reasons), it would be unfair to claim that the *Fragment* represents Hume's considered views on the subject. It might, for instance, have remained unpublished because Hume did not endorse the arguments there. Nevertheless, if the hypothesis that the *Fragment* was excised from the *Treatise* is correct, it follows that the *reason* for the excision is primarily so as not to give offense. This gives us good reason to think that the *Fragment* did, in fact, represent Hume's considered views.

In the following sections, I propose that the *Fragment* can be understood in this way: Hume's primary aim is to discuss whether God is benevolent or malevolent. Throughout the *Fragment*, he discusses three strategies to determine the moral attributes of God. The first strategy is to infer the moral attributes from the natural ones. Hume rejects the efficacy of the first strategy on the grounds that no entailment relationship exists between the moral and natural attributes. The

second strategy, which takes up the bulk of the *Fragment*, is to infer God's moral attributes from natural phenomena.<sup>xx</sup> However, Hume proposes sceptical arguments (the problems of comparison and computation) for why this strategy, too, is unable to help us determine whether God is benevolent or malevolent. Due to this, Hume considers a third strategy, one with less ambitious aims. Since the task of determining whether God is infinitely benevolent or malevolent appears impossible, he attempts to consider whether God can be said to be *more* benevolent, malevolent, or indifferent. Unfortunately, at this point, the *Fragment* ends rather abruptly.

## 2. Hume's Aim and Methodology in the *Fragment*

The *Fragment* begins in Section 7 (presumably part of a larger work discussing religion), on Hume's discussion of a fourth objection against the Deity. The objections discussed seem to be targeted at different aspects of God's attributes.

Hume is sensitive to and frequently employs the distinction between the natural attributes of God and the moral attributes of God.<sup>xxi</sup> Examples of the former include God's power, intelligence, design, while the latter include God's justice and benevolence (e.g., FE 109-111, DNR 10.28, 10.36, 12.8). Hume's primary aim in the *Fragment* is to discuss an objection against the moral attributes of God. In particular, the objection that Hume discusses runs along the lines of: either 'the moral attributes of God cannot be proven' or 'God is not a benevolent God'. Hume assesses the objection by arguing that there are two ways to prove the moral attributes of God: either by deriving it from the natural attributes or by inferring it from natural phenomena. Hume argues that the former strategy does not work, and that the latter strategy yields the conclusion that

we are not in an epistemic position to make a moral assessment of God's moral attributes. Following his interest in moral psychology, Hume accounts for our tendency to believe that God possesses negative moral attributes. Hume thinks that this psychological phenomenon supports his sceptical conclusion concerning our epistemic limitations in relation to God's moral attributes.

Hume begins by dismissing the first strategy for proving the moral attributes of God. This strategy was a common one, employed, for instance, by Samuel Clarke.<sup>xxii</sup> Clarke reasons from the natural attributes (knowledge, wisdom, and self-existence) to the moral ones (goodness, justice and truth). According to Clarke, if God possesses the natural attributes of knowledge and wisdom, he cannot be deceived; and if God possesses the natural attribute of power, he is able to do whatever he wills. Accordingly, in every situation (according to occasionalist interpretations), or, as a whole (according to best-of-all possible worlds interpretations), God acts according to that which is *true*, it follows that his actions are always that which is *best* ('fittest') in all situations.<sup>xxiii</sup> To act according to that which is fittest just is to display his moral attributes. Therefore, according to Clarke, if God possesses natural attributes, he must of moral necessity also possess moral attributes. Crucial to Clarke's argument is that God must possess not only natural attributes, but possess them to an *infinite* degree – an issue which Hume picks up on later in the *Fragment*.

Hume disagrees that we can infer God's moral attributes from his natural ones. He argues that there is no entailment relationship between God's moral and natural attributes by drawing an analogy to these attributes in humans. After all, there are people who possess a high degree of natural attributes (e.g., highly intelligent, powerful and skilful) but who are morally corrupt. It would not be difficult for us to think of politicians, for instance, who possess a high degree of natural attributes, with a very low degree of the moral ones. Consequently, the possession of natural attributes *alone* do not result in a similar possession of moral attributes. In Hume's words,

“A sound understanding and a hard heart are very compatible” (FE 109-110). Consequently, Hume concludes that *even if* we grant that God possesses natural attributes (presumably, the discussion of the earlier sections of the *Fragment*), it does not follow that God possesses moral ones.

Was Hume's argument a strong one? It might be argued that Hume seems to be too dismissive of the relationship between the natural and moral attributes. For instance, consider Clarke's argument. Clarke's argument is only effective if God possesses natural attributes to an infinite degree. For, if God possesses a finite degree of knowledge and power, his actions cannot always be said to be perfect, or fitting, or best; and consequently, his actions will not always be morally praiseworthy. Therefore, a more charitable formulation of Clarke's argument is that if God possesses natural attributes to an infinite degree, he would also possess moral attributes to an infinite degree. If this is so, Hume's response would seem too weak, since the counterexamples he relies on do not include the possession of natural attributes to an infinite degree. Put differently, if Hume's main argument is that the possession of finite natural attributes do not have any clear correlation with the moral ones, it would appear that he would not be responding to the kind of argument that Clarke put forward. One might argue that Hume's dismissal of this distinction is inconsistent with his own real views, where, in the *Treatise*, Hume acknowledges that the natural attributes stand in an important relation to moral virtues (T 3.3.4). On this reading, Hume was not *really* rejecting the first strategy on philosophical grounds. Rather, he was simply not quite interested in the first strategy since, as I will argue, it does not square with his naturalist and experimental epistemology. Nevertheless, in rejecting the inference from the natural to the moral attributes, Hume thus rejects the first strategy of inferring God's benevolence.

### 3. Hume's Inferential Argument from Pain and Pleasure

Given that we cannot infer the moral attributes from the natural ones, Hume argues that the only possibility remaining is to infer God's benevolence from natural phenomena. Given Hume's naturalistic and experimental epistemology, it is unsurprising that he is more interested in the second strategy than the first.<sup>xxiv</sup> In the *Treatise*, for instance, Hume notes that 'Natural Religion' is dependent on the 'science of man' (for instance, T 0.4-0.5); and the most certain foundation for our knowledge about such subjects therefore depend on observation and experience.<sup>xxv</sup> Accordingly, Hume's second strategy, which Hume presents as the only possible one, is to infer the benevolence of God from natural phenomena: if pleasure prevails much over pain, then God is benevolent; but if pain prevail much over pleasure, then God is malevolent.<sup>xxvi</sup>

Hume thinks that benevolence and malevolence can ultimately be determined by pleasure and pain.<sup>xxvii</sup> Importantly, Hume assumes that God *causes* all events; which therefore allows him to be morally responsible for all things.<sup>xxviii</sup> Consequently, through the observation and experience of known phenomena, we are able to examine the *effects* or *consequences* of God's actions, which provides us the data to make inferences about God's attributes. Given this, since we cannot infer God's moral attributes from his natural ones, his natural attributes are still relevant because they need to be presupposed in order to make sense of his moral ones.

Hume discusses two responses: a philosophical response (its foundation in reason), and a psychological response (its origin in human nature).<sup>xxix</sup> Put differently, Hume provides two different answers to the question of whether pleasure or pain predominates. Hume's philosophical response is to derive an epistemic answer to the question based on his scepticism.<sup>xxx</sup> Hume's psychological response is to derive an answer to the question based on his subjective experience.

In this instance, Hume's philosophical answer stands in conflict with his psychological answer, and Hume adopts the conclusion provided by the philosophical answer.

Hume's philosophical response focuses on two sceptical concerns – the problems of computation and comparison. The problem of computation proceeds by way of analogy. Hume likens the predominance between pain and pleasure in the world to the predominance of male or females in the world. In order to adequately answer the latter question, we would need numerical data about *all* the males and females that are born, what he calls 'bills of mortality'. However, to attempt to answer that question by simply "running over all the families of our acquaintance" seems obviously inadequate (supposing we are not the only family on earth). Similarly, in order to determine whether pain or happiness predominate, we need to possess data which is able to yield that conclusion. As a matter of fact, we do not possess that data, and therefore, we do not have the resources to make an accurate assessment. Recall that Hume's second strategy is to determine, from phenomena, whether pain or happiness predominate, and from there, to make an inference about the benevolence of God. However, if we do not have the required information about pain and pleasure, we would then be unable to make any inference about the benevolence of God, and consequently, God's moral attributes.

Our lack of access to the required data is complicated further when we consider the kind of data required in order to make an accurate assessment. First, the space constraint: Hume makes clear that the *scope* of the phenomena is the "universe" (FE 110). If the effect of God's activity concerns the entire universe, then it seems to follow that an accurate assessment of the effect of God's activity requires data concerning the entire universe. Clearly, we do not have access to that data. Given our current knowledge about the vastness of the universe and the many unexplored potentialities and possibilities, it becomes even more evident how little data we possess, and how

inadequate our data are, to determine whether pain or pleasure predominates.<sup>xxxii</sup> Second, the time constraint: if God's activity is across all time, it seems to follow that the kind of data required would be the amount of pain and pleasure across time. Again, it seems obvious that we do not have access to that data. Perhaps, then, a more accurate phrasing of Hume's analogy involves the determination of whether more males or females, across all time and space, were, are, and will be born. Clearly, we are not in an epistemic position to make such an assessment. The problem of computation is exacerbated because of the complex nature of the phenomenon we are aiming to compute.

While the problem of computation posits that we do not have the required data, the problem of comparison holds that even *if* we do possess the required data, we would not know *how* to assess the data. After all, comparing between pain and pleasure is significantly more complex than comparing between males and females. Hume points out that the problem of comparison is due to two important aspects required in our assessment of pain and pleasure: intensity and frequency.

On Hume's view, while pain is more *intense* than pleasure, yet pleasure is more *frequent* than pain. Accordingly, Hume admits that he does not know how to compare between the frequency of pleasure and the intensity of pain, in which case, he is unable to make any meaningful assessment of the *predominance* of pain and pleasure. Due to these two problems, Hume thinks that we are not in an epistemic position to determine whether pleasure or pain predominate. In Hume's words, "I shall only infer, from the whole, that the facts are here so complicated and dispersed, that a certain conclusion can never be formed from them" (FE 111).

It is useful to understand the problems of computation and comparison in the light of Hume's mitigated scepticism. For the problem of computation, for instance, is not that the data do not exist (it could, for instance, exist in the mind of God), but that the limitations of our human

faculties prevent us from attaining the required data. Later in the *Enquiry*, Hume spells out a more complete (some argue, more mature) account of his scepticism.<sup>xxxii</sup> Hume's mitigated scepticism relies on two principles: the limitation of our faculties and the principle of modesty. Roughly, the limitation of our faculties is the observation that there exists subjects that we might be concerned about that exceed the scope and power of human faculties (EHU 12). Importantly, Hume includes the discussion of God's moral attributes as one of these topics (EHU 8.36).<sup>xxxiii</sup> Given the problem of computation, it would appear that the predominance of pain or pleasure just is a topic that exceeds the bounds of our faculties. Hume therefore adopts a conclusion consistent with the principle of modesty: that due to such sceptical worries, we are simply not in an epistemic position to provide such an answer.

In sum, Hume's second strategy for analysing the moral attributes of God depends on our ability to prove whether pain or pleasure predominates in natural phenomena. However, to adequately prove, from phenomena, whether pain or pleasure predominates, we are faced with the problem of computation and the problem of comparison, which yield the following requirement: we must be able to gather and analyse all data about the intensity and frequency of pain and pleasure, past, present and future, and throughout the universe. Being unable to gather and analyse the required data, it follows that we are unable to determine whether pain or pleasure predominate, and so unable to infer God's moral attributes from phenomena. Consequently, we are not in an epistemic position to assess God's moral attributes. Given this, the second strategy of determining God's moral attributes fails as well.

#### 4. Hume's Moral Psychology of Pain and Pleasure

Despite this scepticism, Hume makes it clear that he (and common opinion) has a tendency to believe that evil or pain predominates. However, he emphasizes that this should not affect the argument he has been developing. Put differently, Hume acknowledges that the proposition that 'pain predominates pleasure' might be one that appears to be intuitive, but is, in fact, one that is intuitive not because it is well justified (due to the problems of computation and comparison), but because of a less reliable mechanism (the way pain and pleasure interacts with human imagination).<sup>xxxiv</sup> As a result, Hume thinks that this (potentially inaccurate) intuition should not override the sceptical conclusion that his argument has been pointing towards.

The human experience of pain, Hume points out, is more *intense* and durable than pleasure. Being more intense and durable, it forms a more "lasting impression" on our "imagination." On the other hand, the experience of pleasure, being less intense, and one that we feel "entitled to," forms a less lasting impression on us. Since for Hume, belief consists just in the force, liveliness and vivacity of an idea or impression (eg. THN 1.3.7.5), it follows that the intense experiences of pain (over pleasure) take stronger hold of our imagination, and thus make us apt to believe that pain predominates the world. From the perspective of Cognitive Science of Religion, Hume provides an explanation for why we have a tendency to believe that pain predominates. Yet, Hume thinks that this is not an accurate assessment of whether pain or pleasure *actually* predominates. Consequently, while this psychological observation explains why people have a tendency to believe that pain predominates, it ought not to influence our assessment.

This reading is further supported by Hume's explanation that the use of rhetoric would be able to help him "gain the cause" with his readers. That is, through the use of rhetoric, one might

describe occasions of pain with such vividness that the intensity of pain takes hold of the imagination, and becomes a lively and vivid idea or impression.

However, Hume distinguishes between rhetoric and argument, and relatedly, between the imagination and reason. He argues that, in assessing the truth value of the claim about whether pain or pleasure predominates, we ought to appeal to reason rather than the imagination. We are left with the view that we are not in an epistemic position to know whether pain or pleasure predominates, and consequently, to know whether God possesses moral attributes or not.

### **5. A third strategy?**

Thus far, we have argued that in order to assess whether God possesses moral attributes (specifically, the attribute of benevolence), Hume proposes two strategies: to infer it from God's natural attributes or to infer it from a new set of phenomena. Hume rejects the former strategy. The second strategy turns out to run into the problems of computation and comparison. Consequently, even though Hume might be more inclined to believe that pain predominates, his conclusion based on philosophical reasoning is that we are not in an epistemic position to determine whether pain or pleasure predominates. This results in a sceptical epistemic conclusion: we are not in an epistemic position to prove God's moral attributes.

Given these difficulties, Hume attempts a third strategy: to reduce his ambitions. Unfortunately, the *Fragment* we possess ends abruptly and is incomplete. Nevertheless, we may attempt to reconstruct the third strategy from the available text. The third strategy is connected to the second, in the sense that, while the general strategy is similar, the argument appears less

*ambitious*. The argument, in brief, proceeds as follows: either evil is predominant in the world or good is. If evil is predominant in the world, it indicates that God is not benevolent. However, even if good is predominant, it does not necessarily yield the conclusion that God is benevolent. While at first glance, Hume appears to backtrack on the announced criteria for the second strategy, I don't think that he is doing so.

Hume observes that even if we grant that pleasure (and good) prevails, it does not prevail "much above evil" (FE 110), but only "in so small a degree" (FE 111-112). A limited predominance, according to Hume, is insufficient to prove the benevolence of God. Hume supports the claim that the predominance of good, if it is true, is only so in a small degree, by arguing that it appears that there is a mixture of pain and pleasure "scattered" throughout phenomena.<sup>xxxv</sup> It is at this point that the *Fragment* we possess ends. Hume does not explicitly state his conclusion, and the ending seems less 'complete' than his usual treatment of subjects. Nevertheless, I think that we can reasonably reconstruct the function and conclusion of the third strategy.

Up till now, the first two strategies aim at determining whether God is benevolent or not. But benevolence is a concept that differs by degrees, rather than kind. That is, we might argue that God is benevolent, that he is malevolent, or that his moral attributes lie in between benevolence and malevolence. If we assume that pain predominates, it suggests that God is not benevolent. However, if good predominates, but only to a small degree, it might seem more accurate to argue that God is *slightly* rather than *perfectly* benevolent. Hume is not backtracking on his second strategy; instead, he lowers his ambitions, and argues that while we are not in an epistemic position to know whether God is benevolent or not, we are able, minimally, to conclude, that God is not *perfectly* benevolent.<sup>xxxvi</sup> Given that, according to Hume's observations and experiences, there is a mixture of pain and pleasure which seem to counter-balance each other, the third option, that

God is neither benevolent nor malevolent, but rather, somewhere in the middle, seems the most likely option. If correct, the third strategy appears substantially weak: after all, why would a mixture of pain and pleasure imply that God is not perfectly benevolent? There is nothing intrinsic in the notion of perfect benevolence that precludes the existence of pain; put differently: why should the *amount* of pleasure or pain in nature indicate the *amount* of benevolence or malevolence in God?

Thus far, the interpretation that I'm proposing paints the Hume of the *Fragment* as a moral agnostic. In response to an objection against the moral attributes of God, Hume argues that we are not in an epistemic position to prove God's moral attributes. In order to prove God that God is either benevolent or malevolent, Hume examines two strategies: either by inferring his moral attributes from his natural attributes, or to infer his moral attributes from a new set of phenomena. Hume dismisses the former strategy by emphasizing the distinction and lack of immediate relation between the natural and moral attributes. The second strategy fails to reach the conclusion that Hume is aiming at, due to the problems of computation and comparison. Consequently, Hume considers whether we might reduce our ambitions in order to gain some knowledge about God. Given the mixture of pain and pleasure, Hume gestures towards the conclusion that we cannot prove the perfect benevolence of God from phenomena. In all, the attempt to prove that God is a benevolent God fails due to limitations of our epistemic faculties and our knowledge of the phenomena.

Knowing what the objection was that Hume is discussing would reveal Hume's attitude towards the objection. For instance, if Hume is responding to a version of the inferential problem from evil, that is, the objection that God's benevolence cannot be proven or inferred, it seems that Hume would be in agreement with the objector. He is neither a moral theist nor atheist, but a moral

agnostic: he holds that we do not have access to that kind of knowledge. However, if Hume is responding to a version of the evidential problem from evil, the objection that phenomena proves that God is not benevolent, Hume seems to be disagreeing with the objector.<sup>xxxvii</sup> Unfortunately, it is not clear what the objection was.

In all, this interpretation holds that the Hume of the *Fragment* is an agnostic about God's moral attributes. With this, we may return to several of our earlier concerns about the place of the *Fragment* in Hume's thought. The interpretation provided above is consistent with the view that the *Fragment* was excised from the *Treatise* since, a conclusion of God's moral agnosticism was still an 'irreligious' conclusion. Additionally, that the *Fragment* represents *Hume's* views (even if it's his incomplete views) seems a fair claim, given the consistency of its naturalistic and experimental epistemology with the *Treatise*, and the sceptical approach with the mitigated scepticism of the *Enquiry*. Of course, that the arguments and conclusion do not necessarily reflect Hume's complete views on God's moral attributes is clear, given other discussions of this topic in later works, such as EHU 8 and DNR 10-11.

## Acknowledgements

I am deeply grateful to Hsueh Qu, Daniel Waxman and two anonymous referees for this journal for many useful comments and suggestions. I would also like to thank the audience at the National University of Singapore's Graduate Research Seminar – Eugene Ho, Hongbin, Liu Jiachen, Meaghan Gan and Jonathan Y. H. Sim – for helpful discussions on a previous version of this paper.

## REFERENCES

- Boswell, James. "An Account of My Last Interview with David Hume, Esq." In *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion*. Edited by Norman Kemp Smith. Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1947.
- Bricke, John. "Liberty and Necessity." In *A Companion to Hume*, edited by Elizabeth S. Radcliffe, 201-216. Oxford: Blackwell, 2008.
- Butler, Joseph. *The Works of Bishop Butler*. Edited by David E. White. Boydell & Brewer, 1736/2006.
- Clarke, Samuel. *A Demonstration of the Being and Attributes of God And Other Writings*. Edited by E. Vailati. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1704/1998.

Clarke, Samuel. "A Discourse Concerning the Being and Attributes of God, the Obligations of Natural Religion, and the Truth and Certainty of the Christian Revelation" in *British moralists, 1650-1800, Vol. 1*. Edited by Raphael, D. D. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1728/1969.

Demeter, Tamás. "Liberty, necessity and the foundations of Hume's 'science of man'." *History of Human Sciences* 25.1 (2012): 15-31.

De Cruz, Helen. "The Relevance of Hume's Natural History of Religion for Cognitive Science of Religion." *Res Philosophica* 92.3 (2015): 653-674.

Greenberg, Sean. "'Naturalism' and 'Skepticism' in Hume's *Treatise of Human Nature*." *Philosophy Compass* 3.4 (2008): 721-733.

Harris, James. *Hume: An Intellectual Biography*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015.

Hume, David. *A Treatise of Human Nature*. Edited by L. A. Selby-Bigge, 2nd ed. revised by P. H. Nidditch. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1739–1740/1975.

Hume, David. *The Letters of David Hume. Vol. 1*. Edited by J. Y. T. Greig. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1727–1765/1932.

Hume, David. *An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*. Edited by Peter Millican. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1748/2008.

Hume, David. *Hume: Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion and other writings*. Edited by Dorothy Coleman. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1779/2007.

King, William. *An essay on the origin of evil*. London: Thurlbourn. 1732.

Kraal, Anders. "A Humean objection to Plantinga's Quantitative Free Will Defense." *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 73 (2013): 221-233.

McGrath, Alister E. *Reimagining Nature: The Promise of a Christian Natural Theology*. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2016.

Newlands, Samuel. "Hume on Evil," in *The Oxford Handbook of Hume*. Edited by Paul Russell. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016.

Ooi, Daryl. "Hume's Rhetorical Strategy: Three Views." *The Journal of Scottish Philosophy*, forthcoming.

Penelhum, Terence. "Butler and Hume." *Hume Studies* 14.2 (1998): 251-276.

Pitson, Tony. "The Miseries of Life: Hume and the Problem of Evil." *Hume Studies* 34.1 (2008): 89-114.

Qu, Hsueh M. "Hume's Internalist Epistemology in EHU 12." *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 96.3 (2018): 517-539

Qu, Hsueh M. *Hume's Epistemological Evolution*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020.

Russell, Paul. *Freedom and Moral Sentiment: Hume's Way of Naturalizing Responsibility*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2002.

Stewart, M. A. "An early fragment on evil." In *Hume and Hume's connexions*, edited by M. A. Stewart and John P. Wright, 160-170. Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania University Press, 1995.

Stewart, M. A. "Hume's Intellectual Development, 1711–1752" in *Impressions of Hume*. Edited by Marina Frasca-Spada and P. J. E. Kail. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005.

Stroud, Barry. "The constraints of Hume's naturalism." *Synthese* 152 (2006): 339-351.

Wright, John P. "Butler and Hume on Habit and Moral Character." In *Hume and Hume's connexions*, edited by M. A. Stewart and John P. Wright, 105-118. Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania University Press, 1995.

<sup>i</sup> This is curious, because, if Stewart is correct, the *Fragment* has the potential to play an important role in our understanding of Hume's early religious views, and possibly, in our interpretation of the *Dialogues*. For instance, Stewart hypothesizes that in the *Fragment*, "what we have may be one of the "noble Parts" prudentially removed from the *Treatise* in 1739" (Stewart, 'An early fragment on evil', 164). If this hypothesis is correct, then the *Fragment* becomes an important text in understanding Hume's early religious views. Stewart further considers the hypothesis that "at around the time of the publication of the *Treatise*, Hume had sketched out a significant part of the argument that would eventually be presented through the character of Philo in the *Dialogues*. He was simply seeking a form and an occasion for its expression" (Stewart, 'Hume's Intellectual Development, 1711-1752', 46-47). If this second hypothesis is correct, it indicates that the *Fragment* is potentially crucial in understanding certain features of the *Dialogues*.

<sup>ii</sup> There have been some attempts in the literature at providing an analysis of individual segments of the *Fragment*. Anders Kraal, for instance, provides a helpful discussion of the sceptical argument from the *Fragment* (Kraal, 'A Humean Objection to Plantinga's Quantitative Free Will Defense'). However, such analyses are few. More commonly, parts of the *Fragment* have been cited in order to support some other point from the *Dialogues* (e.g., Pitson, 'The Miseries of Life: Hume and the Problem of Evil' and Newlands, 'Hume on Evil'). My point here is that there have been limited analysis of the *Fragment* as a whole document, in its entirety.

<sup>iii</sup> Stewart speculates that one way that Martha could have acquired it was through John Peach, "whom Hume reputedly sent some of his manuscripts." Though Stewart admits that there is insufficient evidence to determine the exact circumstances of her acquisition of the manuscript (Stewart, 'An early fragment on evil', 160).

<sup>iv</sup> References to the *Fragment on Evil* are from Coleman 2007 (FE), *Hume's Memoranda* are from Coleman 2007 (EM), *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* are from Coleman 2007 (DNR), *Treatise on Human Nature* are from Selby-Bigge 1975, revised by Nidditch (T), *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* are from Millican 2007 (EHU), *Hume's Letters* are from Greig 1932 (HL). Arabic numerals refer to page numbers (FE, EM); to part and paragraph numbers (DNR); to book, part, section, and paragraph numbers (T); to section and paragraph numbers (EHU); and page numbers in the Greig edition of the letters (HL).

<sup>v</sup> I will discuss this aspect in greater detail later on. However, we know from other parts of Hume's writings that he was sensitive to the centrality of the 'providence of God' for any 'System of Theism'. For instance, in Hume's early memoranda, he records that there are three kinds of atheists, one kind are those who "deny a providence" (EM 106) – a view he repeats in a Letter to William Mure, June 30, 1743 (HL 11). This general view occupied Hume throughout his life, and can be found discussed clearly especially in EHU 8 and EHU 11.

<sup>vi</sup> See Newlands, 'Hume on evil', 638-639.

<sup>vii</sup> Ooi, 'Hume's Rhetorical Strategy: Three Views'.

<sup>viii</sup> See Stewart, 'An early fragment on evil'; also, the editor's note in FE 109. Newlands describes the *Fragment* as Hume's "earlier ruminations on evil" and thinks, that it was "likely written during the 1740s" (Newlands, 'Hume on evil').

<sup>ix</sup> In his analysis, Stewart paid less attention to the content of the *Fragment*, noting that "Content can often be ambiguous. For example, there need be nothing topically autobiographical in the fragment's reference to "melancholy Views of things": the borderline between philosophy and melancholy is omnipresent in Hume's work" (Stewart, 'An early fragment on evil', 164). Stewart therefore focuses on the formal features of the *Fragment*.

<sup>x</sup> We know that Hume was familiar with the works of all three thinkers (and more). Hume's disagreement with Clarke's religious views is well known. For instance, on his deathbed, he reportedly told Boswell that Hume "never had entertained any belief in religion since he began to read Locke and Clarke" (Boswell, 'An Account of My Last interview with David Hume, Esq.', 76). We know from Hume's memoranda that very early on, he was familiar with the work of King (EM 107). Additionally, we know that Hume was familiar with Butler's works (e.g., HL 24-25). In fact, John Wright, following Green and Grose, thinks that parts of the *Treatise* was Hume's response to Butler's *Analogy* (Wright, 'Butler and Hume on Habit and Moral Character'; see also Penelhum 'Butler and Hume'). It is worth noting that Harris posits that the *Fragment* may have been inspired by Bayle (Harris, 'Hume: An Intellectual Biography', 147).

<sup>xi</sup> This does not mean that Hume's *only* imagined interlocutor was Butler.

<sup>xii</sup> See also Wright, 'Butler and Hume on Habit and Moral Character', 106.

<sup>xiii</sup> Especially with Chapter 3 in 'Of Natural Religion': *Of the Moral Government of God*.

<sup>xiv</sup> George Berkeley, too, uses the phrase 'Author of Nature'. However, there are substantially more similarities between the *Fragment* and Butler's work than Berkeley's.

<sup>xv</sup> See Butler, *The Works of Bishop Butler*, 174

<sup>xvi</sup> See, for instance, Butler, *The Works of Bishop Butler*, 152, and Chapter 3 in 'Of Natural Religion': *Of the Moral Government of God*.

<sup>xvii</sup> Butler writes that "Probable evidence, in its very nature, affords but an imperfect kind of information; and is to be considered as relative only to beings of limited capacities" (Butler, *The Works of Bishop Butler*, 152). One might speculate whether, after finding his second argument inconclusive due to our limited capabilities, Hume therefore uses an argument from probable evidence in response, but does not draw a clear conclusion from it, given that there is scepticism about the conclusion we may draw from probable evidence. See also Butler, *The Works of Bishop Butler*, 179-180, 184.

<sup>xviii</sup> Importantly, here, Butler was discussing whether the benevolence of God was the "only character of the author of nature" (Butler, *The Works of Bishop Butler*, 174).

<sup>xix</sup> In fact, if we think that the *Fragment* was one of the sections that Hume had in mind in his letter, it suggests that the *Fragment* would have been written since the time he read Butler's *Analogy* (earliest 1736, more likely when he returned to England in 1737) and before the time of his letter to Home (Dec 2, 1737).

<sup>xx</sup> In contemporary literature, this methodology often falls under the domain of 'natural theology' (see, for instance, McGrath, 'Reimagining Nature: The Promise of a Christian Natural Theology').

<sup>xxi</sup> This was a common distinction in discussions on God's attributes, see Clarke, *A Discourse Concerning the Being and Attributes of God*, King, *An essay on the origin of evil*, Butler, *The Works of Bishop Butler*.

<sup>xxii</sup> Similar arguments are made by King and Butler. For instance, King provides a lengthy argument for the claim that "The Moral Attributes of God, are deducible after the same manner from his *Natural* ones" (King, *An essay on the origin of evil*, 47). After attempting to prove "an intelligent governor of the world," Butler first admits that "this alone does not appear, at first sight, to determine any thing certainly, concerning the moral character of the author of nature, considered in this relation of governor; does not ascertain his government to be moral, or prove that he is the righteous judge of the world" (Butler, *The Works of Bishop Butler*, 174). However, in examining the intelligent governance of God, he goes on to conclude, "Upon the whole, there is a kind of moral government implied in God's natural government" (Butler, *The Works of Bishop Butler*, 185).

<sup>xxiii</sup> "Wherefore since the *natural* attributes of God, his infinite knowledge, wisdom and power, set him infinitely above all possibility of being deceived by any error, or of being influenced by any wrong affection; it is manifest his divine will cannot but always and necessarily determine itself to choose to do what in the whole is absolutely best and fittest to be done; that is, to act constantly according to the eternal rules of infinite goodness, justice and truth. As I have endeavoured to show distinctly in my former discourse, in deducing severally the *moral* attributes of God. (Clarke, *A Discourse Concerning the Being and Attributes of God*, 199; see also Clarke, *A Demonstration of the Being and Attributes of God and Other Writings*, 84).

<sup>xxiv</sup> If we accept that the *Fragment* was written sometime towards the end of the *Treatise*, it would also imply that Hume would have already developed his naturalistic and experimental epistemology (see, for instance, T 0).

<sup>xxv</sup> That Hume later adopts 'observation' and 'experience' as his primary epistemic tools for natural religion is evident in his use of these later in the *Dialogues* (e.g., DNR 2.4, DNR 7.14). See (Newlands, 'Hume on evil', 625-626).

<sup>xxvi</sup> There is a clear connection here with King's claim that "[i]t is manifest, that tho' Good be mix'd with Evil in this Life, yet there is much more Good than Evil in Nature" (King, *An essay on the origin of evil*, 78; see a helpful discussion in Kraal, 'A Humean objection to Plantinga's Quantitative Free Will Defense').

<sup>xxvii</sup> Hume uses pleasure and happiness interchangeably, and connects benevolence, goodness and happiness in EPM 2.

<sup>xxviii</sup> In Hume's discussions about the moral attributes of God, he frequently assumed God as a causal power (see EHU 8, DNR 10-11).

<sup>xxix</sup> See De Cruz, 'The Relevance of Hume's Natural History of Religion for Cognitive Science of Religion' for a helpful discussion of this distinction in Hume's *Natural History of Religion* and its relation to contemporary Cognitive Science of Religion.

<sup>xxx</sup> Much has been written about the tension between Hume's naturalistic epistemology (and ambitions) and his scepticism. See (Stroud, 'The constraints of Hume's naturalism', Greenberg "'Naturalism" and "Skepticism"' in Hume's *Treatise of Human Nature*, Qu 'Hume's Internalist Epistemology in EHU 12') for examples.

<sup>xxxi</sup> In his discussion of the problem of computation in the *Dialogues*, Hume includes here the pain and pleasure of animals (presumably, all *experienced* pain and pleasure by all living things, see DNR 10.33-34).

<sup>xxxii</sup> See for instance (Qu, *Hume's Epistemological Evolution*, 179-219).

<sup>xxxiii</sup> Commentators are divided about how sincere Hume is in his pronouncement in EHU 8.36. See (Russell, *Freedom and Moral Sentiment: Hume's Way of Naturalising Responsibility*, 162-163), (Bricke, 'Liberty and Necessity', 214) and (Demeter, 'Liberty, necessity and the foundations of Hume's "science of man"', 26) for an example of differing interpretations.

<sup>xxxiv</sup> We might say that the problems of computation and comparisons act as a *defeater* belief against claims about God's benevolence.

<sup>xxxv</sup> Butler discusses the "promiscuous distribution" of happiness and misery. He writes, "Pleasure and pain are indeed, to a certain degree, say to a very high degree, distributed amongst us, without any apparent regard to the merit or demerit of characters" (Butler, *The Works of Bishop Butler*, 179-180, 184).

<sup>xxxvi</sup> There is some contextual motivation for this strategy, given that many of his contemporaries focus their discussions on whether God's benevolence might be thought of as 'perfect' or 'infinite' (e.g., Butler, *The Works of Bishop Butler*, 174; Clarke, *A Discourse Concerning the Being and Attributes of God*, 199).

<sup>xxxvii</sup> In the *Dialogues*, Hume discusses the logical, evidential and inferential problems of evil.