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THE ABSENCE OF GOD AND ITS CONTEXTUAL SIGNIFICANCE
FOR HUME¹

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ABSTRACT

Hume's thoroughgoing religious scepticism is set within the context of the Scottish Enlightenment. Against some interpreters, it is argued that, although elusive, his 'attenuated deism' (Gaskin) is not wholly dismissive of all forms of religious thought and practice. His position is further compared with contemporary expressions of 'new atheism'. Despite some obvious similarities, Hume's position is judged more nuanced both in terms of content and rhetorical strategy.

Key Words: Hume, God, religion, scepticism, atheism, deism

In narrating the final illness of Hume, Adam Smith records a conversation in which his friend reflected upon the reasons why he might wish to delay his journey across the Styx. He tells Charon, the ferryman, that perhaps he might correct his works for a new edition. This is dismissed as an excuse. Finally, he asks for time to see his work dismantle the prevailing systems of superstition. The boatman then loses his temper. 'You loitering rogue', he says, 'that will not happen these many hundred years. Do you fancy I grant you a lease for so long a term? Get into the boat this instant, you lazy loitering rogue' (Hume 1935: 245).

At a distance of three centuries, we can offer some assessment of the ways in which Hume challenged superstition and indeed what he might have intended by this late remark to his friend. Associated for much of his life with the city of Edinburgh, Hume became the doyen of the Scottish Enlightenment during the

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second half of the 18th century. Today he is regarded as the greatest philosopher to have written in English. Yet within his native context, he was also an exceptional figure by virtue of his views on religion. In Scotland, the Enlightenment was a movement that flourished on Presbyterian soil, many of its leading figures being clergy such as Robertson, Blair, Ferguson and Reid, who distinguished themselves in fields other than theology. By contrast, Hume took a view on religion that was neither heterodox nor indifferent but explicitly hostile in important respects. He was attacked by the clergy on numerous occasions; some of it was vicious and vitriolic, including that of James Beattie, the Aberdeen philosopher, later memorialized in Joshua Reynolds' painting 'The Triumph of Truth' (Beattie 1773).² Never offered an academic position, Hume even endured an attempt to have him excommunicated from the Kirk in 1755–56. Boswell famously described him as 'the great infidel', an epithet that has since stuck. (Graham 2006). In recent times, he has been valorized by the new atheists as one of their own, a critic of religion who helped to turn the tide of reason against superstition.

In what follows, I shall present Hume as a sceptical naturalist, his views on both the practice and theory of religion being largely negative. Yet, while much of Hume scholarship today presents him as more explicitly atheist and dismissive of religion than he was able to appear in 18th century Scotland, I shall make three further claims that modify this reading. 1. The question of God was never closed for Hume. 2. The existence of an intelligent creator was not a possibility that he judged capable of elimination. 3. There is a minimal form of theism and religious observance that he regarded as benign and even socially useful. In light of this, some comparisons will be drawn with today's new atheists who regard Hume as their patron saint.

Hume wrote repeatedly on the subject of religion throughout much of his life. Although the material can readily be assembled into a single volume of writings, it covers a broad range of topics (Wollheim 1963; Baggini 2010). Almost everything he had to say on the subject remains of significance today whether in its philosophical, social-scientific or historical study. It is clear, moreover, that his writings on religion were of much importance to Hume himself. He was willing to suffer public hostility on account of his views, even if at times he took steps to conceal the real extent of his scepticism. Shortly before his death, he added further material to the manuscript of the *Dialogues*, while also making provision for their posthumous provision. Some have judged this work to be a philosophical masterpiece.

We teach our students that Philo is generally the mouthpiece for Hume, his scepticism throughout the conversation largely representing that of the author. Yet Philo's own position becomes curiously ambivalent in the penultimate paragraph of the *Dialogues* where he appears to leave open the possibility of a residual theism. Is this merely a dramatic device to conceal the author's convictions, or is Hume making a more serious philosophical move that prevents us from labelling

him an outright atheist, in today's sense of that term? Commentators have divided over this issue of interpretation. There are certainly features of those closing remarks that must be seen as a smokescreen deliberately intended to conceal Hume's resting position. At any rate, the claim that he has destroyed reason in order to make room for faith in revelation must be read in this way. This was simply a tactical move that enabled Hume to advance a thoroughgoing scepticism in much of his writings without causing the outright offence and censure that would have inevitably ensued in much of 18th century Europe.

The use of scepticism to support faith was a procedure that had been employed by different French writers, notably Montaigne and Pascal. It was a strategy that could be utilised to support the authority of the church over individual interpretations of Scripture, or more widely to set faith over reason (Penelhum 2008). But the same device could also be used as a convenient means of disguising the real extent of one's scepticism, at a time when wholesale criticism of religion would have had deleterious consequences. Terence Penelhum notes that Bayle's *Historical and Critical Dictionary* of 1697 with its combination of 'phenomenal learning, sceptical argument, and cynical cunning ... provided a mine of anti-religious ammunition' for Hume and other Enlightenment figures (Penelhum 2008: 330). Some of the most explosive material in Bayle is reserved for his footnotes. Again something similar occurs in Hume's *Natural History*, where the attack on the religion of his own day is sometimes more apparent in footnotes and citation. So the rhetorical strategy of Bayle is deployed by Hume. Cast doubt on all popular forms of religion by subjecting these to tests of reason and evidence, but insist simultaneously that true faith must repose upon revelation. Hume had no intention of developing a theology of revelation, but this putative commitment provided him with a smokescreen behind which he could rehearse his arguments against natural theology.

A further tactical motive may have been Hume's resentment towards those such as Hutcheson and Leechman who represented the more liberal wing of the national Church of Scotland, but whose opposition to his appointment to the Edinburgh chair in 1745 proved decisive. Within Scottish Reformed theology, there had been a struggle since around 1700 between those who insisted upon an orthodox theology derived more or less exclusively from Scriptural revelation and 'new light' thinkers who expressed much greater confidence in the powers of human reason leading to more heterodox emphases (Hazlett 1993). While heavily revisionist in their views on the Westminster Confession and more indebted to classical thinkers, especially the Stoics, this latter group within the Kirk had failed to support Hume's candidacy for the Edinburgh chair. James Harris has argued that Hume's preference for a 'Calvinist rhetoric' in much of the First *Enquiry* can be explained by his rejection of the providential Deism of this latitudinarian group within the Kirk. So Hume's veiled criticism of a rational approach to theology is not intended to provide support for the evangelical party within the Kirk,

only to point to the serious inadequacy of the moderate alternative (Harris 2005; Stewart 2002).

Even allowing for such tactical manoeuvres, Philo's remarks remain puzzling especially when one considers these to have been late additions, inserted shortly before Hume's death. '[T]he whole of natural theology... resolves itself into one simple, though somewhat ambiguous, at least undefined proposition, *that the cause or causes or order in the universe probably bear some remote analogy to human intelligence*' (Hume 1935: 227). Does this simply reduce religious belief to a point where it has to vanish altogether, thus requiring that we view Hume as a thoroughgoing agnostic? This was expressed by T. H. Huxley, 'Darwin's bulldog', just over a century later. '[I]f we turn from the *Natural History of Religion*, to the *Treatise*, the *Enquiry*, and the *Dialogues*, the story of what happened to the ass laden with salt, who took to the water, irresistibly suggests itself. Hume's theism, such as it is, dissolves away in the dialectic river, until nothing is left but the verbal sack in which it was contained.' (Huxley 1879: 146) This seems nearly but not quite right.

The closing remarks of Part XII of the *Dialogues* are neither a volte-face nor entirely a concealment of Hume's final position. For one thing, it accords with views that have already been developed in the *Dialogues* and elsewhere. The order of the universe, particularly its organic life forms, is mysterious and apparently in need of explanation. At least, it is not wrong to consider whether there might be an explanation. The Epicurean hypothesis, even though flagged as an alternative hypothesis in the *Dialogues*, is described by Philo as 'the most absurd' (Hume 1935: 182). We know that in animals and human beings organisation is accompanied by intelligence. So it remains a possibility that something akin to human intelligence is the source of order in the universe, and this we might call God. Is this consistent with characteristic Humean scepticism? Given the qualifications surrounding the claim, it seems that it is. While the theistic hypothesis is possible, it is difficult to attach a particular weight to its likelihood. Hume insists that we cannot get into a position to pronounce its probability, since we have had no experience of such an intelligence. The analogies, moreover, must be remote, given the inevitable differences between any distant cosmic mind and those of human beings whose intellects are determined by and directed towards the conditions of physical and social existence. Finally, while intellect appears to offer some possibility for an analogical inference, this cannot be said of other attributes attaching to human life, notably moral ones. The residual theism at the end of the *Dialogues* is amoral.³ The analogy, Philo insists, cannot be transferred, with any appearance of probability, to the other qualities of the mind. So even if God exists in some inaccessible region, we cannot assume that God would have any moral concern with the world. The evidence indeed suggests quite otherwise, rather than requiring our suspension of judgement. This also explains why Philo regards himself as moving to much stronger ground when

the *Dialogues* turn from cosmic order to consider the problem of evil in Part X. 'It is your turn now to tug the labouring oar, and to support your philosophical subtilities against the dictates of plain reason and experience.' (Hume 1935: 202) It is a tacit recognition that with respect to the possibility of there being some cause of cosmic organisation, Cleanthes has raised a significant question that cannot readily be dismissed. His position is not as hopeless as that of Demea.

Hume's final position on natural theology is therefore a nuanced one. True religion reduces to our giving a degree of intellectual assent to the proposition that 'God exists', although it cannot ever be clear what this entails. This is the only form of 'worship' that Hume will allow. Anything else is superstitious and debasing of our character. The consequence of this is that all practical manifestations of religion are called into question. The God whose probable existence is conjectured cannot be God as ordinarily understood. Therefore, a rational religious belief will have no possible bearing on human life. To this extent, all real (i.e. actual) religion is without intellectual foundation and, for other reasons, much of it is considered by Hume to be superstitious or fanatical.⁴ While pleading for temperance and tolerance in matters of religious debate, some of his jibes display a mocking tone which is hardly surprising given the treatment meted out to him by his opponents. His famous quip about the miracle by which the principles of understanding are subverted is one of several sarcastic sallies against the faithful (Hume 1978: 131) This of course suggested the title of J. L. Mackie's *Miracle of Theism*, perhaps the most consistently Humean work in modern philosophy of religion (Mackie: 1982). Yet Hume's concluding remarks in the *Dialogues* suggest an *aporia* with regard to the enquiry into cosmic order. It yields a scepticism that confesses intellectual defeat. This may have quite similar practical outcomes to more explicit forms of early 21st century atheism, but its tonality, as I shall later suggest, is less complacent and strident. The question of God is neither a pseudo-question nor one that is readily dismissed by Hume. The position he adopts is a counter-cultural contestation of key social tenets, yielding the possibility of a bare theism lacking any apparent practical value. But this is not the confident default setting of an established tradition, too readily dismissive of the claims of religion.

If this characterisation of Hume's theological position is correct, then it might be viewed as belonging at the far end of the spectrum of deist positions that were advocated in the 18th century. 'Deism' is a portmanteau terms that refers not so much to a single school of thought, owing allegiance to any one writer or body of literature; instead, it denotes a range of Enlightenment views which tend to rest upon natural rather than revealed theology, and to maintain elements of Judeo-Christian beliefs about creation, providence, ethics and the afterlife. At one end of the spectrum, it is an etiolated version of Christian orthodoxy, as in the case of some of the moderate clergy in Scotland. At the other end – shorn of providence, ethics, and the afterlife – it shades into scepticism and a practical atheism. This

appears to be where Hume ends up in the *Dialogues*. Indeed, it may well be a settled position held over many years. In the essay on providence in Section XI of the *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, he had already written.

All the philosophy, therefore, in the world, and all the religion, which is nothing but a species of philosophy, will never be able to carry us beyond the usual course of experience, or give us measures of conduct and behaviour different from those which are furnished by reflexions on common life. No new fact can ever be inferred from the religious hypothesis; no event foreseen or foretold; no reward or punishment expected or dreaded, beyond what is already known by practice and observation. (Hume 1975: 146)

Gaskin describes Hume's settled position as an 'attenuated deism' although this might be further qualified by describing it as a tentative attenuated deism (Gaskin 1978: 223).⁵ Against this, Simon Blackburn has argued that the vague commitment at the close of the *Dialogues* constitutes an 'inert proposition' or 'bare claim' that is without content. '[I]t suggests no enquiry, and interacts with no desires or emotions, and guides no practices.' (Blackburn 1999: 4) The affirmation of Philo is thus hollow, Hume having conceded nothing. In this poker game, there is only one winner who takes all. Blackburn claims that Kant and William James refused to pay up while Wittgenstein simply changed the rules of the game. But is Philo's proposition entirely inert? Certainly, it has no moral relevance for Hume, but it does seem to place a question mark against the very existence of an organised cosmos. The universe might have an explanation; or, at any rate, we could reasonably say that the absence of any explanation would be a puzzle. One outcome of this train of thought is that natural science cannot deliver all the answers. At least, it seems that there will be some residual questions remaining after science has done its explanatory work. To that extent, Hume's agnosticism is less self-confident and exclusive of possibilities than some species of today's new atheism.

In his recent work, Daniel Dennett has suggested that Hume would have been bolder in his affirmation of outright atheism had he received the benefit of reading Darwin. Unable to explain the sources of order in the world, he had finally to revert to mystery and an appeal to the limits of human knowledge. But with later accounts of natural selection and genetic mutation, we can now explain far more in naturalistic ways than Hume realised. Describing the final position of Philo in the *Dialogues*, Dennett states that '[Hume] caved in because he just couldn't imagine any other explanation of the origin of the manifest design in nature. . . The evolutionary revolution had to wait until Charles Darwin saw how to weave an evolutionary hypothesis into an explanatory fabric composed of literally thousands of hard-won and often surprising facts about nature.' (Dennett 1995: 32–33) In his more recent work, however, Dennett has suggested instead

that the arguments of natural theology have reached a stalemate and that no breakthrough should be anticipated. What is more significant is not so much the *Dialogues* as the work begun in *The Natural History*. Perhaps even religion itself can be accounted for by neo-Darwinian cognitive psychology, thus placing on a more scientific basis the kind of explanation for religious belief and practice which Hume had already attempted (Dennett 2007: 27).

To an extent, much of this is valid comment and follows in the tradition of Huxley's aforementioned commitment to Hume. Despite the publication of the *Dialogues*, the design argument continued to persuade a succession of early 19th-century writers, including Paley and the authors of the *Bridgewater Treatises*. Its intuitive force together with the accumulation of scientific evidence seemed to make the design hypothesis unassailable to its defenders. By contrast, the criticisms of Hume were perceived as playful, ingenious and slight. These could readily be overcome by counter-argument. After the publication of *Origin of Species* (1859), however, all that changed. The design argument did not disappear but it was presented more cautiously, just as the force was more fully felt of Hume's earlier criticisms (Flint 1887; Brooke and Cantor 2000: 141–175).

But whether Darwinism would have led Hume to a more forthright atheism is doubtful. One version of the 18th century design argument is clearly made redundant by the principle of natural selection, namely the one predicated upon observation of the matching of species to environment. That camels are equipped for desert conditions and polar bears for the north pole is explained very well by Darwin without recourse to the hypothesis of divine providence. Similar comments might be made *mutatis mutandis* about the evolution of complex organs such as the camera eye – these have evolved incrementally as a result of mutations combined with the outcomes of natural selection. But whether this accounts for all types of cosmic organisation is less clear. What about the motions of the planets and the origin of carbon-based life forms? Modern science can give us an account of their origins in terms of big-bang cosmology but this too reposes upon their being a universe, or maybe a multiverse, that has the capacity to generate regions of space-time governed by scientific laws. The givenness of cosmic organisation, including animal evolution, is not something that is readily explained, at any rate not to the point of exhausting all the possible 'why' questions that can be posed. Hume's minimal deism thus remains a valid option, even for a post-Darwinian philosopher or scientist. To suggest that evolutionary theory must inevitably yield a full-blown and more self-confident atheism is to miss something of the subtlety of Philo's conclusions. Darwin himself did not commit to the full force of Huxley's scepticism. He may have lost much of his faith, but it did not lead him to espouse outright atheism or naturalism. He preferred to leave some questions open, it seems, even if traditional religious answers had long since ceased to satisfy. In turning away from orthodox dogma and practice, therefore, Darwin and Hume may have ended closer to one another, than to Huxley and Dennett.

Nevertheless, Blackburn and others are surely right that the practical outcome of the *Dialogues* is that God exercises no moral influence upon us, nor do we upon God. This entails for Hume that the claims of revealed theology are false; ceremonies, prayers, sacrifices, rituals, sacraments, and fasting are either superstitious or fanatical. A binary opposition thus emerges between a thin philosophical theism and the actual practices and beliefs of the historical forms of religion. These depend upon particular beliefs about the divine nature and our capacity to influence it. Superstition appears in Hume's mind to be most closely associated with a religion of external ceremonies and rituals, no doubt with medieval Catholicism in mind, whereas enthusiasm is largely a Protestant phenomenon often marked by selectivity and intolerance (Hume 1996: 38–42). In the *Natural History of Religion*, there is a fuller discussion of the different forms of religion, this making it clear why, despite his comprehensive scepticism, Hume has a preference for the pagan religion of ancient Greece and Rome. With its plurality of gods, elaborate myths, and anthropomorphism, this polytheism is more accommodating of diversity and tolerance. Its limited and quasi-human gods are more like fellow actors in a drama. Its focus on ritual and myth, rather than dogma, makes it less toxic. This ensures that pagan religion is more apt to produce virtues such as courage and generosity. By contrast, monotheism is altogether more grim and demanding; it leans towards intolerance, violence and the servile virtues. In our increasingly anxious and ingenious efforts to please the Almighty, we are drawn into all manner of irrational creeds and immoral actions. The long footnote, quoting Chevalier Ramsay, surely represents Hume's most bitter attack upon the religion of Reformed Scotland, including its cornerstone doctrine of double predestination (Wollheim 1963: 88) With his moderate contemporaries, he recoils from the violence of the 17th century covenanting period, as is apparent in more satirical remarks from the *History of England*.

Great were the rejoicings among the Scots, that they should be the happy instruments of extending their mode of religion, and dissipating that profound darkness, in which the neighbouring nations were involved. The general assembly applauded this glorious imitation of the piety displayed by their ancestors, who, they said, in three different applications, during the reign of Elizabeth, had endeavoured to engage the English, by persuasion, to lay aside the use of the surplice, tippet, and corner-cap. The convention too, in the height of their zeal, ordered every one to swear to this covenant, under the penalty of confiscation; beside what farther punishment it should please the ensuing parliament to inflict on the refusers, as enemies to God, to the king, and to the kingdom.' (Hume 1983: Vol. 5. Chapter 56)

Another notable feature of the *Natural History* is the way in which it undermines a central tenet of deism (Bell 1990: 9). The assumption that there is a single

natural religion common to all people is a premise of much deist writing in the 18th century. To this extent, deism is a project of recovery. By nature, we own a religion that is rational and ethical, and roughly commensurate with the findings of natural theology. This pure faith, however, has been overlaid with the superstitious claims and practices which have flourished for many centuries. By weeding these out, we can return to a common religion that is natural and self-evident. A *consensus gentium* will hence be established across confessional division. But the historical work undertaken by Hume is sufficient to cast serious doubt on the proposition that there is a single, natural and monotheistic religion underlying all of the religious traditions of the world. The essentialist concept of a natural religion is no longer tenable. The historical contextualising of all religious forms thus threatens a key motivational commitment of deism.

Hume does not appear to have favoured a mitigated scepticism in matters of religion, as he did with respect to other types of belief. There is no natural tendency towards belief in this domain. Morality is independent of religion and is distorted by its intrusion. Gaskin argues that despite some similarities religious belief cannot be construed as a natural belief in Hume (Gaskin 1978: 120–126). It is neither universal nor is its absence practically self-defeating, as for example, in the case of belief in the external world or other minds. Although it is a strong impulse, the religious is secondary rather than primary. This raises the further question as to whether Hume hoped for a society without religion. Does he explore the idea of a secularised society in which religion has altogether disappeared? Could a Humean perspective be embraced by every citizen?

Hume's views on superstition and enthusiasm when combined with his commitment to a naturalist ethics appear to render a negative verdict upon most historical forms of religious belief and activity. Yet there are themes in his writing elsewhere which suggest a more nuanced position. Although not arguing for religion as a natural belief, he seems to assume that in practice all societies will be religious in complexion, even while this takes diverse forms. In the *History of England*, a model of establishment is advanced which shows a preference for an Anglican *via media* that resonates with Hume's views in other contexts (Jordan 2002). The preferred form is a state religion released from the worst superstitions of the middle ages, retaining many of its ceremonies, clerical orders and sensual forms of worship, and maintaining a lower level of doctrinal commitment, after a cooling of the temperature raised by the divisive dogmas of the Reformation. Hume appears to believe that this is most likely to facilitate social harmony and civility when accompanied by state regulation, funding and a high commitment to religious tolerance. At any rate, this is his declared preference in the *History of England*.

Was Hume seriously committed to this proposal? It is certainly a position that is argued, as opposed merely to being presented. The detail advanced in support of this model, the implied criticism of Scottish Reformed ideals, and the difference

from the more disestablished type of church-state relation favoured by Adam Smith might suggest that it was his preferred position rather than another instance of diplomatic concealment. It was not simply a pragmatic or tactical response to appease a religious readership. Referring to the Elizabethan settlement, he writes.

The ancient liturgy was preserved, so far as was thought consistent with the new principles: Many ceremonies, become venerable from age and preceding use, were retained: The splendour of the Romish worship, though removed, had at least given place to order and decency. . . . And the new religion, by mitigating the genius of the ancient superstition, and rendering it more compatible with the peace and interests of society, had preserved itself in that happy medium, which wise men have always sought, and which the people have so seldom been able to maintain. (Hume 1983: Vol. 4, Chapter 40)

In other respects, it accords with his historical claim that religion appears to be a feature of all civic life, as well as his general preference for public ceremony and ritual over against highly particular dogmas that tend to be fiercely contested. Under a sacred canopy of a church regulated and sponsored by the state, religion is most likely to be rendered cohesive and benign in its effects. Doubtless, Hume as a sceptic sought only a national church that was moderate, latitudinarian and undemanding of citizens. But this is rather different from Smith's more American-style model of a neutral state for a society populated by different confessional bodies, none of which is given political preference.

This resonates with other remarks that Hume makes in the *Dialogues* and elsewhere. There is a 'true' religion which is regulated by the calm passions. This is supportive of our natural moral impulses and can be evoked by a sense of wonder at the universe. Hume denotes this 'true' religion not so much because he believed it with any conviction, but because it was plausible, worth tolerating and even promoting over other more toxic forms. This might explain why the theological distance between Cleanthes and Philo appears to diminish somewhat in the closing stages of the *Dialogues*, as if these are the outcome partly of temperamental differences between friends.⁶

Genuine piety is described in the following manner in an unpublished draft introduction to Volume II of *The History of England*. Here Hume seems to be referring not so much to his own position as to a benign form of religion that is to be encouraged over against its alternative.

The proper Office of Religion is to reform Men's Lives, to purify their Hearts, to inforce all moral Duties, & to secure Obedience to the Laws and civil Magistrate. While it pursues these useful Purposes, its Operation, tho' infinitely valuable, are secret & silent; and seldom come under the Cognizance of History. (Mossner 1954: 306)⁷

Hume's particular attacks on religion are unsettling and profound, precisely because the ground had already been prepared for this in his general philosophy. The *Treatise* says little about God, but precisely in doing so it offers an account of the natural and social world that has no need of theology. Alexander Broadie has pointed out that the *Natural History of Religion* could have been added almost seamlessly to the argument of the *Treatise* (Broadie, 2009: 187). Hume's mitigated scepticism has no role for God either in terms of its explanatory framework or its practical outworkings. The business of life can be conducted well, perhaps even better, without much reference to the divine. It is for this reason that the most interesting response to Hume was not George Campbell's reply to the essay on miracles or the later efforts to rehabilitate the design argument, however worthy though these were. Thomas Reid's more widespread effort to set philosophy on a different basis was the most creative and constructive response to Humean scepticism in the Scottish Enlightenment. The attempt to offer an alternative account of our most deep-seated convictions about knowledge, the nature of the self, the external world, and the objectivity of moral and aesthetic values showed how much would be required if a satisfactory response was to be made. While Reid makes little effort in arguing specifically for divine existence through any one argument, he constructs a philosophy of the intellectual and active powers that lends itself more readily to theistic claims.

Two comments might be made about this approach. First, it shows that if one allows the role of God to be squeezed into a tightly demarcated religious province, then the design argument is unlikely to be very persuasive or significant in its outcomes. Unless it is part of a much broader and more cumulative strategy of reasoning about the natural and social world then it will achieve relatively little. This is true *a fortiori* in late modernity when belief in God is no longer the default setting of western society. As Charles Taylor argues in *A Secular Age*, this is the most profound difference between the contemporary world and the one that preceded the Enlightenment. For us, faith is an 'embattled option' and it requires not simply assent to one argument but the mustering of a broad set of intellectual and practical commitments (Taylor 2007: 3). So any response to Hume will have to widen the front of the argument. Secondly, even if faith can be maintained in the stronger realist setting provided by Reidian philosophy, the effects of scepticism may still prove significant. For Reid, the ineluctable principles by which our thinking and action are regulated are given for the negotiation of embodied life in the natural and social world. Our knowledge does not extend much further. At best, we can live 'wisely in the darkness' with just sufficient awareness of God's ways (Wolterstorff 2004). The creeds and ceremonies of faith have a practical function in orienting us towards love of God, self and neighbour. They may carry cognitive commitments but these are limited in scope and imprecise in what they affirm. This may point to one of the abiding benefits of Hume's scepticism, even for the faithful. The limitations of theological reason can thus serve

the cause of a moral religion, devotional practice, tolerance and ecclesiastical self-criticism.⁸

The banishment of God in Hume's philosophy is an urbane achievement with neither dramatic nor tragic nor wistful consequences. This sets him apart from other European thinkers, in both theological and philosophical traditions. Luther's failure to locate God in worldly processes led to a sense of estrangement. The *Deus absconditus*, the absent God, generated an existential tension that was only resolved by the figure of the suffering Christ. The ways of the crucified God eluded those of philosophy and religion. At least since Kant, the German theological tradition has generally been dismissive of the standard arguments of natural theology claiming that its failure only points to the real location of God in human history and experience. Of course, there is nothing of this in Hume. Claims to revelation are equally suspect with little attention being given in his writings to the figure of Jesus. By contrast, other forms of agnosticism and atheism have a different tonality in later western philosophy. Nietzsche dramatises the death of God in modernity, seeing this as a difficult and heroic act with far-reaching consequences. In late Victorian England, agnosticism may have been the default setting for many intellectuals but it is presented wistfully, with nostalgic and elegiac elements, in writers such as Matthew Arnold and Thomas Hardy. Even within the tradition of British empiricism, Bertrand Russell's atheism is of a more strident and dramatic form with its rhetoric of 'unyielding despair'. For Hume, by contrast, the criticism of religion is a quietly therapeutic exercise for those willing to take the trouble. It need not induce existential *Angst*, cosmic despair or moral nihilism. More redolent of the ancient world, his mitigated scepticism will prevent these from gaining purchase. The lesson of his philosophy, particularly his moral theory, is that one can live and act well without regard to God. On balance, it will be better for us if we are not obstructed or misled by the prejudices of faith.

In terms of the history of philosophy, Hume's position is a minority one. Kant and Hegel sought to reintroduce God, albeit in ways that were judged heterodox. Like Spinoza before him, Hegel was described as 'God-intoxicated'. Wittgenstein, whose views on religion were admittedly elusive, appears nevertheless to allow that religious discourse has an important role to play in expressing insights and commitments that cannot otherwise be stated. It is more akin to a box of tools that enable us to adopt and inhabit perspectives without which our lives would be impoverished, lacking a certain depth, discernment and openness to the transcendent. But there is nothing in Hume which suggests that even a regulative account of religious language and practice might have some real advantages over other philosophies. The intention appears to be one of dispelling its irrational and baleful hold over human beings, as opposed to assimilating it within a naturalist framework.

We can speculate about the contextual factors that contributed to this. Unlike Boswell, Hume was someone who appeared able to live and die well, without

any recourse to religious sentiments, rituals or hopes. His criticism of religion is not that of someone who craves faith but cannot find it, or who feels keenly the absence of a rational creed. He suffers no religious crisis after the swift loss of faith in his adolescence. Another factor may also be the religion of his early 18th century upbringing in the Scottish lowlands, in the wake of the violence of the covenanting era. The Reformed theology and worship of the period must have appeared ‘gey dreich’ to someone entering upon the exciting intellectual world of the early Enlightenment. It would take another 150 years before Scottish church life embarked upon a systematic renewal of its worship, sacramental practice, preaching, music and church architecture to bring it closer to the Anglicanism seemingly preferred by Hume (Cheyne 1983). Yet Hume does not adopt the emerging moderate position of Hutcheson and many of those clergy who became his friends and supporters. His indifference to religion and its institutions sets him at a distance from most of the other thinkers of the Scottish Enlightenment, with the possible exception of Adam Smith. That other great critic of 18th Presbyterian church life, Robert Burns, was a younger contemporary of Hume. He exposed the hypocrisy of the ‘unco guid’ and generally set his face against the prevailing orthodoxy, but without it seems abandoning religion altogether. There are many more positive religious notes in Burns than in Hume.

Others have read Hume as a man ahead of his time. In the writings of the so-called new atheists today, he has come into his own. Richard Dawkins assumes that a cocktail of Hume and Darwin will prove lethal for all forms of religion. The multifaceted attack of Hume on religion is replicated, if intensified in much of this literature. Dawkins follows many of Hume’s standard criticisms of the standard proofs for God’s existence. The citation of the problem of evil bears similarities to Parts X and XI of the *Dialogues*. The attack on sacred texts as populated with miracle stories and unedifying tales is reminiscent of Hume’s famous essay on the subject, while the claim of Christopher Hitchens that ‘religion poisons everything’ in its individual and social effects recalls much in the *Natural History* and other works (Dawkins 2006; Hitchens 2007).

Nevertheless, despite their obvious alliances, there are probably two related ways in which Hume would have been uneasy around the new atheism. Its confident assertion of the non-existence of God might appear an overreaching of the power of reason. Much of Hume’s criticism is that our experience is too limited to enable us to pronounce over questions surrounding the origin of the universe. Peter Atkins’ inflated claim that we should expect science eventually to answer the question ‘why there is something rather than nothing?’ would have been unlikely to secure the support of Hume (Atkins 2011: 12ff.). There may be many questions that remain incapable of resolution, given our human condition. The capacity of science to produce a new metaphysics might have been greeted with a similarly sceptical response. The remarkable credulity displayed around the explanatory concept of memes would surely have elicited some doubts on

Hume's part. At the same time, the tonality of the new atheism might also have disturbed Hume, particularly its tendency to scoff at religionists as either fools or knaves. Dawkins often writes as if exponents of faith should be creationists, fundamentalists and biblical literalists for the sake of consistency. He is reluctant to enter into conversation with revisionist positions which offer alternative constructions in ways that seek the co-existence of religion and science. Hume's *Dialogues* by contrast are a model of interpretation *in optimam partem*. His opponents, especially Cleanthes, are given a fair and sympathetic hearing. The art of civilised conversation and friendly disagreement is exemplified, even when the differences run deep. For that reason, the rhetorical strategies of the new atheists with their strident and condescending overtones would probably have elicited some rebuke from Hume himself.

Hume might have preferred to position himself alongside other humanist voices who have urged the need for collaboration between advocates of tolerance, civility and social justice whatever their religious hue. At the risk of frivolous anachronism, we might ask what would Hume have made of buses in London and Edinburgh parading the message, 'There's probably no God. Now stop worrying and enjoy your life.' Is this the public triumph of scepticism or the nadir of a reflective secular humanism? It is hard to see Hume disagreeing much with the content of that slogan. Its light and urbane tone is more Humean than Nietzschean. Yet the medium might have offended him rather more. Is this just too vulgar, a descent into sloganizing rather than arguing? Is there an atheist fanaticism that also has its bad consequences? Is this likely to induce the calm and measured discussion on the subject which he urged upon his critics? Or is it indeed a strategy that might prove counter-productive by triggering a reflux of intemperate religious enthusiasm? With his scepticism about the inevitability of human progress, Hume might have entertained that prospect.

Finally, what of Hume's reception amongst later Scottish philosophers and theologians? My impression is that later generations, including scholars who identified broadly with the Kirk, have learned to value Hume and have sought to include him in a noble tradition of distinctively Scottish philosophers. Cairns Craig points out that the late-19th century reading of Hume located him within a Scottish tradition that was no longer fundamentally at odds with Hutcheson and Reid (Craig 2009: 91–95). Henry Calderwood and James Orr, both products of the United Presbyterian Church, wrote sympathetic studies at the turn of the 19th century, even if Calderwood sought implausibly to identify the real Hume with Cleanthes (Calderwood 1898; Orr 1903). Hume's scepticism contributed to the refining of faith, thus playing a positive role, albeit in ways that he himself did not directly intend. Kemp Smith, who remained a theist of sorts, wrote one of the finest studies of Hume's philosophy and sought to position him close to Reid in his espousal of a philosophical naturalism (Kemp Smith 1941). The Divinity Faculties in Scotland ensured for many years that the *Dialogues* remained a

prescribed text. Scottish theologians, it seems, took some pride in the view that while Hume may have been a sceptic, he was at least their sceptic and better than any of the others out there. For that reason amongst others, he deserves to be better known and valued in contemporary Scotland. His nuanced criticism of religion should enable us to think twice, to realise the danger of believing too much in the wrong things, to remain alert to the follies and prejudices of the faithful, aware of the mobility of religious forms across history, while listening patiently to those who see the world differently in the expectation that we will profit from them.

As a critic of religion, Hume deserves to be eulogised in his native land at least as much as Robert Burns. Although the toast to the immortal memory of the mitigated sceptic is an intriguing prospect, it is unlikely that we shall ever have Hume Suppers. Yet at least he is worthy of greater public recognition than he currently receives. But as the ferryman at the Styx informed him, these things take a long time.

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NOTES

- ¹ This essay was originally presented as an address at the 38th Hume Society Conference in Edinburgh, 2011. I am grateful to colleagues at that event for comments offered, and also to an unpublished lecture by Willem Lemmens on 'The Piety of the Sceptic: Hume on 'True Religion' and Atheism' delivered at the Institute for the Advanced Study of the Humanities, University of Edinburgh, November, 2011 from which I have also benefited.
- ² For discussion of the Beattie affair, see Mossner (1954), pp. 577ff. Despite his cheap attack on Hume's scepticism, Beattie, a determined abolitionist, deserves some credit for exposing the flaws in Hume's notorious comments on national characteristics. See also Eze (1997).

- ³ Whether Hume goes all the way in arguing transcendently that moral qualities cannot be ascribed to God, as Thomas Holden (2010) has recently claimed, seems less clear.
- ⁴ Here I am largely following the line of Kemp Smith in Hume (1935), p. 24.
- ⁵ This largely accords with the readings of Kemp Smith in Hume (1935) and Broadie (2009). Much light is shed on how and why Hume held to such a position by Garrett (2012). Garrett points out that the true religion espoused by Philo (and Hume) suffers from a lack of determinate probability in relation both to the degree of resemblance between divine and human intelligence and also to the existence of the former. Thus Hume's epistemic claim at the close of the *Dialogues* is authentic but highly modest.
- ⁶ 'Diverse judgements and expressions within this range may result from mere blameless differences in philosophical temperament—such as the notable differences between Cleanthes and Philo. These differences need not and should not breed animosity or hinder friendship, in Hume's view.' (Garrett 2012: 218)
- ⁷ Immerwahr (1996: 333) notes that this passage is adapted in a speech of Cleanthes in *Dialogues*, Part XII. Philo appears to accept the proposition, adding that only the philosophical and rational kind of religion can function in this way. For further exploration of what Hume intends by 'true' religion, see Lorne Falkenstein (2009).
- ⁸ This echoes earlier remarks of Principal Robertson to James Beattie defending the religious benefits of Hume's scepticism. '[A] little fluctuation, now and then, to the sceptical side, tends perhaps to humble the Pride of Understanding, and to check bigotry; and the consequences as to practice, I am enclined to think, are not very great.' Cited by Mossner, 1954: 580.