"The Paradoxical Principle and Salutary Practice": Hume on Toleration

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David Hume is an ardent supporter of the practice of religions toleration. For Hume, toleration forms part of the background that makes progress in philosophy possible, and it accounts for the superiority of philosophical thought in England in the eighteenth century. As he puts it in the introduction to the *Treatise*: "the improvements in reason and philosophy can only be owing to a land of toleration and of liberty" (T Intro.7; SBN xvii).[1] Similarly, the narrator of part 11 of the *First Enquiry* comments:

> Our conversation began with my admiring the singular good fortune of philosophy, which, as it requires entire liberty above all other privileges, and chiefly flourishes from the free opposition of sentiments and argumentation, received its first birth in an age and country of freedom and toleration. (EHU 11.2; SBN 132)

The toleration to which Hume refers is broader than religious toleration, but in the context of the eighteenth century, religious toleration is clearly the paradigm case. Indeed, religious toleration represents one of the key accomplishments of the culminating event of Hume's *History of England: the Glorious Revolution of 1688*.

Yet even though religious toleration forms the background of philosophy in general—or perhaps just because it does so—Hume offers precious few arguments for it, and they are, for the most part, given implicitly rather than as formal arguments. Nevertheless, we can distinguish three different, though interrelated, lines

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of argument for toleration in Hume's thought: (i) an argument based on a general skepticism; (ii) an argument based on a contempt for organized religion; and (iii) a pragmatic argument based on the need for peace and orderly government. From our point of view, what is striking about all of these argument is how un-Lockean they are: Hume does not rely on the idea of a fundamental conceptual separation of church and state, nor on a natural right to freedom of conscience that characterizes writers working in the Lockean tradition. However, of the arguments he gives, only the last, I will argue, has any hope to provide a useful argument for toleration.

I. Skepticism

Given Hume's reputation, the most obvious line of argument for toleration is based on a general skepticism about knowledge or a skepticism about religious knowledge in particular. One of the general results of his "mitigated skepticism," Hume argues, is that it combats the general tendency people have "to be affirmative and dogmatical in their opinions" (EHU 12.24; SBN 161):

> But could such dogmatical reasoners become sensible of the strange infirmities of human understanding, even in its most perfect state, and when most accurate and cautious in its determinations; such a reflection would naturally inspire them with more modest and reserve, and diminish their fond opinion of themselves, and their prejudice against antagonists. (EHU 12.24; SBN 161)

Indeed, even in the most learned, "a small tincture of Pyrrhonism" is useful to keep them from taking too much pride in their own meager abilities. "In general," Hume concludes, "there is a degree of doubt, and caution, and modesty, which, in all kinds of scrutiny and decision, ought for ever to accompany a just reasoner" (EHU 12.24; SBN 161–2). A due modesty about our intellectual abilities is always warranted.

On these grounds, the general idea of an argument for toleration is that once we accept Hume's brand of skepticism, we will regard our own reasoning and our own conclusion with diffidence and without any presumption that we are really correct. With such an attitude, we will then be less likely to make the kind of harsh pronouncements that are needed to sustain a campaign of persecution against a religious group. We should then regard both politics and religion with a cautious air that promotes toleration for those who draw different conclusions from our own. We should, then, embrace a political moderation which entails religious toleration.[2]

How exactly such an argument is really supposed to work is another matter. The thought is that skepticism teaches us that even the most basic things in life,

like our belief in causation and in external objects, are not justified by the under-standing. Once we realize that even these basic beliefs are subject to grave doubts, we should become less willing to pronounce judgment on those with whom we disagree about more esoteric matters. Hume is clearly hoping that skepticism will lead people to a kind of fallibilism and that fallibilism will lead them to modesty and toleration. Psychologically, such a progression seems plausible. Once we think that we must doubt our most fundamental beliefs, we will come to doubt ourselves, and we will question our motivations in virtually every decision. Once such questions are raised, we might then question whether we should act on our beliefs since they seem so fallible. But once we question whether we should act on our beliefs, especially those that seem far from certain, we may think it presump-tuous of us to interfere with, say, the religious beliefs of others. Psychologically, then, Hume has a point.

Yet however psychologically attractive these steps may seem, they are neither psychologically nor philosophically required. From skepticism, we simply can not deduce political modesty. If *none* of our beliefs is justified by the understanding, then my belief that you should be punished because you stole my hens is not better justified than your belief that you needed the hens to feed your family eggs. Nor is my belief that people should be left to believe in one God, twenty gods, or no god as they see fit better than your belief that government must promote virtue and salvation by embracing the true religion.[3] If skepticism results in a general inability to made positive pronouncements, then toleration does no better than any other belief. After all, in the grand scheme of things, toleration is as at least as esoteric a belief as monotheism. So, from the fact that we have reason to doubt most of our beliefs, we can not conclude that we should not act on those beliefs. Indeed, if we thought so, the skeptic would be paralyzed. But once we acknowledge that to live our lives, we must act on the beliefs that we have, then we will need other reasons to explain why we should act on the belief that toleration promotes the good rather than the equally strong beliefs of others that only a society united by religion can create the feelings of solidarity necessary to sustain a good life. We can not, then, rely on skepticism in general to support an argument for toleration.

We might instead argue that Hume's mitigated skepticism is not as sweeping as the account I have just given suggests. Indeed, as most Hume scholars since Norman Kemp Smith[4] have acknowledged, Hume uses his skepticism to advance a broadly naturalistic thesis. So Hume is not claiming that none of our beliefs are justified, only that they are not justified *by the understanding*. So, we should believe that one thing causes another, but that the basis of that belief is something like sentiment rather than reason: we can not help but believe in causation because it is based on principles that are "permanent, irresistible, and universal" (T 1.4.4.1; SBN 225). Our beliefs are formed according to natural processes, some of which are so compelling that we can not resist them, even if our understanding gives us no

independent reasons to believe them. Thus, our most fundamental beliefs—like the belief in causation and the belief in bodies—are compelling because they are products of natural mechanisms that are deeply engrained in us. Many other beliefs, however, are not so endorsed. Similarly, our moral beliefs are not products of reason, but arise almost completely from our sentiments (T 3.1.1–2; SBN 455–76 and EPM app. 1; SBN 285–94). However, our beliefs about God are not among these basic beliefs about the world or about morality. It is neither compelled by the mechanisms at work in our mind that lie behind our belief in causation, nor is it a product of our moral sentiments since the belief in God is not itself a belief about what is a virtue.[5] Because our beliefs about God are not among our natural beliefs, then, the general doubts about our knowledge still hold for them, and so we should be willing to allow others their beliefs about these abstruse questions. So this view does not force us to accept a self-defeating skepticism, and we can make reasonable claims about when one kind of belief is better supported than another and thereby continue to lead our lives. Hume's skepticism is not so broad that it leads us to suspend judgment about too many matters; our ordinary beliefs survive the skeptical gaze. But the skepticism can still give us reason to be reticent in our pronouncements about esoteric subjects like religion.

If anything, however, this more nuanced view of Hume's skepticism only makes an argument for toleration more difficult. The idea is still that our doubts about vast areas of potential knowledge should lead us to tolerate those things about which doubts are possible. However, such an argument is valid only if we accept the general principle that we should tolerate differences in opinion about any matter which we are not forced by nature to have a set of beliefs. As in the more radical case, the principle here has an initial psychological plausibility: when we are not compelled to believe something, we should be open to the possibility that others will not share our interpretation of any given phenomenon. But such a principle is not justified within Hume's system and it too is self-refuting: the principle itself is not something we are compelled to believe and so we should be open to many different principles about these matters, including one in which we do not tolerate religious dissent. We can, of course, try a different tack and give an explicitly moral argument for why we should accept the principle, and Hume's moral theory has plenty of resources for such arguments. But insofar as the argument rests on claims whose force come from Hume's sentimentalist morality, then the support for toleration is based not on skepticism, but on the strength of those moral arguments, which I shall examine below. Skepticism, at any rate, would not be the basis of toleration; the moral arguments for the non-interference principle are.

Instead of relying on Hume's more general skepticism, we might try instead to rely on a skepticism about religious belief in particular. Indeed, Hume offers some reasons why we should be skeptical of the particular kinds of reasoning that

are found in support of religion, particularly at the end of the first *Enquiry* and, of course, in the *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion*. So, for example, Hume contends that miracles are used to support religious views, but claims for miracles always rely on irrationally trusting the testimony of people, whose interest are not always in the truth, above the ways we know nature to act (EHU 10; SBN 109–31). Or, for another example, the causal argument for the existence of God would have us infer the existence of God from features of His alleged effects. But, Hume contends, God is by hypothesis a unique creature, and so we do not have the experience that allows us to make any proper causal inferences concerning Him (EHU 11; SBN 132–48). Religious arguments are, to say the least, unique and unusual, and in a more generous moment at the end of *The Natural History of Religion*, Hume throws up his hands in frustration:

> The whole is a riddle, an ænigma, an inexplicable mystery. Doubt, uncertainty, suspence of judgement appear the only result of our most accurate scrutiny, concerning this subject. (NHR 15.12; R 76)

Religious belief, then, is utterly mysterious. When we consider it, Hume suggests, we can not, even with the utmost care, come to any conclusions. We are left in such a confusion that we must simply suspend our judgments about it altogether.

Since we should suspend our judgment about religion, we might think, we should be willing to tolerate the many different opinions about it. But, once again, suspending judgment does not help us to adopt one position rather than another. If religion is utterly mysterious, then we have no more reason to think that toleration is a better scheme than one in which everyone is forced to embrace the same religion or even that it is better than the outright repression of all religion. Once again, we need some other principle—a moral principle of some kind—to justify toleration. For these reasons, skepticism is a poor route to toleration.

Yet even if some of these skeptical arguments for toleration were more promising, we should still reject them. Skepticism, even in a mitigated form, is a highly contentious epistemological doctrine, which most people—and certainly most religious people—reject. Hume himself may not be concerned if his claims do not move the "vulgar"; the arguments here, like that about religion in general in the *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion*, are directed to scholars like Cleanthes and his student, Pamphilus, rather than to the masses. Yet even Hume would appreciate the need for an argument with broader appeal; "on opinion only," he notes, does government function (E 1.4.1; M 32). Without at least the passive support of most people, any government policy will fail. And a policy like toleration, which has wide-ranging implications and which is likely to rankle many people's religious convictions, must be supported by reasons that most people can accept, if not endorse. So even if skepticism were the philosophically best response to religious

issues, it is politically treacherous. If toleration is only based on skepticism, too many people would reject it for it to be politically viable. On pragmatic grounds, if nothing else, we should avoid skeptical arguments.[6] Even if it were philosophically compelling, then, such an argument would not serve the political function we had hoped for it.

II. Contempt for Religion

A second kind of argument for toleration that we can find in Hume derives from contempt he expresses for religion and its practitioners. Showing how most religions are irrational and how they often do more harm to society than good undermines the prominent role in society that religion is supposed to have. Such arguments, Hume seems to think, make toleration more attractive.

Religions, Hume argues, encourage traits of character which are injurious to society at large. Famously, Hume dismisses a whole set of distinctively religious virtues as worthless:

> Celibacy, fasting, penance, mortification, self-denial, humility, silence, solitude, and the whole train of monkish virtues, for what reason are they every where rejected by men of sense, but because they serve no manner of purpose. (EPM 9.3; SBN 270)

Those "monkish virtues," Hume says, "cross all these desirable ends; stupefy the understanding and harden the heart, obscure the fancy and sour the temper" (EPM 9.3; SBN 270). Only those whose judgments are distorted by the "delusive glosses of superstition and false religion" could approve of them (EPM 9.3; SBN 270). The practitioner of such "virtues" is simply a "gloomy hare-brained enthusiast" (EPM 9.3; SBN 270), who lies outside the society of truly decent people. These "virtues" belong clearly to monks of the Catholic Church, but most of them were much admired by the Puritans of Hume's *History* and by many of the clerics in the presbyterian Church of Scotland of Hume's day.

The problem with these virtues is that they make people unfit to live with others. They create people who are consumed with their own private idea of faith and who have little room for the problems that real people around them suffer. What they need is a dose of common sense morality, which prescribes sociability and a willingness to engage others. Indeed, the main lesson of the *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion*, as I have argued elsewhere, is that we should oppose any religious beliefs that undermine the common morality.[7] When Cleanthes argues that "[t]he doctrine of a future state is so strong and necessary a security to morals, that we never ought to abandon or neglect it" (DNR 12.10; KS 219), Philo scornfully replies that history shows that religion leads more often to conflict and misery (DNR 12.11;

KS 220).[8] Hume's *History* gives ample examples to prove Philo's point from Henry VIII's smear campaign against the monasteries (H 31, 3: 28) to the Catholic fanaticism behind the Gunpowder Plot against James I (H 46, 5: 28, 31) to the religious cruelty that led to the execution of the gallant Earl of Montrose in 1650 (H 60, 6: 20–5).[9] Indeed, for Hume, the English Civil War serves as one long lesson in the pernicious effects of religion on civil society. But Philo's point can best be seen in Hume's assessment of the ruthless reign of Queen Mary:

> England was soon filled with scenes of horror, which have ever since rendered the catholic religion the object of general detestation, and which prove, that no human depravity can equal revenge and cruelty, covered with the mantle of religion. (H 37, 3: 435)

Vulgar religion, Philo argues, either excites the imagination and incites a dangerous fervor in people, or it breeds hypocrisy as people pretend to feel the fervor that their religion teaches them they should feel. Either way, morality is sacrificed:

> [W]here the interests of religion are concerned, no morality can be forcible enough to bind the enthusiastic zealot. The sacredness of the cause sanctifies every measure which can be made use of to promote it. (DNR 12.18; KS 222)

Indeed, the focus on eternal salvation

> is apt to extinguish the benevolent affections, and beget a narrow, contracted selfishness. And when such a temper is encouraged, it easily eludes all the general precepts of charity and benevolence. (DNR 12.19; KS 222)

When eternal salvation is at stake, it overwhelms everything else; common decency and simple charity stand no chance.

Religion usually does not even console the miserable, Philo contends; instead, it nurtures only fear: "terror is the primary principle of religion, it is the passion which always predominates in it" (DNR 12.29; KS 225–6). Philo thus stands the usual argument against atheists and skeptics on its head: the true threat to morality comes not from them, but from the most pious, who do not feel constrained by the requirements of an earth-bound morality. So, Philo claims, we do not need religion to teach morality; instead,

> the smallest grain of natural honesty and benevolence has more effect on mens conduct, than the most pompous views, suggested by theological theories and systems. (DNR 12.13; KS 221)

Common life and common sense are more important for teaching morality than religious proselytizing.

That this view is Hume's own and not simply one voiced by Philo can be seen in the penultimate chapter to *The Natural History of Religion*, entitled "Bad Influences of Popular Religions on Morality" (NHR 14; R 70):

> Hence the greatest crimes have been found, in many instances, compatible with a superstitious piety and devotion; Hence, it is justly regarded as unsafe to draw any certain inference in favour of a man's morals, from the fervour or strictness of his religious exercises, even though he himself believe them sincere. . . . *Those who undertake the most criminal and most dangerous enterprises are commonly the most superstitious* as an ancient historian remarks. . . . Their devotion and spiritual faith rise with their fears. (NHR 14.7; R 72–3)

Those enthralled in religious beliefs let their belief that they are doing God's will overpower their common sense morality. Moreover, true virtue requires no such religious incentives, Hume argues:

> Even with regard to the virtues, which are more austere, and more founded on reflection, such as public spirit, filial duty, temperance, or integrity; the moral obligation, in our apprehension, removes all pretension to religious merit; and the virtuous conduct is deemed no more than what we owe to society and to ourselves. In all this, a superstitious man finds nothing, which has properly been performed for the sake of his deity, or which can peculiarly recommend him to the divine favour and protection. He considers not, that the most genuine method of serving the divinity is by promoting the happiness of his creatures. (NHR 14.6; R 71–2)

Our everyday morality will be performed "were there no god in the universe" (NHR 14.6; R 72) because our natural sentiments and interests support them. Religious devotion, then, is not needed to promote the common sense morality that we need to live in society

Notice that the problems of religion occur whether the religion embraces superstition or enthusiasm. Many of the above quotations deal explicitly with religions that inspire superstition, which is founded in "weakness, fear, melancholy, together with ignorance" (E 1.10.2; M 74). Indeed, Hume suggests, superstition *requires* persecution of new sects and new ideas to stave off the innovations that inevitably arise among both those interested in salvation and in the public good (H 38, 4: 19). Yet a fair sampling of the quotations deal with fanaticism and enthusiasm, which are based in "hope, pride, presumption, a warm imagination,

together with ignorance" (E 1.10.3; M 74). In the long run, Hume thinks that the fires of enthusiasm will burn out so that enthusiasts "*in a little time become more gentle and moderate*" (E 1.10.7; M 76). Nevertheless, "enthusiasm produces the most cruel disorders in human society" (E 1.10.7; M 78). So even though most of the problems of religion are produced by superstition, many of the same problems are also produced by enthusiasm as well. Since most, if not all, religions partake of either superstition or enthusiasm, Hume's claims seem to embrace all of religion.

This set of arguments does not, however, obviously lead to a case for toleration. Insofar as the effects of religion are as horrific as Hume imagines, we have good reason not to tolerate religion, but to ban it altogether. At least, we should tolerate only those forms of religion that support a common sense morality. To do so, of course, would require the government to keep a close watch on religious groups so they do not stray too far from common sense. Practically speaking, it would probably lead the government to restrict religious activities to a limited number of sects, whose actions could be easily monitored. Indeed, on just such grounds, the 1689 Act of Toleration in England—the law in effect in Hume's time—granted toleration only to Trinitarian Protestants. At best, then, this argument leads to a very limited form of toleration. At worst, it leads to a broad intolerance of the religious on the grounds that they are threat to society. The latter, arguably, was the view of many Enlightenment intellectuals—Hume perhaps among them—who favored toleration in the hope that it cause religion to wither away.

We might, however, try to argue that if our goal is to counteract the negative influences of religion on morality, then a broad toleration is our best policy, for one of at least three reasons. First, because toleration permits the existence of many different sects dedicated to different beliefs, no one group is able to become too influential and so none is able to have untoward effects on society at large[10] A healthy diversity keeps the any one group from becoming too arrogant. Second, since toleration leads to competition between various religious groups, the more fanatical groups, we might think, are likely to become smaller and smaller as the unsociability of their ideas becomes more clear. Third, because toleration exposes people to many different religious view, we might argue, people become generally less religious and so religion ceases to have as great a hold on the public imagination.

Unfortunately, there is no reason to think that toleration, especially for more controversial groups, will have any of these effects. Certainly the experience of toleration since Hume's day has given us no reason to think any of them are true. In America, the existence of many sects has only barely lessened the prevailing influence of Christianity—indeed, of the unsociable forms of Christianity that so troubled Hume—on public life. Competition has led to the growth of more "exciting" sects, as Hume himself was aware, for reasons I discuss below. Finally, the broad toleration in American society has certainly not led to the general decline of

religious influence on either people or on policy. Indeed, as Alexis de Tocqueville famously argues, "the main reason for the quiet sway of religion over their country [America] was the complete separation of church and state."[11] Toleration can have the paradoxical effect of making religion stronger.

More importantly, however, this general approach can not possibly succeed as a general argument for toleration. Insofar as the toleration granted by this argument depends on viewing the religious as evil (or nearly so) and moronic (or nearly so), the religious will—with good reason—reject it as grossly unfair and highly condescending. Too many people define their deepest identity in terms of their faith to accept a view that treats them in this way. Such a policy could only be imposed on them without their consent or even their acquiescence. And even if we could establish toleration on this basis, I would argue, we shouldn't. To do so does not show the proper respect for people of differing view that we should show. Suffice it to say, this line of argument is most unpromising as a public argument for toleration.

III. Pragmatic Arguments

Even if the arguments that rely on thinking that religion is anti-social fail to justify toleration in their own right, they do point to a problem that Hume does think needs to be addressed: the tendency of religious conflicts to lead to strife, to violence, and to outright civil war. On these grounds, then, we might be able to construct a pragmatic argument for toleration, based on what governments need to function.

The most the basic function of government , Hume argues, is to secure peace and justice for the members of a society:

> All men are sensible of the necessity of justice to maintain peace and order; and all men are sensible of the necessity of peace and order for the maintenance of society. (E 1.5.2; M 38; see T 3.2.7.6; SBN 537 and EPM 4.1; SBN 205)

Because we need peace and order, we need justice. But to have justice, we must have government (E 1.5.3; M 38). The sentimentalist morality comes in at just this point: justice is a moral principle because it evokes favorable sentiments when viewed from the moral points of view, mostly because it is so clearly useful.

The chief purpose of government, then, is to enforce justice and to maintain peace and order. Insofar as religious conflicts lead to violence and war, they obviously undermine a government's ability to achieve its most fundamental goals. Unlike most conflicts, however, the power of the government is not usually effective in containing them. The basic problem is that attempts to repress unorthodox

religious practices only inflame the passions of the faithful. As Hume notes when considering the efforts to suppress "fond and fantastical prophecies," "[w]itchcraft and heresy are two crimes, which commonly encrease by punishment, and never are so effectually suppressed as by being totally neglected" (H 39, 4: 62). When faced with potentially divisive ideas, then, the best thing a government can do is to ignore them. A civil magistrate simply condemns herself to continual troubles when she tries to meddle in theological disputes:

> So fruitless is it for sovereigns to watch with rigid care over orthodoxy, and to employ the sword in religious controversy, that the work, per-petually renewed, is perpetually to begin; and a garb, a gesture, nay, a metaphysical or grammatical distinction, when rendered important by the disputes of the theologians and the zeal of the magistrate, is suf-ficient to destroy the unity of the church, and even the peace of society. . . . And while the sovereign authority checked these excesses, the flame was confined, not extinguished; and burning fiercer from confinement, it burst out in the succeeding reigns to the destruction of the church and monarchy. (H 40, 4: 123)

By trying to curb religious fanaticism, a sovereign—Elizabeth I in this case—simply gets herself involved in abstruse issues without the ability to solve them in a way that will satisfy anyone involved in the dispute. At best, she can keep people quiet for a while, but such measures only increase the attachment of the fanatics to their cause. In the long run, then, suppression only makes matters worse.

Hume puts a longer version of the same argument in the mouth of Cardinal Reginald de la Pole during the reign of Mary I. Hume's Pole declares:

> But surely never enterprize was more unfortunate than that of founding persecution upon policy, or endeavouring for the sake of peace, to settle an entire uniformity of opinion, in questions which, of all others are least subjected to the criterion of human reason. (H 37, 3: 432).

Religious matters are not settled in the cool light of reason, and attempts to appeal to people's interests through the usual incentives governments have available do not work. Once an opinion is relatively well-known, any attempts to persecute practitioners "serves only to make men more obstinate in their persuasions, and to encrease the number of their proselytes" (H 37, 3: 432–3). They then produce "furious zealots" who become inspired by "the glory of martyrdom" (H 37, 3: 433). As a result, "spectators, moved with pity towards the supposed martyrs, are easily seduced to embrace those principles, which can inspire men with a constancy that appears almost supernatural" (H 37, 3: 433). Since people come to sympathize

with the martyrs, the religion is likely to gain even more converts, and the flames of the conflict are stoked ever higher.

In addition, Pole argues, the efforts to eliminate differences in opinion only make people more vulnerable to the seduction of new ideas:

> As healthful bodies are ruined by too nice a regimen, and are thereby rendered incapable of bearing the unavoidable incidents of human life; a people, who never were allowed to imagine, that their principles could be contested, fly out into the most outrageous violence, when any event (and such events are common) produces a faction among their clergy, and gives rise to any difference in tenet or opinion. (H 37, 3: 432)

Trying to keep new ideas away from people only makes people unable to assess them when they inevitably encounter them. In a similar vein, Hume himself argues that one of the values of a free press is that it creates an atmosphere in which many different points of view are discussed so that people become practiced in entertaining and in evaluating new ideas (E 1.2.var.d.1; M 604). In both places, Hume suggests that a free exchange of ideas takes some of the power and passion out of the disagreements. As a result, Hume's Pole suggests, everyone feels less threatened by differences in opinion:

> Open the door to toleration, mutual hatred relaxes among the sectaries; their attachment to their particular modes of religion decays; the common occupations and pleasures of life succeed to the acrimony of disputations; and the same man, who, in other circumstances, would have braved flames and tortures, is induced to change his sect from the smallest prospect of favour and advancement. (H 37, 3: 433)

Toleration, Pole claims, weakens the siege mentality that is infused in a persecuted minority and which helps to sustain its practitioners. For that reason, it undermines the fury of new sects, and eventually it allows people to concentrate on the more mundane aspects of their life. When they focus on, say, their economic self-interest rather than their religious beliefs, they often come to regard even their choice of religion as a matter of calculation and interest. Self-interest thus serves as a counterweight to fanaticism—a point that has been eloquently argued by Albert Hirschman in his classic study of eighteenth-century political thought, *The Passions and the Interest*.[12] People then understand that they can pass members of other religions on the highway of life without harm (see E 1.8.12; M 60–61).

However, Hume admits that the wisdom of this policy is not easy to see and even less easy to implement:

> If any prince possessed such enlarged views as to foresee, that a mutual toleration would in time abate the fury of religious prejudices, he yet met with difficulties in reducing this principle to practice; and might deem the malady too violent to await a remedy, which, though certain, must necessarily be slow in its operation. (H 39, 4: 54)

Princes usually think it makes more sense to eliminate conflicts by siding with one side to crush the other. So in the situation Hume considers in this passage, Philip II of Spain brutally tried to stamp out all heresies within his vast empire in Spain, Italy, and the Netherlands in a vain effort to achieve peace and religious harmony. But, Hume admits, even if Philip or any other magistrate had understood the fruitlessness of such endeavors, he might have been unable to effect a change anyway.[13] If the people as a whole do not accept toleration, violence will break out, whether the sovereign embraces toleration or not—a point Hume illustrates in his account of Catherine de Medici's attempts to stave off the Wars of Religion in France (H 39, 4: 55–6).[14] In the sixteenth century, toleration simply was not a live option in most countries.

Two kinds of experiences, Hume suggests, were crucial to the development of toleration in England. First, as long as no country had peacefully incorporated different sects, no one had any reason to think it would work. For that reason, the successful experiment in toleration that occurred in the Netherlands was crucial to the development of toleration in England:

> Before the United Provinces set the example, toleration was deemed incompatible with good government; and it was thought impossible, that a number of religious sects could live together in harmony and peace, and have all of them an equal affection to their common country, and to each other. (E 1.2.var.d.2; M 605)

With the Dutch experience in view, others could see that loyalty to a country did not require loyalty to a specific church. The Dutch experience, then, made toleration seem possible.

However, unless people also saw toleration as attractive—or at least, as less worse than the alternatives—they will never adopt it. So second—and more importantly—toleration could be seen as a real option only once people had experienced the horrors of religious civil war that forced them to give up the ideal of religious unity. In England, then, only the long tumult of the English Civil War could bring people to the point that toleration did not seem like a bargain with the devil. Hume, unlike many contemporary historians, emphasizes the essentially religious character of the Civil War. By 1642, he argues, Parliament had achieved its political aims of securing liberty for the people, and so the war occurred only to further religious goals:

> So obvious indeed was the king's present inability to invade the consti-
> tution, that the fears and jealousies, which operated on the people, and
> pushed them so furious to arms, were *undoubtedly not of a civil, but of a
> religious nature*. . . . The fanatical spirit, let loose, confounded all regard
> to ease, safety, interest; and dissolved every moral and civil obligation.
> (H 55, 5: 380, emphasis added)

Religion, Hume argues, has an almost unique ability to inspire people to such ef-
forts; indeed, for most people, the rights and liberties for which Parliament had
been fighting were beside the point. For them—if not always for their leaders—the
dispute was always about religion. So, Hume claims,

> It is vain . . . to dignify this civil war and the parliamentary authors of it,
> by supposing it to have any other considerable foundation than theo-
> logical zeal, that great and noted source of animosity among men. (H
> 55nAA, 5: 572)

Religion, Hume says, ultimately lay behind the terrors of the civil war.

After the horrific experience of the war, however, people were open to tol-
eration as a way of ending such conflicts permanently. Hume thus summarizes
his argument:

> In all former ages, not wholly excepting even those of Greece and Rome,
> religious sects and heresies and schisms, had been esteemed dangerous,
> if not pernicious to civil government, and were regarded as the source
> of faction, and private combination, and opposition to the laws. The
> magistrate, therefore, applied himself directly to the cure of this evil as of
> every other; and very naturally attempted, by penal statutes, to suppress
> those separate communities, and punish obstinate innovators. But it was
> found by fatal experience, and after spilling an ocean of blood in those
> theological quarrels, that the evil was of a peculiar nature, and was both
> enflamed by violent remedies, and diffused itself more rapidly throughout
> the whole society. Hence, though late, arose the paradoxical principle
> and salutary practice of toleration. (H app. 4, 5: 130)

Toleration is thus the product of hard and long-suffering experience. It requires an
"ocean of blood" before anyone is willing to consider it as an option. Battle fatigue
has to change their attitudes before it becomes possible. Even the chief proponents
of toleration during the Civil War, the Independents, came to it as part of their own
peculiar kind of enthusiasm; ironically, then, "so reasonable a doctrine owed its origin,
not to reasoning, but to the height of extravagance and fanaticism" (H 57, 4: 443).

In the above passage, Hume endorses what he calls the "paradoxical principle and salutary practice of toleration." Why Hume thinks the practice of toleration is "salutary" is obvious enough from the passages I have quoted already, but why it is a "paradoxical" he never explains. But I do not think we need to delve too deep here: to tolerate a religion different from my own, I must allow to exist—and possibly to flourish—a view of the world that I think is misguided at best and morally pernicious at worst. Even if I think that a person is leading people into the worse possible harm—eternal damnation—toleration requires me to stand aside and let them do so. To stand aside, however, we must fight against our yearning to correct those we think fundamentally mistaken.

Hume's pragmatic argument for toleration is, then, that it is the best means for solving the puzzle of religious conflict. By turning religious warfare into merely political fights, toleration allows governments to serve their most basic functions of maintaining peace and of securing justice. Unlike the previous arguments, it does not depend on any outright disrespect for religious beliefs or for religious practices. It does, however, depend on a basic claim about the nature of government. The purposes of government is not to save anyone's soul, but merely to set up a framework in which people can reliably resolve conflicts that arise over earthly goods. So insofar as the religious want something more from government, they will reject Hume's arguments, even if they accept the empirical findings on which it is based. Indeed, as long as people are convinced that their own salvation could suffer as a result of the presence of heretics among them, no penalty will compel them to tolerate others. A basic change in their attitudes—a change I am inclined to call a "conversion"—is needed.[15] That conversion, I think, is made possible, but not rationally required, by the battle fatigue, by a generational shift between those who started the war and those who have grown up in it, and by a vision of what the alternative might be. So while Hume recognizes that toleration is not an obvious remedy to the problems it addresses and that deep changes are needed in both the princes and the people before it is possible, even he underestimates the profundity of the transformation that is required.

IV. Lessons of the Pragmatic Approach

On the pragmatic view of toleration that I have found in Hume, toleration is not the triumph of grand political or philosophical principles. It is a compromise born out of a long-lasting suffering that impels people towards a new way of thinking about their religious beliefs. Hume's toleration has a very specific goal: to defang religious controversies. Since he has that goal in mind, he has a rather different attitude towards the principle that is often at the center of contemporary debates about religious toleration: the separation of church and state. From the point of view of modern separationists, the problem with Hume's view is not simply

that he does not support separation based on an unalterable principle. Although purists might fault a pragmatic argument for the separation of church and state on the grounds that it does guarantee religious liberty in principle, they would sympathize with it. But the purists could not sympathize with Hume's version of this argument because Hume does not accept the separation at all. On the contrary, Hume actually supports the *establishment* of religion—albeit a non-coercive state religion—as a means of stealing the thunder of religious leaders. The best means to keep the clergy under control, he argues, is to make them dependent on the state:

> Without the dependence of the clergy on the civil magistrates . . . it is in vain to think that any free government will ever have security or stability. (E 2.16.64; M 525).[16]

He makes this argument in its fullest form in a discussion of the beginning of the Reformation in the *History*:

> [T]his interested diligence of the clergy is what every wise legislator will study to prevent; because in every religion, except the true, it is highly pernicious, and it has even a natural tendency to pervert the true, by infusing into it a strong mixture of superstition, folly, and delusion. (H 29, 3: 135–6)

Clergy who need to attract a flock are most likely to gain adherents by proposing outrageous doctrines in their efforts to set themselves apart from their spiritual competitors:

> Each ghostly practitioner, in order to render himself more precious and sacred in the eyes of his retainers, will inspire them with the most violent abhorrence of all other sects, and continually endeavour, by some novelty, to excite the languid devotion of his audience. No regard will be paid to truth, morals, or decency in the doctrines inculcated.. Every tenet will be adopted that best suits the disorderly affections of the human frame. Customers will be drawn to each conventicle by new industry and address in practising on the passions and credulity of the populace. (H 29, 3: 136)

With no direction from the state, the clergy is too likely to create discord, either intentionally to create a stronger bond within their own churches or accidentally as their doctrines cause distress in others. The result is more strife than the government can usually handle:

> And in the end, the civil magistrate will find, that he has dearly paid for his pretended frugality, in saving a fixed establishment for the priests; and that in reality the most decent and advantageous composition, which he can make with the spiritual guides, is to bribe their indolence, by assigning stated salaries to their profession, and rendering it superfluous for them to be farther active, than merely to prevent their flock from straying in quest of new pastures. (H 29, 3: 136)

A lot less trouble results, Hume claims, if we simply enlist the clergy in the support of the state and give them every incentive not to pursue their job too vigorously. When a significant portion of the clergy have nothing to gain from proselytizing, then their preaching will be politically innocent. The result is that no one will be enthralled by religion, and toleration will be easy to sustain since no one will see any reason to suppress any dissenting sects, and general social peace will ensue.

For Americans, this strategy seems like a poor bet: having an established church in a tolerant regime would not prevent others from preaching increasingly outlandish doctrines, so it is hard to see how any conflicts would be lessened in that area. Moreover, the privileged status church itself would be a source of conflict, so the move only seems to increase religious conflict in the society. But history may bear Hume out on this point—especially if the goal is to eliminate the political effects of religion. In Europe where almost every country has an established church, people are distinctly less religious than in America. Religion as such is a much less significant factor in their politics. If, then, the goal is to lessen the influence of religion on the moral life of most people, Hume's approach may be correct.

Thus, Hume sees the problem of toleration as one in which the goal is only to minimize the civic strife caused by religious conflict. For him, toleration is simply "the true secret for managing religious factions" (H 44, 4: 352). It is a pragmatic tool designed for a certain purpose: "to make the civil union acquire a superiority above religious distinctions" (H 66, 6: 322). He thus he weighs policy alternatives in light of that goal. Given the pragmatic character of Hume's arguments, we can now reconsider the first two arguments he offers for toleration. The skeptical considerations and the assault on religious reasoning are less arguments for toleration as such than attempts to undercut the strong hold that religion has on people's lives. In other words, they are philosophical arguments that serve as psychological gambits to make toleration seem more plausible and more attractive. We can then see these three arguments as of a piece within a broadly pragmatic scheme for toleration that ultimately derives its power from our political experiences of a world of political conflict.

That policy goal is one, however, that he can expect many, if not most, religious people to accept. In light of the experience of the religious wars, many can accept toleration at least as a *modus vivendi* and the success of toleration over the

past four hundred years has made it easy to accept on these grounds. Those who want an argument for a broader religious liberty based on individual rights or for a vigorous separation of church and state will need additional premises, like a commitment to individual autonomy, premises which simply are not supported by the pragmatic resources available in Hume's work.

NOTES

An earlier version of this paper was presented at a panel on Toleration in Early Modern Philosophy at the Pacific Division meetings of the American Philosophical Association in March 2004. This paper has benefited from the comments Chris Laursen, Samuel Black, Michael Rosenthal, Jennifer Kwon, and the referees of *Hume Studies*.

1   References to Hume's works will be placed in the text, using the following scheme of abbreviations:

DNR—*Dialogues concerning Natural Religion*. First reference to part and paragraph. Page references designated KS to refer to edition edited by Norman Kemp Smith (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1947).

E—*Essays: Moral, Political, and Literary*. First reference is to part, essay number, and paragraph. Page references are designated M and refer to the edition edited by Eugene Miller (Indianapolis: Liberty Classics, 1985).

EHU—*Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*. First reference to section number and paragraph, and quotations taken by the edition edited by Thomas Beauchamp (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999). Page references designated SBN and refer to the third edition edited by L. A. Selby-Bigge and revised by P. H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975).

EPM—*Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals*. First reference to section number and paragraph, and quotations taken by the edition edited by Tom L. Beauchamp (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998). Page references designated SBN and refer to the third edition edited by L. A. Selby-Bigge and revised by P. H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975).

H—*History of England*. First reference is the chapter number, followed by volume and page in the edition edited by William Todd (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1983).

NHR—*Natural History of Religion*. First reference to part and paragraph. Page reference designated R to refer to the edition edited by H. E. Root (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1956).

T—*Treatise of Human Nature*. First reference to Book, part, section, and paragraph, with quotations taken for the edition edited by David Norton and Mary J. Norton (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000). Page references designated SBN to refer to the second edition edited by L. A. Selby-Bigge and revised by P. H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978).

2   In this historical context, see Richard Tuck, "Scepticism and Toleration in the Seventeenth Century," in *Justifying Toleration*, ed. Susan Mendus (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 21–36.

3   See Thomas Jefferson, "Notes on Virginia, Query XVII" in *Political Writings*, ed. Joyce Appleby and Terrence Ball (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 394.

4   Norman Kemp Smith, *The Philosophy of David Hume* (London: Macmillan, 1941; reprinted New York: Garland Publishing, 1983).

5   Among Hume scholars, the claim that a belief in God is not among the basic beliefs is controversial. For the most recent defenses of this view, see Peter Fosl, "Doubt and Divinity: Cicero's Influence on Hume's Religious Skepticism," *Hume Studies* 20 (1994): 103–20; and Donald Livingston, *Philosophical Melancholy and Delirium: Hume's Pathology of Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), chapter 3. However, J. C. A. Gaskin, I think, argues convincingly against any such attempts in *Hume's Philosophy of Religion* (London: Macmillan Press, 1978), chap. 10. For my take on these issues, see Richard H. Dees, "Morality above Metaphysics: Friendship and Philo's Stance in *Dialogue* XII," *Hume Studies* 28 (2002): 131–47.

Of course, if belief in God did turns out to be natural, then we would still not have an argument for toleration. If anything, it may give us a reason to prosecute those who would deny such an obvious proposition.

6   See John Rawls, *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 62–3.

7   See Dees, "Morality above Metaphysics." Parts of the following paragraphs draw on this article.

8   In this way, Philo and Hume distance themselves from Locke. In *The Reasonableness of Christianity*, Locke argues for exactly the position that Cleanthes defends here:

The view of heaven and hell will cast a slight upon the short pleasures and pains of this present state, and give attractions and encouragements to virtue which reason and interest, and the care of ourselves, cannot but allow and prefer. Upon this foundation, and upon this only, morality stands firm, and may defy all competition.

In Locke's view, the chief benefits of Jesus' incarnation was to give support to the belief in the afterlife. Without such a belief, Locke thinks, people will inevitably stray from morality. See Locke, *The Reasonableness of Christianity, as delivered in the Scriptures* in *The Works of John Locke*, 10th edition, (London: T. Davison, 1801), 150–1.

9   On Henry VIII's campaign, Hume declares, "During times of faction, especially of a religious kind, no equity is to be expected between adversaries" (H 31, 3: 228). For an excellent general discussion of the role of religion in the *History*, see Christopher Bernard, "Hume and the Madness of Religion," in *Hume and Hume's Connexions*, ed. M. A. Stewart and John P. Wright (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994), 224–38.

10   As Voltaire famously put this point,

If there were only one religion in England there would be danger of despotism, if there were two they would cut each other's throats, but there are thirty, and the live in peace and happiness.

Voltaire*, Letters on England*, trans. Leonard Tancock (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1980), 41.

11   Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans. George Lawrence (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Co., 1969), 295.

12   Albert Hirschman, *The Passions and the Interest: Political Arguments for Capitalism before its Triumph* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977).

13   Hume also implies the toleration was not a live possibility in the reign of Henry VIII (H 32, 3: 282), in the reign of Elizabeth I (H 38, 4: 15) or in France at the same time (H 40, 4: 169).

14   I discuss the many problems of establishing toleration in general and in sixteenth-century France in particular in *Trust and Toleration* (London: Routledge, 2004), particularly chaps. 2–4.

15   See Dees, *Trust and Toleration*, chaps. 2–3.

16   This argument lies within Hume's plan for a perfect commonwealth, which we have some reason not to take too seriously. However, even if Hume thinks that no such plans are ever practical, I think he does express genuine opinions about political matters. In this case, too, we have further evidence that he accepts these claims.