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## *Hume, David*

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### **Abstract**

David Hume (1711-1776) is widely recognized as one of the most influential and significant critics of religion in the history of philosophy. There remains, nevertheless, considerable disagreement about the exact nature of his views. According to some, he was a skeptic who regarded all conjectures relating to religious hypotheses to be beyond the scope of human understanding – he neither affirmed nor denied these conjectures. Others read him as embracing a highly refined form of “true religion” of some kind. On the other side of this spectrum, it is claimed that Hume was committed to atheism, although due to social conditions at the time, this had to be (thinly) concealed or masked. The aim of this article is to provide an overview of Hume’s core concerns and arguments on this subject and to provide the reader with a framework for interpreting and assessing his various contributions.

**Key terms:** Hume, David; argument from design; cosmological argument; miracles; problem of evil; atheism; naturalism; empiricism; Enlightenment.

David Hume (1711-1776) ranks among the greatest of philosophers and issues of religion lie at the heart of what most concerned him. Although the exact nature of Hume’s attitude to religion is a matter of some controversy, there is general agreement that his basic stance was critical, if not hostile, to the doctrines and dogmas of orthodox religious belief and practice. There remains, however, considerable disagreement about whether or not Hume believed that there is any truth or value in religion. According to some, Hume was a skeptic who regarded all conjectures relating to religious hypotheses to be beyond the scope of human understanding – he neither affirmed nor denied these conjectures. Others read Hume as embracing a highly refined form of “true religion”. On the other side of this

spectrum, it is claimed that Hume was committed to atheism, although due to social conditions at the time, this had to be (thinly) concealed or masked. The aim of this article is to provide an overview of Hume's core concerns and arguments on this subject and to provide the reader with a framework for interpreting and assessing his various contributions.

### *The Place of Religion in Hume's Philosophy:*

Hume's philosophy of religion is generally interpreted against the background of a broader interpretation of his philosophy and the historical context in which it arose. One of the most familiar and deeply entrenched perspectives on Hume's philosophy is that he belongs in the "British Empiricist" tradition – the last member of the great triumvirate of "Locke-Berkeley-Hume" (EOPR 0216) (EOPR0044). Viewed this way, Hume's philosophy is understood as an effort to draw out the systematic skeptical implications of empiricist principles, whereby even our most common sense beliefs are brought into doubt and shown to lack rational credentials. Hume's skeptical critique of religion is, according to this account, just one dimension of his overall empiricist-skeptical program. It is argued, moreover, his concern with religion was a later development in his thinking, one that eventually culminates in his posthumous *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* (1779).

An alternative understanding of Hume's philosophy, takes religion to be more fundamental in the development of this thought. More specifically, according to the *irreligious* interpretation, Hume's first and most ambitious work, *A Treatise of Human Nature* (1739-40), is deeply rooted in debates between "religious philosophers" and "speculative atheists" that dominated British philosophy throughout the late 17<sup>th</sup> and early 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. It is this debate - not the anachronistic, post-Kantian empiricist/rationalist divide - that shaped and motivated Hume's most fundamental concerns *throughout* his philosophy, continuing from the *Treatise* through to the *Dialogues* (Russell 2008; Russell 2016). Both Hume's skeptical and naturalistic principles, it is argued, are carefully crafted to serve his core irreligious aims and objectives. With respect to both these elements of his philosophy, Hume's objective is to challenge and discredit the doctrines and dogmas of the Christian religion. Read this way, Hume should be understood as belonging to an irreligious tradition of thought of which the most celebrated representatives were Hobbes and Spinoza (EOPR0373). His primary targets, consistent with this, were a set of apologists for the Christian religion, the most prominent of whom included Descartes, Locke and, especially, Samuel Clarke (a close associate and ally of Isaac Newton) (EOPR0444). It was

Hume's concern, according to this reading, to show that religion received little or no support from philosophy and, paired with this, that morality required little or no support from religion. These two issues were fundamental to the core debate between religious philosophers and speculative atheists. On both issues Hume sides *decisively* with the latter party on both.

*Empiricism, Skepticism and the Idea of God:*

Lying at the heart of the issue concerning the rational (philosophical) credentials of religion was the question of the existence of God. The relevant starting point here is our *idea* of God. It is a fundamental principle of Hume's entire empiricist program that all our ideas are derived from prior impressions of sensation or reflection (i.e. "the copy principle"). The obvious question to ask, therefore, is from what impression is our idea of God derived from? It is, perhaps surprising to find that Hume has little or nothing (explicit) to say about this problem in the *Treatise*, where the general problems of the scope and limits of human understanding is examined at length. However, in his *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (1748), Hume suggests, in line with Locke's answer to this question, that our idea of God is complex and derived from simple ideas. "The idea of God", he says, "as meaning an infinity intelligent, wise and good being, arises from reflecting on the operations of our [human] mind, and augmenting without limit, those qualities of goodness and wisdom" (EU, 2.6/19). On the face of it, this (Lockean) account is not only consistent with his "copy principle", it also has no skeptical implications.

Although Hume's brief remarks in the *Enquiry* concerning the origin of our idea of God seem orthodox enough, there are other passages and remarks that suggest he has a more skeptical view about this matter. For example, in a letter to a friend, written in 1743 (several years before his first *Enquiry* was published) Hume discusses the idea of God. He tells his friend that while the deity may possess the attributes of excellence and benevolence "in the highest perfection", He is an object of neither our senses or of our passions (LET, I, 51/#21). God, Hume suggests, is like a remote ancestor, who we know little or nothing about and can form little or no specific idea of. To a considerable extent, God is simply *incomprehensible* to us (LET, I, 51/#21). This more skeptical view is also advanced in an important section of the first *Enquiry* (XI), where Hume presents his first extended discussion of our knowledge of God. Much of this section is devoted to assessing the suggestion that we can acquire an idea God based the basis of evidence of

design in this world. Anticipating arguments that he would develop in more detail later on in the *Dialogues*, Hume maintains that the relevant evidence is too slight and weak for us to draw any clear idea about God's nature or attributes. God, he claims, is "a Being so remote and incomprehensible... and who discovers himself only by some traces or outlines, beyond which we have no authority to ascribe to him any attribute or perfection." (EU, 11.29/146). On any reading, Hume's remarks in this section veer heavily in a skeptical direction, which is continued and amplified in his lengthier discussion in the *Dialogues*.

### *The Argument from Design:*

As we noted, the argument from design purports to provide us with evidence of both the being and attributes of God. A particular strength of this argument is that it is neither abstract nor complex. It relies on ordinary forms of reasoning based on experience. In this respect, even on Hume's principles, the design argument (EOPR0385) is *methodologically* sound and credible. However, as Hume sees it, the argument falls well short of being able to *prove* what it aims to establish. Although it is true that in a number of contexts Hume presents this argument as plausible and convincing (see, e.g. LG, 23,25; NHR,134,150,153,183; and also D,12.2/214), he systematically exposes its weaknesses, flaws and limitations – leaving his readers to draw their own conclusion. Much of the *Dialogues* is devoted to presenting the argument and, then, subjecting it to careful examination – and demolition.

In the *Dialogues* the core structure of the design argument is presented and defended by the character "Cleanthes". The foundation of the argument is the claim that there is an analogy or resemblance between the world and human artefacts and objects (e.g. a house, a watch, etc.) in respect of their shared features of order, structure, harmony and the evident way that their parts are suited to perform certain functions or ends. When we discover an object that has these features we do not suppose that they have simply come into existence through chance. On the contrary, we immediately draw the inference that any object of this kind must have its source in some designing mind or intelligence – not by way of the blind operations of matter (D, 2.14/48; cp. EU, 4.4/26; 5.7/45). The form of reasoning relied in this argument is same as that which we employ in ordinary life. The premises seem to be well-supported by experience and observation and the conclusion is validly drawn. Given this, what reason is there to challenge the argument or doubt its conclusion?

The basic flaw in the argument, as identified early on by the character “Philo”, is that it relies upon a weak analogy – a point that Hume had already highlighted in his first *Enquiry* (D, 2.18, 7.15/ 49,82; EU, 11.26-2/ 144-6). Any analogy is only as strong as the resemblance that is found between two sets of objects, one being the set of causes and the other the set of effects. To take Hume’s example, we have a set of objects that resemble each such as houses. Although they may vary in their particular features they are all similar enough (rooms, walls, doors, roofs, etc.) We rely on our experience and observe that they all have a uniform cause (human builders, architects, etc.). On this basis, when we come across a house or a building of some kind we can confidently infer that it was built or constructed by intelligent (human) beings. The reliability of this inference depends, however, on the following features: (a) the set of buildings and houses we have observed in the past *closely* resemble each other; (b) we have experience of observing *many* houses being constructed by human builders; and (c) we relevant experience of *both* causes and effects (e.g. we have seen houses *and* builders). To the extent that any or all of these conditions fail or are not satisfied our inference is weakened and becomes unreliable (D, 5.1/165).

The argument from design fails at all three levels. We find, in the first place, that the world (W) is a *unique* object – we do not observe multiple worlds (much less their creation). Nor do we observe anything more than a *small part* (in both space and time) of this unique object (D, 2.20/148; EU, 11.24-5/142-4). Beyond this, the cause of this unique object (W) is entirely unobserved and we have *no experience* of it whatsoever – nor of any other such cause. Given these limitations, the whole argument rests with the claim that the resemblance between the world and human artefacts and machines is *sufficiently close* that we can reliably infer that the creator of W is similar to a human mind, an assumption that is plainly unjustified. All this renders the entire argument suspect and lacking adequate rational credentials. Given our own epistemic limitations, we are in no position to draw any such conclusion on the basis of the partial and incomplete evidence that is available to us.

Throughout the *Dialogues* Hume elaborates on these core difficulties and obstacles for the design argument. For the purposes of orthodox theism, it is particularly important to establish that that the original being is not matter but an “invisible, intelligent power in the world” (D, 2.14; EU, 11.10-11/135-6; NHR, 144-5). More specifically, the theist needs to show that the “ultimate cause” of all things resembles, in some relevant and substantial way, the *human* mind. According to Hume, however, trying to meet this challenge lands the theist in an intractable dilemma with respect to our *idea*

of God. On the one hand, theists such as Cleanthes want to insist that the analogy between this world and human productions is sufficiently close that we can infer (with some assurance) that God, the original mind, resembles human intelligence. The difficulty with this line of reasoning, Hume argues, is that it encourages an arbitrary anthropomorphism that results in “a degradation of the supreme being”, which is little better than plain idolatry and atheism (D, 2.15; D, 4.1-4/ 146, 158-60). On the other hand, if we follow mystics, such as Demea, we retreat into a position that becomes indistinguishable from skepticism and atheism, holding that we know nothing of God’s nature and attributes and that everything about him is “unknown and unintelligible” (D, 4.1/158). In this way, Hume’s skeptical technique in the *Dialogues* is to oppose one group of theists to another, reducing both their views to variants of atheism.

*The Cosmological Argument (Argument A Priori):*

Although Hume’s *Dialogues* treats the argument from design as the (methodologically) most sound and credible of the various proofs for the existence of God he was, nevertheless, well aware that there are other arguments available to the theist. The most important of these was the cosmological argument (EOPR0084) or what Hume and his contemporaries refer to as the argument a priori. This argument enjoyed considerable prestige during the period that Hume was writing. In the late 17<sup>th</sup> and early 18<sup>th</sup> centuries it was advanced and defended by several major figures, most notably by John Locke and Samuel Clarke. (Details on this can be found in Russell 2008: Chp. 10.) In Scotland, the argument a priori found a champion in Andrew Baxter, a staunch opponent of atheism and a prominent figure in the same Scottish philosophical circles that Hume moved in. The arguments of these thinkers were given careful philosophical attention by Hume in the *Treatise* and the first *Enquiry* – a point that Hume’s early reviewers and critics were quick to note. (Russell 2008: Chps 2-4.)

Hume’s most explicit assault on the cosmological argument appears in Part IX of the *Dialogues*. He specifically mentions Clarke in this context and condenses his argument in a few sentences (where Demea is the spokesperson):

Whatever exists must have a cause or reason of its existence; it being absolutely impossible for any thing to produce itself, or to be the cause of its own existence. In mounting up, therefore, from

effects to causes, we must either go on in tracing an infinite succession, without any ultimate cause at all, or must at last have recourse to some ultimate cause, that is necessarily existent... (D,9.3/188 — Hume's emphasis) Whatever exists must have a cause or reason of its existence; it being absolutely impossible for any thing to produce itself, or to be the cause of its own existence. In mounting up, therefore, from effects to causes, we must either go on in tracing an infinite succession, without any ultimate cause at all, or must at last have recourse to some ultimate cause, that is necessarily existent...

(D, 9.3/188 — Hume's emphasis)

According to this argument, there cannot be an infinite succession of causes and effects without any ultimate cause at all, because this would fail to provide any cause or reason for the whole series of the causal chain. What we need to explain is “why this particular succession of causes existed from eternity, and not any other succession, or no succession at all.” This series cannot be *produced by nothing*. We may conclude, therefore, that the universe must have arisen from some “necessarily existent Being, who carries the Reason for his existence in himself; and who cannot be supposed not to exist without an express contradiction.” (D, 9.3/188). This necessarily existent being is God.

The foundations of this argument rest with the causal principle that everything must have a cause or ground for its existence, along with the closely related principle that no effect can have any perfection that is not also in its cause. To deny either of these causal principles is, on Clarke’s account, to reject the more general principle that “nothing can come from nothing” – a principle that atheists such as Lucretius have endorsed. In the *Treatise* Hume develops an account of causation that directly contradicts these causal principles. It is entirely possible, he maintains, for us to conceive of something beginning to exist without any cause. To deny this implies no contradiction or absurdity and, therefore, the causal maxim is neither intuitively nor demonstratively certain (T, 1.3.3/78-9). Granted this is correct, it follows that we cannot show that it is inconceivable or absurd to deny that the whole universe requires some distinct and independent ground or cause of its existence (D, 9.5/189).

While it is entirely conceivable or logically possible that there exists a causal series that came into existence uncreated, without any independent cause or ground for its existence, this is not to say that the world is created or produced by nothing. Nor is it to say that the world was produced by



itself. These claims would be absurd. All that is claimed is that it is conceivable that the world is not created or produced or the effect of anything.

Creation, annihilation, motion, reason, volition; all these may arise from one another, or from any other object we can imagine. (T, 1.3.15.1/173; cp. 1.4.5.30/247)

As far as we can tell a priori, the world may exist or have come into existence without any cause whatsoever. There is no contradiction or absurdity in supposing this.

Clearly, then, Hume opposes the preferred causal maxim “nothing can come from nothing” with his alternative causal principle “any thing may produce any thing” (T, 1.3.15.1/173; 1.4.5.30/ 247-8; EU, 12.29/164). A corollary of this is that he also denies that it is impossible for an effect to perfections that its cause lacks. It follows from this that a priori it is possible for matter to be as “active” as thought and consciousness and to actually produce thought and consciousness, which is exactly what we discover from experience and observation (T, 1.4.5.31/248-9). There is, therefore, no basis whatsoever for the a priori claim that there necessarily exists an original, self-existing being that is an immaterial, intelligent being (i.e. God).

Closely related to Hume’s critique of all efforts to demonstrate the existence of any being by means of a priori reasoning is his critique of the notion of necessary-existence in general. In the *Dialogues* Hume explains his position this way:

... there is an evident absurdity in pretending to demonstrate a matter of fact, or to prove it by arguments a priori. Nothing is demonstrable, unless the contrary is a contradiction. Nothing, that is directly conceivable, implies a contradiction. Whatever we conceive as existent, we can also conceive as non-existent. There is no being, therefore, whose non-existence implies a contradiction. Consequently there is no Being whose contradiction is demonstrable. (D, 9.5/189; cp, EU,12.28–34/ 164–5)

As Hume puts the point in the *Treatise*, when we believe that God exists our “idea of him neither increases nor diminishes” – we simply conceive of “the idea of such, as he is, represented to us” in a more forceful or vivid manner (T, 1.3.7.2/94; cp. 1.3.7.5n/96n). In so far as we have any clear idea of God we can conceive of him existing or not existing.

This argument against the notion of necessary-existence not only undercuts the cosmological argument, it also serves to discredit the ontological argument (e.g. as advanced by Descartes, among others). Contrary to the ontological argument, whatever idea of God we are able to frame, it is an idea of something we can conceive as either existing or not existing. Existence is not some further quality or “perfection” which a being possesses along with its other attributes. There is, therefore, no contradiction or absurdity in denying God exists.

### *The Problem of Evil:*

In order to establish the existence of God it is necessary to prove that God has the relevant set of attributes. From any orthodox (e.g. Christian) perspective this must include God’s moral attribute of perfect goodness (as Cleanthes, speaking in the *Dialogues* on behalf of orthodoxy, willingly concedes: D, 10.28/199). Perhaps the most powerful set of arguments that Hume launches against the theological hypothesis strikes at this point by way of the problem of evil (EOPR0137). Hume’s argument takes the form of a stronger and weaker version of the objection. The weaker version aims to show that confronted with plain and extensive evidence of evil in this world we are in no position to infer that God is a morally perfect being (although this need not be denied either). The stronger version goes further and aims to show that the existence of evil is evidence against the hypothesis, making it highly improbable, if not impossible. Hume’s argument in the *Dialogues* toys with the strong challenge but retreats to the weaker version, which is all that he needs to vindicate the skeptical conclusion that the theist falls well short of proving that God is morally perfect (i.e. perfectly benevolent, just, etc.).

Hume presents the stronger challenge in the form of “Epicurus’s old question”, which is still “unanswered”: Why, if God is both willing and able to prevent evil is there any evil in the world? Is God willing to prevent evil but unable to do so? Then he is not omnipotent. Is God able to prevent evil but unwilling to do so? Then he is malevolent (or at least less than morally perfect). Theists have offered a variety of strategies for dealing with this challenge but Hume finds them all unconvincing and flawed.

One strategy, which is also considered in the first *Enquiry*, is to argue that the evil we encounter in this world will be “rectified” in a future state (D, 10.29/199). However, assuming that our understanding of God’s attributes is based on the evidence of his creation *in this world*, we are in no

position to infer the “perfect goodness of the Deity”. We may hope or imagine that something better awaits us but the present phenomena do not licence a conjecture of this kind (EU, 11.21-6/141-5). Hume’s point here is not that the reality of evil proves that God cannot be both omnipotent and morally perfect (as per the stronger challenge) but that we are in no position to claim that God will “rectify” the evil of this world (e.g. its unjust distribution of good and evil) in a future state, since the available evidence does not support such a conjecture.

Another way for the theist to deal with the skeptical challenge is to argue that the *all* the evils we find in this world are necessary or essential to the goodness of the whole. The central thrust of Hume’s discussion in the *Dialogues* is to show that this kind of theodicy serves, at best, to refute the stronger challenge but not the weaker.

I will allow, that pain or misery in man is compatible with infinite power and goodness in the Deity, even in your sense of these attributes: What have you advanced by all these concessions? A mere possible compatibility is not sufficient. You must prove these pure unmixed, and uncontrollable attributes from the present mixed and confused phenomena, and from these alone. (D,10.35/201)

The subtlety of Hume’s argument is now clear. There is no need for the skeptic to rely on a strong version of the argument that aims to prove that God cannot exist (given the existence of evil). All the skeptic needs to do is to show that the theist is unable to prove or establish God’s attributes of infinite power and perfect goodness given the evidence of creation *as we observe it*. Given the evil that we observe in this world the theist is in no position to support their hypothesis.

Hume’s weaker argument falls short of categorically (dogmatically) denying that God exists on the ground that there is unnecessary evil in the world. What his argument does show, however, is that while it is possible that the reality of evil is consistent with the existence of God this leaves theism with a large and significant problem that remains unanswered. The enormous degree and range of evil in this world is impossible to explain or justify from a human perspective (i.e. given the limits of human understanding). There is, therefore, no basis for inferring the existence of an infinitely powerful and perfectly good God in face of evidence of this kind. On the contrary, given the available evidence, we have every reason to doubt

this conjecture or hypothesis and it is not unreasonable to conclude that the hypothesis is probably false.

### *Miracles:*

Apart from the arguments of natural religion, which offer philosophical proofs of the existence of God available to every sufficiently rational being, revelation is another important source of knowledge of God. Miracles (EOPR0245) are a key foundation of revealed religion and essential doctrine for the major monotheistic religions (i.e. Judaism, Christianity, and Islam). The accounts of miracles, as presented in scripture and elsewhere, are supposed to confirm the authenticity and authority of scripture (i.e. as “the word of God”) and of his prophets. More importantly, miracles establish that God has revealed himself to human beings through these special acts or events. A major concern of Hume’s, especially in section X of the first *Enquiry*, was to discredit miracle claims of this kind.

A miracle, according to Hume, is “a transgression of a law of nature by a particular volition of the deity, or by the interposition of some invisible agent” (EU, 11.12n/115n). A law of nature, Hume maintains, involves a uniform regularity of events. We discover laws of nature on the basis of our experience of constant conjunctions of events or objects. An obvious example of this, provided by Hume, is that “all men must die” (EU, 11.12/114). The key issue for Hume’s critique of miracles is whether or not we ever have reason to believe *on the basis of testimony* that a law of nature has been violated. Hume’s arguments lead to the conclusion that we *never* have reason to believe miracle reports – much less the sort of miracle reports that orthodox religion is founded upon.

How should we evaluate claims that miracles have occurred? The principle that Hume relies on for this purpose is that a reasonable person “proportions his belief to the evidence” (EU, 11.4/110). In the case of miracles, the relevant evidence that we need to weigh comes from two distinct sources that must be balanced against each other. On one side, there is the question of the credibility of the witnesses to the event. That is to say, we need to ask if we can rely on the truthfulness and sound judgment of the individuals(s) who report that the relevant event took place. On the other side, there is the question of the credibility of the fact itself (i.e. that a violation of the law of nature occurred). Faced with some opposition between these two sets of considerations, Hume points out, the reasonable person will believe that which has the superior evidence in its favour.

How, then, does belief in miracles stand given these considerations?

According to Hume, “no testimony for any kind of a miracle has ever amounted to a probability, much less to a proof” (EU, 11.35/127). The evidence telling against the occurrence of a miracle must always constitute a full-proof – since we have uniform human experience in support of a law of nature (EU, 11.12/115). The only basis for giving any credibility to miracle reports – since by their nature they are wholly unbelievable – is to give weight and credibility to the character and authority of the witnesses to the event(s). Even under these ideal circumstances, however, where the credibility of the witnesses is judged to be beyond doubt, we are still faced with “proof against proof” (EU, 11.11/114). When we consider miracle reports as they are generally found, and the various sources and circumstances they are derived from, we have to conclude that testimony in support of actual historical miracles (e.g. Christ rising from the dead) are *far* from reliable or credible.

#### *The Origins and Consequences of Religion:*

In *The Natural History of Religion* (1757) Hume suggests that the only thing that the various religions all have in common is the belief that there is an invisible, intelligent power” (Intro, 1; 4.1). Although there is a “universal propensity to believe in invisible, intelligent power” (NHR, 15.5), even religious belief of this limited kind is not entirely universal or any sort of “original instinct”. Hume also points out that religion of this most general kind is not to be confused with ‘genuine theism’. Genuine theism involves a more specific set of beliefs: that there is only one god and that god is the invisible, intelligent creator and governor of the world (NHR, 4.1-2). It is Hume’s objective to show that the actual foundations of genuine theism, as we find it in the world, does not rest with reason or argument of any kind. The true roots of genuine theism, he maintains, is to be discovered in the psychological dynamics that first gave rise to polytheism.

The evidence of history, as well as the internal logic of the evolution of religious belief, suggests that “polytheism or idolatry was, and must have been, the first and most ancient religion of mankind” (NHR, 1.1). The basis of polytheism, Hume argues, is found in “the various contrary events of human life” (NHR, 2.5). We find that these events (e.g. weather, illness, wars, etc.) are as unpredictable as they are important to us. As events of these kinds directly influence human happiness and misery they engage our deepest hopes and fears. Because we are generally ignorant of the various causes involved in producing them, the “ignorant multitude” postulates

invisible, intelligent agents as their causes and they hope to influence these agents by means of prayer and sacrifice. By this means, human beings hope to control what they do not understand and are afraid of.

Hume goes on to explain how theism arose from polytheism. His explanation is given in terms of two conflicting tendencies in human nature. On one hand there is a strong propensity to believe in invisible, intelligent power in nature. On the other hand, there is an equally strong propensity to rest our attention on sensible visible objects. In order to reconcile these opposing inclinations, human beings “are led to unite the invisible power with some visible object” (NHR, 5.2). This is best achieved by representing the various gods as something like ourselves and attributing particular qualities and attributes to them that are relevant to their specific sphere of influence (e.g. the god of war is ferocious etc.). Over time, among the vulgar, one of these gods will emerge as a particular object of veneration and worship and, in order to placate this god, worshippers continue to attribute greater and greater powers and perfections to him. Eventually, Hume suggests, they reach a point where this god is represented as infinite and entirely perfect – rendering him wholly inexplicable and mysterious. By this route, entirely unguided by reasoning of any kind, the vulgar arrive at a more “philosophical” conception of god. The result of these dynamics of theistic belief is a continual oscillation between anthropomorphic and mystical conceptions of the deity – similar to the split in theism that Hume describes in the *Dialogues*. The result of this process is an inherent instability in theism itself.

Having described the causes and (unstable) dynamics of religious belief, Hume carries on to describe the *effects* of religious belief on human conduct and practice. One important theme that runs throughout *The Natural History of Religion* is a comparison of the effects of polytheism and theism on their respective believers (Sects. 9-14). Hume argues that while theism may avoid some of the absurdities and barbarisms of polytheism, it is by no means free of these problems. On the contrary, among the various flaws that Hume cites, theism is prone to intolerance and persecution of its opponents; it corrupts and perverts philosophy; and it breeds serious moral vices, including fraud and cruelty. It is plainly Hume’s view that religion, far from being a source of support for moral practice, is in fact a major source of moral sickness in the world. Hume summarizes his assessment in the closing passages of his *The Natural History of Religion*:

Examine the religious principles, which have, in fact, prevailed in the world. You will scarcely be persuaded, that they are any thing

but sick men's dreams: Or perhaps will regard them more as the playsome whimsies of monkeys in human shape, than the serious, positive, dogmatical assertions of a being, who dignifies himself with the name of rational. (NHR, 15.6)

### *Hume and Irreligion*

The survey of Hume's philosophy of religion provided above has focused primarily on his views about the existence of God (i.e. theism). A more extended treatment would also cover Hume's views on the closely related topics of the immortality of the soul and religious morality – but these matters will not be examined here. (For more on these topics see Russell & Kraal, 2005/2017). What does require some further and final comment is how we should interpret Hume's overall stance on the subject of religion. In particular, we might ask whether or not Hume was an "atheist"?

It has been argued that, from any reasonable perspective, Hume's views must be broadly understood as *irreligious* in character. This leaves, however, a wide spectrum of possible interpretations concerning the extent and degree of Hume's irreligious aims and intentions. One familiar way of approaching Hume's philosophy of religion is through the lens of his skepticism. Hume's biographer E.C. Mossner has suggested, for example, that Hume "was neither a believer nor an unbeliever, that is to say, neither a theist nor an atheist. In short, he was a skeptic" (Mossner, 1978). On this account, Hume belongs in one or other of three categories: theism/skepticism/atheism. The theist camp is understood to have the greatest internal variation. Although theism asserts the existence of God, the conception of God may vary from some form of orthodox (thick) conception to a (thinner) less orthodox conception – such as what J.C.A. Gaskin has described as Hume's "attenuated deism" (Gaskin, 1983). On the other side, it has been argued that, although Hume makes intermittent theist-friendly remarks throughout his writings, this is just a subterfuge to avoid giving offence to the orthodox and generating trouble for himself (i.e. given the intolerant climate of the times). Hume's position, it is argued, while tactfully concealed, goes well beyond mere agnostic skepticism to embrace plain atheism.

While it is not possible to settle these interpretive disputes in this context, it is worth drawing attention to several especially important passages in the final section of the *Dialogues* (XII) around which much of this debate has centered. Some have found clear evidence in these passages that Hume not only rejects atheism, he backtracks on his skepticism and

endorses a form of “true religion” that terminates in the proposition “that the cause or causes of order in the universe probably bear some remote analogy to human intelligence” (D, 12.33/227). Even if this claim is accepted as it stands (and it remains open to various interpretations), it is, nevertheless, evident that from any *orthodox* point of view this is a “concession” still strips religion of almost all its familiar substance and content, as well as of its practical force and significance for human conduct. As such, Hume’s discussion ends on a note that is little different from atheism except, perhaps, in name.

For Review Only



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**TA** *Treatise of Human Nature*, edited by L. A. Selby-Bigge, 2nd edition, revised by P.H. Nidditch, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975. *A Treatise of Human Nature*, edited by David Fate Norton and Mary J. Norton, Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 2000.

**LG** *A Letter from a Gentleman to his friend in Edinburgh*, ed. by E.C. Mossner and J.V. Price, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1967.

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**EM** *Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals*, edited by Tom L. Beauchamp, Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 1998.

**ESY** *Essays: Moral, Political, and Literary*, revised edition by E.F. Miller, Indianapolis: Liberty Classics, 1985.

**NHR** *The Natural History of Religion* (1757) in, *A Dissertation on the Passions, The Natural History of religion: A Critical Edition*, edited by T.L. Beauchamp, Oxford & New York: Clarendon Press, 2007. Section

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**D** *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion and Other Writings* (1779), edited by D. Coleman, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007. References are to the Part and paragraph numbers as provided in this edition. Page references after the slash are provided to: *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion*, 2nd edition, edited by N. Kemp Smith, Edinburgh: Nelson & Sons, 1947.

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