

Hume's Skepticism and the Problem of Atheism

*And it is now, in a manner, avowed, by all pretenders
to reasoning and philosophy, that atheist and sceptic are
almost synonymous.*

—HUME, *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion*

ALTHOUGH DAVID HUME is widely acknowledged as one of the most influential and penetrating critics of religion, there remains considerable debate about where exactly he stands on the crucial question concerning the existence of God. Resolving this interpretative debate and securing a convincing interpretation of Hume's position on this great issue remains one of the most challenging tasks for the history of philosophy. While interpretations vary greatly, they generally fall into a well-established tripartite structure. On one side, there are those who argue that Hume is a sincere theist of some kind.¹ On the other, there are those who claim that, underneath some (insincere and prudential) camouflage, he is an atheist.² In the middle of these two, are those who argue that Hume is neither a

1. The most prominent and influential statement of this view is Gaskin, "Hume's Attenuated Deism"; and Gaskin, *Hume's Philosophy of Religion*. For a similar view, suggesting that Hume was some sort of "genuine theist," see Willis, *Humean True Religion*, esp. 5–12. Other commentators have argued that Hume's theism was more orthodox and involved a more substantial conception of God (see, e.g., Hendel, *David Hume*, 267–309; and Livingston, *Philosophical Melancholy*, 78). Jonathan Israel's recent and prominent study of the Enlightenment also maintains that Hume is a "religious conservative" who "does not wholly reject 'the argument from design'" (Israel, *Enlightenment Contested*: 692–93).

2. See, e.g., Williams, "Hume on Religion," 77; Russell, *The Riddle*, esp. Chap. 19; Penelhum, "Hume on Religion: Cultural Influences," 336; Holden, *Spectres of False Divinity*, esp. Chap. 1; Lenmens, "Hume's Atheistic Agenda"; Bailey and O'Brien, *Hume's Critique of Religion*, esp. Chap. 13. These atheistic interpretations, and others, both overlap and diverge from each other.

theist nor an atheist but rather a skeptic.³ According to this account, Hume neither believes in God's existence nor denies it, since he regards this as an issue that is beyond human understanding and, therefore, a "total suspension of judgment is here our only reasonable resource" (D, 8.12; cp. 2.10, 11/ 186–87; cp. D, 135). Throughout much of the 20th century, the skeptical interpretation was the dominant view.

The central concern of this chapter is to advance a set of core arguments and distinctions in support of the atheistic interpretation. This approach begins with evidence to show that Hume did not endorse any form of theism, not even of a minimal or "attenuated" kind. The question that follows from this is whether Hume was satisfied with a "soft" skepticism that simply neither affirms nor denies the existence of God or went further, to a "harder" skepticism that maintains that there are reasonable grounds for *denying* the theist hypothesis. The interpretation advanced argues that Hume takes a "hard" stance on this issue and that this is entirely consistent with his mitigated skeptical principles as he puts them into practice.

I. Theism and Its Modes—Some Preliminary Distinctions

In order to secure a convincing interpretation of Hume's views on this subject a necessary preliminary is to get a clear picture of his idea of God. Hume makes three key points about this that are especially important for the way he frames this issue. First, in the *Natural History of Religion*, where Hume is especially concerned to provide a genealogy of our idea of God and explain the way it varies and fluctuates, he claims that the "only point of theology, in which we shall find a consent of mankind almost universal, is, that there is an invisible, intelligent power in the world" (NHR, 4.1; and cp. Intro 1 [122; cp. 107]). He continues: "But whether this power be supreme or subordinate, whether confined to one being, or distributed among several, what attributes, qualities, connexions, or principles of action ought to be ascribed to those beings; concerning all these points, there is the widest difference in the popular systems of theology." Clearly,

3. Mossner, "Enlightenment of Hume"; Mossner, "Religion of David Hume"; Norton, *David Hume*, 10, 50, 246–9. and also O'Connor, *Hume on Religion*, esp. Chp. 10. A more recent biography of Hume defends a view similar to Mossner's and endorses the claim that "Hume 'was professedly a sceptic, though by no means an atheist'" (Harris, *Hume*, 569n193; see also 18–23, 343, 410–14, 454–56, 464).

then, a belief in invisible, intelligent power is the common element shared by highly diverse systems of religion and theology.⁴

Second, Hume goes on to argue that belief of this very general kind should be distinguished from “genuine theism,” which involves a narrower and more specific set of beliefs. Genuine theism, at a minimum, involves a belief in a deity that is, not only invisible and intelligent, but also the Creator or the “author of nature” (NHR, 4.1, 4.7, 4.9–10). A being of this kind answers more closely to our own (modern, Western, Christian) idea of God. A God of this kind serves to answer “the question concerning the origin of the world,” a question which is not even raised or addressed in many ancient religious systems (NHR, 4.10).⁵ What is crucial to genuine theism, therefore, is the belief that God is the origin or first cause of the universe—it is this invisible, intelligent being that we call God (D, 2.3/ 142).⁶

Third, even those who conceive of one supreme God who is “the first principle of all things,” may nevertheless deny a particular providence and may hold that God does not disturb or intervene in the course of nature and its laws as they have been laid down (NHR, 6.2). This is a view, Hume goes on to explain, that many will regard as “the grossest infidelity.” The general point Hume is making here, and that he also elaborates on in the *Dialogues*, is that while theism, at a minimum, requires belief in an intelligent, invisible being who is the creator or origin of the world, the particular set of attributes that such a deity is supposed to possess vary greatly and do not necessarily involve a being who is present and active in the world, much less has an interest in human happiness.

It follows from these observations and claims that we should avoid, on one side, understanding theism too broadly (e.g., ideas of God that make no reference to the origin and structure of the world) and, on the other

4. Although belief in intelligent, invisible power is very prevalent, it is not, according to Hume, a universal belief among human beings (NHR, Intro. 1).

5. As Hume points out, “the gods of all polytheists are not better than the elves and fairies of our ancestors” and these believers are nothing more than “superstitious atheists” (NHR, 4.2).

6. According to Hume, theism involves a general tendency to oscillate between an idea of God as an “invisible power” or (i.e., “a pure spirit” or “perfect intelligence”) of which we can form no image and conceptions that represent God as an object of our senses and made *visible* by means of some “material image.” The latter, Hume suggests, are “vile representations,” that “degrade” and “disfigure” our idea of God (NHR, 6.12; 8.1–2; 15.5). It is *genuine* theism, rather than any “degraded” idea or some mode of “idolatry,” that is Hume’s specific *philosophical* target.

side, understanding theism too narrowly (e.g., committing us to a God that is continually active and present in the world). The vindication of theism does not, therefore, depend, on this account, on an overly narrow or religion-specific idea of God's nature. It simply requires vindication of the existence of a supreme, invisible, intelligent being who is the creator and origin of this world.⁷

Hume's account of the idea of God suggests that we need to draw a distinction between the *minimal* conception which avoids importing any attributes beyond the limited elements required for "genuine theism," and a more *robust* conception that insists on a larger set of attributes, especially those of an anthropomorphic character.⁸ Minimal theism commits us only to the existence of an intelligent, immaterial being that is the cause or origin of the world. Robust theism, by contrast, involves a conception of God that requires a richer set of attributes than this. Obviously there may be a wide range of attributes that may be included in this larger set. However, in the predominant monotheistic religions this set of attributes involves moral and personal qualities of an anthropomorphic character.

In the *Natural History of Religion*, Hume emphasizes not only the *variation* in our idea of God but also the *instability* of this idea. There is, on his analysis, a certain *dynamic* to theistic belief, which is due to the conflicting propensities of the human imagination, leading us to oscillate between more abstract and more concrete or anthropomorphic conceptions. (See esp. NHR, 5 and 8.) This instability and opposition, which is due primarily to divergent propensities of the human mind, is given further expression in Hume's *Dialogues*, through the voices of the characters of Demea and

7. The fundamental *philosophical* difficulty lying at the bottom of all this, as Hume understands this issue, is that God "is no Object either of the Senses or Imagination, & very little of the Understanding" (LET, I, 51/#21). It is in this sense that God is "invisible" (i.e., hidden or concealed from us). The important issue, for understanding the idea of God that is at stake here, is how Hume and his own contemporaries—i.e., those he was actually arguing with and against—understood the relevant parameters of this debate. All the major representatives of theism (e.g., Descartes, Locke, Cudworth, Bayle, Clarke, and any number of the Boyle Lecturers) took for granted that the crucial and fundamental divide between theism and atheism falls on the question of whether or not one accepts that an intelligent *immaterial* mind is the cause and origin of the (material) world—and that there is a real, substantial distinction between the two. Suffice it to note, for now, that any effort to represent the material world as a self-existent being that was itself capable of thought and activity (and so independent of any immaterial cause) was generally recognized as *paradigmatic* atheism. (I return to this issue further later.)

8. The terminology of "minimal" theism follows Penelhum, who refers to "minimal deism" ("Natural and Religious Belief," 210).

Cleanthes. Demea's mysticism insists on the "adorable mysteriousness of the divine nature" (D, 2.15/ 146) and is rooted in his defence of the argument a priori. Cleanthes's contrasting commitment to an anthropomorphic conception of God's nature, which relies on a resemblance between the human and divine mind, is based on the reasoning of the argument from design. Different conceptions of God's being and attributes will, therefore, encourage and suggest different lines of arguments to those who are theistically inclined. Similarly, who does or does not get identified as an "atheist," in these circumstances, will depend on what particular set of attributes are taken to be essential to God's nature.

II. *Skepticism and the Soft Middle*

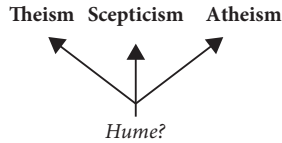
The debate concerning Hume's views on the existence of God has generally presented us with a simple model that offers a tripartite range of positions that Hume may be slotted into.⁹ On this account, Hume belongs in one or other of three categories: theism/skepticism/atheism. The theist camp is the one that 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 (robust) conception to a less orthodox (minimal) conception, including a deism that rejects orthodox theism (e.g., Christianity). The skeptic neither asserts nor denies the existence of God, and instead suspends belief in all such matters. The skeptic is what we now term an agnostic, avoiding both theism and atheism.¹⁰ Finally, Hume has also been interpreted as an atheist, although this is generally qualified to describe his attitude to orthodox (robust) conceptions—leaving his attitude to less orthodox (minimal) conceptions undecided or open.¹¹

9. This view is succinctly stated by Mossner in these terms: ". . . Hume, in the strict conventional sense of the terms, was neither a believer nor an unbeliever, that is to say, neither a theist nor an atheist. In short, he was a sceptic." ("The Religion of David Hume", 653). See also Mossner, "Enlightenment of Hume," 57: "Frequently branded atheist, atheist he certainly was not . . ."

10. Strictly speaking "the Agnostic suspends judgment, saying there are not sufficient grounds either for affirmation or for denial" (Bertrand Russell, "What Is an Agnostic?," 557). Similarly, Mossner says that Hume "was an agnostic long before that word was coined by Thomas Henry Huxley in 1869. . . . It should now be evident that Hume is not in opposition to religion as such, except along with all men of good will, to the abuses of it" ("Enlightenment of Hume", 57–59).

11. See the citations provided in note 2 earlier.

When we consider Hume's views in this tripartite framework it seems natural to place him in the middle, as a skeptic (agnostic), standing in opposition to both theists and atheists. Reading Hume this way seems a natural extension of Hume's more general skeptical outlook. Presented this way the model and its options look like this:



This way of structuring our available alternatives may be further encouraged by the thought that the skeptic stands opposed to dogmatism in any form and that both theism and atheism are essentially dogmatic.¹² Clearly, however, the relevant degree of assertion or denial (i.e., concerning the existence or nonexistence of God) may or may not be dogmatic in character. There is no reason to suppose that either the theist or the atheist must be a dogmatist and so any simple contrast between skepticism, on one side, and theism or atheism, on the other, should not be based on an assumption of this kind.¹³

With regard to the nature of Hume's skepticism, Hume draws a contrast between two different kinds of skepticism. The first is Pyrrhonianism, or an "extreme skepticism," which aims to discredit all our (commonsense) beliefs and inferences (see, e.g., EU, 12.5–23/ 150–60; LFG, 19–21; T, 266–74). A skepticism of this radical nature is not targeted specifically on theological claims (be they theist or atheist) but on all our beliefs and claims to knowledge that reach beyond our immediate experience. Hume rejects any extreme skepticism of this kind on the grounds that it is both unlivable and destructive in practice (EU, 5.1–2, 12.21–23/ 41–42, 158–60; LG, 20–21; D, 1.5–17/ 132–37). At the same time, however, Hume goes on to argue that Pyrrhonian reflections are, nevertheless, of some value (D, 12.24–26/

12. Mossner is not alone in encouraging this picture of Hume's options. Norton claims, for example, that we should see Hume's skepticism as falling between "the two dogmatisms—theism and atheism" (*David Hume*, 50, and also 246).

13. A further complication in relation to the "philosophical sceptic," as Hume's remarks make clear, is that scepticism may be used as a basis for fideism—where (theistic) belief is based on faith and not reason. As Hume's remarks also make clear, however, a position of this kind will not serve the purposes of those who seek to place religion on rational foundations (D, 1.17/ 138; EU, 10.40–41, 11.10/ 129–31, 135). Moreover, a (skeptical) fideism of this kind is easily used to mask atheism (D, 1.184.1/ 13839, 158; and cp. EU, 12.1–2/ 149).

161–63). Their value rests, in the first place, in making the weakness and “strange infirmities” of human understanding evident to us (EU, 12.24–26/ 161–62; D, 1.3, 1.8–10/ 131, 133–35; LG, 19). Skeptical reflections of this kind will, Hume maintains, encourage a degree of modesty and humility in regard to all our reasonings and investigations and discourage our propensity to dogmatism. The overall effect of this is, most importantly, that the Pyrrhonian reflections help to sustain and support our commitment to the principles of “mitigated skepticism or academical philosophy.”

Unlike extreme skepticism, or Pyrrhonism, the principles of “mitigated skepticism” are durable and useful in practice. There are two core features of this moderate form of skepticism. They are:

- (1) Given the evident weaknesses and limitations of human understanding we must avoid all dogmatism, and adopt an appropriate “degree of doubt, caution and modesty” with respect to our beliefs and inferences (EU, 12.24/ 161–62; D, 1.3 / 131–32).
- (2) Those who have learned the lessons of mitigated skepticism, as supported by the stronger arguments of Pyrrhonism, will confine their reasonings and speculations to “common life, and to such subjects as fall under daily practice and experience” (EU, 12.25/ 162). More specifically, “we will never be tempted to go beyond common life” and, in particular, we will resist the temptation to extend our speculations to the “two eternities, before and after the present state of things” (D, 1.3, 1.10/ 131–32, 134–35; EU, 12.25/ 162).

Whereas Pyrrhonian skepticism would subvert *all* knowledge, the principles of mitigated skepticism do not imply any unqualified, universal doubt. As Hume’s remarks in both his Introduction and Conclusion to the first *Enquiry* make clear, in areas that fall within common life and experience we may, cautiously, expect to contribute to and advance human knowledge (EU, 1.12–17/ 12–16; and also EU, 4.1, 12.24–34/ 41, 161–65; T, 1.4.7.14/ 273). At the same time, however, the principles of moderate or mitigated skepticism that Hume endorses plainly serve to discredit all theological speculations, such as those associated with the various proofs of the existence of God. All such speculations and hypotheses of these kinds are, Hume famously concludes, “nothing but sophistry and illusion” (EU, 12.34/ 165).

How does this way of reading Hume’s skepticism affect our assessment of where he stands on the existence of God? While it is evident that Hume is hostile to natural religion and the forms of philosophizing associated

with it, it is not obvious from this that he can be read as *denying* the existence of God (i.e., that he is an atheist). On the contrary, on one reading of Hume's mitigated skepticism we may conclude that since all issues of this kind, relating to the "two eternities," are well beyond the sphere of common life and human understanding, we must take Hume to be neither affirming nor denying the existence of God—as the skeptical reading on the simple model cited earlier would suggest. On this view, theism is not affirmed but it is not (dogmatically) denied either. Hume's position, therefore, is one of nonbelief or suspension of belief, which should not be confused with the atheist's denial of the existence of God.

In order to assess this reading of Hume it will be helpful to introduce another distinction concerning the nature of skepticism. Let us call any form of skepticism about a proposition P (e.g., the existence of God) that neither asserts nor denies the proposition but suspends belief in relation to it *soft* skepticism. On the reading we have just considered, Hume's mitigated skepticism commits him to soft skepticism with respect to the question of God's existence. While the various theistic proofs for the existence of God are challenged and found wanting, atheistic arguments and conclusions are not advanced nor endorsed.

The soft skeptical interpretation avoids a "harder" skeptical reading. In general, hard skepticism adopts a different epistemic stance toward a proposition P, one that claims there is *some reasonable basis for denying it* (i.e., holding it to be false). Clearly, this form of skepticism goes well beyond merely suspending belief about P. It is important to note that the soft/hard skeptical distinction does not apply just to theological issues, such as the existence of God. On the contrary, there are other aspects of Hume's philosophy where this distinction could also apply and issues of interpretation arise. This includes topics such as the existence of the material world, the existence of the self or soul, a future state and immortality, (real) causal powers, and so on. The soft/hard skeptical distinction could also apply to other, more mundane issues; such as whether there is life on Mars, if there is a Loch Ness monster, or if there was a conspiracy to kill John F. Kennedy. One could simply conclude, for example, that you are not in an epistemic position to either assert or deny the existence of life on Mars but, equally, one could take the "harder" stance that there are good reasons for *denying* this—not just not believing it. It is especially important to note that whereas Pyrrhonian principles suggest a soft skeptical attitude with respect to all beliefs and claims that reach beyond our immediate experience, the principles of mitigated skepticism can accommodate

both soft and hard epistemic attitudes. There is no principled reason why a mitigated skeptic could not take a hard skeptical attitude toward some issue that falls within the sphere of experience and observation, as long as the relevant reserve and modesty is displayed. The mitigated skeptic need not be a soft skeptic about *all* matters—this will depend on their epistemic position and the content of the claim in question.

The simple skeptical reading maintains, nevertheless, that Hume's mitigated skepticism does indeed commit him to *soft* skepticism when it comes to the specific issue of the existence of God. This can be gauged, it is argued, by a consideration of the particular skeptical arguments that Hume advances on this subject. In the first place, Hume rejects both the ontological and cosmological arguments (D.9; see also T, 1.3.3, 1.3.7.1–3/78–82; 94–95; LG, 22–26). The only valid form of argument for the existence of God, suitably based on experience and inferences grounded upon that, is the design argument or argument *a posteriori*.

None of the skeptical arguments employed in discrediting the theological position in these terms goes beyond the “soft” objective of showing that the theist's proofs fail—i.e., they are not convincing much less certain. The only candidate, on this account, for a harder reading is the argument from evil, but here too, it is argued, Hume pulls in his horns and confines himself to the soft position (D, 10 and 11). More specifically, Hume is careful to distinguish between a strong and a weak version of the argument from evil. The strong version suggests that the existence of evil in this world, of which we observe an enormous amount, is straightforwardly inconsistent with the existence of an omnipotent and perfectly good God (D, 10.25–34, 11.12–13/ 198–201, 211). An argument of this kind aims to prove that God, so conceived, cannot exist—which is, obviously, a hard skeptical conclusion. Significantly, however, Hume retreats from this position and allows “that pain or misery in man is compatible with infinite power and goodness in the deity” (D, 10.35, 11.4, 11.12/ 201, 205, 211). But Hume goes on to argue that this concession will not serve the theist's purpose. It remains the case that in the face of all the evil that we observe in this world, we are in no position to infer God's moral attributes on the basis of such “mixed” evidence (D, 10.35; 11.2–4/ 201–02, 210–12; cp. EU, 11.17–18/ 138–39). This weaker form of the argument blocks any effort to prove or establish the existence of God, understood as an omnipotent being with the moral attributes, on the basis of our experience and observation. This leaves Hume committed only to the soft objective of discrediting the argument from design in relation to the moral attributes

but not committed to the harder aim of proving that such a God does not exist.

When Hume's core arguments are read this way then the middle, skeptical position, avoiding both theism and atheism, seems a comfortable and natural fit. More specifically, this soft reading also looks like a comfortable fit with Hume's mitigated skepticism, since it counsels us to avoid dogmatism and abandon all speculations and hypotheses relating to cosmological questions of this kind. Whatever the merits of this general interpretation may be, however, it has been challenged from both the theist and atheist sides. Let us begin with the theist challenge.

III. Philo's Reversal and the Case for Hume's (Minimal) Theism

Several commentators have interpreted Hume as endorsing robust theism in some form. Among these is Charles Hendel, who presents Hume as deeply impressed by the "statements on behalf of a religious faith by Berkeley in *Alciphron* and by Butler in his *Analogy of Religion*." According to Hendel, Hume appreciated the meaning of the anthropomorphic theism defended by those authors and none of Philo's skeptical arguments serve, in the end, to discredit the essentials of Cleanthes's anthropomorphic robust theism.¹⁴ Nevertheless, the theist interpretation that has been most influential in recent years is that offered by J.C.A. Gaskin.¹⁵ Gaskin endorses Kemp Smith's suggestion "that Philo, from start to finish, represents Hume."¹⁶ He does not conclude from this, however, "that Hume does not believe in god at all." On the contrary, according to Gaskin, Hume

14. Hendel, *Philosophy of David Hume*, 267–68, 369–70. Hendel argues that it is Pamphilus who, strictly speaking, represents Hume in the *Dialogues* and that it is Pamphilus's final judgment that Cleanthes's view is closest to the truth on this issue (D, 12.34/ 228; and Hendel, *Philosophy of David Hume*, 269–70).

15. "Gaskin's study of Hume's philosophy of religion . . . remains influential and is considered by many to be the standard introductory work on the topic" (Beauchamp, editor's introduction to *Hume's Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*: EU, 76).

16. Gaskin, *Hume's Philosophy of Religion*, 211, cp. Kemp Smith, Introduction to the *Dialogues*, 59. It is worth pointing out that we may grant that Hume's views approach most closely those of Philo, without endorsing the stronger claim that "Philo from start to finish, represents Hume" (which rather obscures the complex way in which Hume employs all three characters in the *Dialogues* to advance his own arguments and agenda). It should also be pointed out that even if we allow that Philo is Hume's most natural or dominant representative in this work, this does settle the issue of whether Hume was a theist, a skeptic(agnostic) or an atheist—since Philo's views are also up for debate.

repeatedly “gives explicit or implicit assent to the proposition that there is a god.”¹⁷ We should, Gaskin suggests, distinguish between an “absolute atheist,” who “believes in no gods whatsoever,” and a “relative atheist,” who believes only “in a more contracted or radically different idea of god from that which prevails in their society.”¹⁸ Gaskin argues that Hume should be described as an “attenuated deist” since he *assents* to the proposition that there is a God. Although Hume aims to expose the weaknesses and shortcoming of the design argument, Gaskin maintains, he does not entirely reject it.

Whatever Hume’s final appraisal of the argument, these criticisms stand. . . . Their effect is not to *demolish* the argument. What Hume effects in the *Dialogues* is its steady erosion: its conclusion is ambiguous; its analogy is weak, and extends not to the moral attributes of the designer; its conclusion is remotely possible, and so on. . . .¹⁹

What is left, according to Gaskin, is “the restricted affirmation of Philo’s last speech in the *Dialogues*.”²⁰ The “attenuated deist” position that Philo embraces, on this reading, is what we have described as minimal theism. A belief in God that “is fostered by the feeling of design and given a weak rational basis by recognition that the order in nature *could* (not must) be explained as the work of an ordering agent.”²¹ This is a God whose sole attribute is “an intelligence which may bear some remote analogy to the intelligence of man.”²²

Gaskin’s interpretation of Hume as an attenuated deist turns in large measure on the evidence of the last Part of the *Dialogues* (D, 12) and, in

17. Gaskin, *Hume’s Philosophy of Religion*, 221, Gaskin’s emphasis; and also 219, 223 and Gaskin, “Hume’s Attenuated Deism,” 164.

18. Gaskin, “Hume’s Attenuated Deism,” 163. Gaskin’s distinction and definitions are, in fact, problematic. A soft skeptic may not believe in any Gods but may not deny the existence of God(s) either—skeptics of this kind simply suspend all belief either way. Lack of belief, as such, will not distinguish the soft skeptic (agnostic) from the genuine atheist, who denies the existence of (all) gods. An *absolute* atheist should, therefore, be understood as one who *denies* the existence of God under *any* interpretation, robust or minimal. A relative atheist only denies the existence of some more specific (orthodox) conception.

19. Gaskin, “Hume’s Attenuated Deism,” 170, Gaskin’s emphasis.

20. Gaskin, “Hume’s Attenuated Deism,” 170–71.

21. Gaskin, *Hume’s Philosophy of Religion*, 221.

22. Gaskin, *Hume’s Philosophy of Religion*, 223.

particular, on the passages that contain what is generally referred to as “Philo’s reversal” (D, 12.2–7/ 214–19). Whereas the entire trajectory of Philo’s interventions up to that point aim at exposing the inadequacies and difficulties of the argument from design, at the beginning of D, 12 Philo appears to abandon this position and endorse the general (anthropomorphic) view that Cleanthes defended. In a passage that appears at the beginning of D, 12 Philo says: “A purpose, an intention, or design strikes everywhere the most careless, the most stupid thinker; and no man can be so hardened in absurd systems, at all times to reject it” (D 12.2/ 214). A few paragraphs later Philo adds to this, that “the works of nature bear a *great* analogy to the productions of art is evident; and according to all the rules of good reasoning, we ought to infer, if we argue at all concerning them, that their causes have a proportional analogy” (D, 12.6/ 216–17, my emphasis). Immediately after these passages, however, Philo proceeds to reverse his reversal—that is, he performs a double reversal. Contrary to his remarks reversing his view, he returns to his initial position and emphasizes, once again, “the *vast* difference, which may reasonably be supposed between [God] and human minds” (D, 12.6/ 217, my emphasis). In a single passage, inserted just before his death in 1776, containing his final revisions to the text, Hume mentions the “remote” nature of the analogy in question three separate times. In the same passage he says the truly pious will acknowledge “that there is a great and immeasurable, because incomprehensible, difference between the *human* and *divine* mind” (D, 12.7/ 218, Hume’s emphasis). At the same time Philo (Hume) suggests that the atheist may allow that there is some “remote analogy” among the various operations of nature, including the “rotting of a turnip, the generation of an animal, and the structure of human thought” (D, 12.7/ 218). The point that Hume is concerned to make here is that there are *other analogies* that are no less plausible than that which Cleanthes has suggested. (See, in particular, D, 7, where Hume elaborates on these alternative analogies.) The atheist may, therefore, concede that there is some remote analogy between “the first and supreme cause” and the human mind and still insist that there are other analogies and hypotheses that are no less plausible—and which do not suggest that the cause of the world is something like a mind or human intelligence. The crucial point, for our purposes, is that Hume never retreats from the view stated in the first *Enquiry* that God (i.e., the cause of the world) is “a Being, so remote and incomprehensible, who bears much less analogy to any other than the sun to a waxen taper, and who discovers himself only by some faint traces or outlines, beyond which

we have no authority to ascribe to him any attribute or perfection" (EU, 11.27/ 146).

Near the end of the *Dialogues*, in another passage that was also included in Hume's final revisions, Philo suggests that the opposing parties in this dispute may converge on the "undefined proposition" "*that the cause or causes of order in the universe probably bear some remote analogy to human intelligence*" (D, 12.33/ 227, Hume's emphasis). This is a proposition, Philo says, that "the most inquisitive, contemplative, and religious man" may "give plain, philosophical assent to" (D, 12.33/ 227). Gaskin takes this to be the essence of Hume's "attenuated deism" or minimal theism. The question that Gaskin does not ask, however, is whether "assent" to this proposition, as carefully framed by Philo (Hume), allows any scope for *belief* in the existence of God (so understood). In order to properly answer this question, we need to consider Hume's views about the psychology and mechanisms of belief and how this relates to his views about analogy and probable reasoning. To understand these features of Hume's system we need to look beyond the *Dialogues* and consider his account of these matters in his earlier works, the *Treatise* and the first *Enquiry*.²³

According to Hume, belief should be understood in terms of the manner in which we consider our perceptions or ideas (T, 1.3.7.5/ 96; TA, 21; EU, 5.10–14/ 47–50). When we believe in the existence of an object we have "a more lively, a more vivid, a firmer, or a more *intense* conception" (TA, 22/ 654). In the case of causal inferences to the existence of a given object, such as the reasoning involved in the argument from design, belief depends on our experience of a constant conjunction of resembling objects of one kind (*X*'s) regularly followed by objects of another kind (*Y*'s), then on the appearance of an impression of an *X* the mind naturally infers a lively idea of a *Y*—which is to believe in the existence of *Y*. The relevant regularity in the case of the argument from design is our experience of artefacts (*Y*'s) that have been produced by human minds (*X*'s). We infer the relevant (human) intelligent cause from an observation of the effect based on our experience of similar objects in the past. The fundamental difficulty with the argument from design, as Hume makes clear in the first *Enquiry* and the *Dialogues*, is that the inference to God's existence and attributes, as based on our observation of the "order, beauty and the wise

23. It is rather striking—and surprising—that despite all the attention paid to Hume's views on this subject (i.e., the existence of God) there is little discussion of the relevance of his theory of *belief* to the various claims that he puts forward and defends.

arrangement of the universe” (EU, 11.10/ 135; D, 2.5/ 143), depends heavily on the analogy we draw between this world and human artefacts or creations. This is, as we noted, an analogy that Hume finds weak and highly problematic.

How do the mechanics of belief based in causing reasoning, as Hume describes them, generate particular problems for the argument from design? There are, I suggest, three key considerations to take note of. The first, and most important, is the weakness of the analogy. In the *Treatise* Hume specifically mentions this general problem.

According to the hypothesis above explain'd all kinds of reasoning from causes or effects are founded on two particulars, viz the constant conjunction of any two objects in all past experience, and the resemblance of a present object to any one of them. The effect of these two particulars is, that the present object invigorates and enlivens the imagination; and the resemblance, along with the union, conveys the force and vivacity to the related idea; which we are therefore said to believe, or assent to. If you weaken either the union or resemblance, you weaken the principle of transition, and of consequence that belief, which arises from it. (T, 1.3.13.25/ 142)

The relevance of these remarks for what Hume has to say about the weak and remote nature of the analogy in the argument from design as it concerns *belief* in the existence of God could hardly be more obvious.

Another consideration relevant to this issue is that arguments based on experience can be considered *proofs* only when they “leave no room for doubt or opposition” (EU, 6.11/ 56n; T, 1.3.11.2/ 124). In cases of a proof the mind is moved in one direction and there is no conflict or variation in the inference that is generated by our past experience. In the case of probability, by contrast, our experience produces no determinate or single inference and there is a proportional diminution of belief, resulting in a degree of doubt. With regard to the theist hypothesis, while it relies on the analogy between the universe and the creations of human creation, there are other analogies available to us, some of which are arguably more plausible (e.g., animal bodies, vegetables, etc.; D, 7; 12.7/ 218). To the extent that the argument from design is subject to these limitations, the reliability of the inference made is weakened. In these circumstances, moreover, any inference we may draw will produce no firm or steady belief.

Finally, a further consideration that Hume puts forward as tending to weaken or inhibit belief are circumstances where our ideas are vague or obscure. Hume describes one such “remarkable instance” in some detail: “the universal carelessness and stupidity of men with regard to a future state” (T, 1.3.9.13/ 113). Hume maintains that almost no one believes in the immortality of the soul or a future state. The principal reason for this, he argues, is that the idea of such a condition is too obscure and vague for us to be able to (sincerely) believe it.

I ask, if these people really believe what is inculcated on them, and what they pretend to affirm; and the answer is obviously in the negative. . . . A future state is so far remov'd from our comprehension, and we have so obscure an idea of the manner, in which we shall exist after the dissolution of the body, that all the reasons we can invent, however strong in themselves, and however much assisted by education, are never able with slow imaginations to surmount this difficulty, or bestow sufficient authority and force on the idea. (T, 1.3.9.13/ 114)

Granted that the obscurity of our idea of a future state is such a significant obstacle to securing belief, the same considerations apply to our idea of God. This is, indeed, especially true in the case of *minimal* theism, where the idea is almost emptied of any significant content.²⁴ As Hume emphasizes throughout his writings, our idea of God is not only divergent and unstable, even in its most anthropomorphized form, it suffers from a lack of resemblance with any mind or being that we have experience of. As such, an idea of this kind is impossible to sincerely believe (as we find in the case of a future state and the immortality of the soul).

It is clear that *all* of the three considerations we have described are in play with regard to the theist hypothesis as advanced by the argument from design. Hume also makes the point, throughout his writings, that without belief our ideas have no practical influence, since our passions and motivations will be unaffected by ideas of this nature (see, e.g., his remarks at T, 1.3.10; see also T, 2.3.7–9). These observations are all consistent with

24. Hume makes this point in another way in the *Natural History of Religion*, where he describes the human propensity to anthropomorphic conceptions of God. The more we entertain a “mystical” idea, lacking specific content, the more difficult we find it to believe—hence the need for images to sustain belief (NHR, 5–8).

Hume's claims that defenders of religion seek to counteract these difficulties by making our ideas (of God, a future state, etc.) more familiar and thus more effective in guiding our conduct and practice. Nevertheless, the fact remains, on Hume's analysis, that the natural mechanism of belief, insofar as it is based in causal inference, works against belief in the existence of God. Assuming that no one is a theist who does not *believe* in God, Hume is not a theist of any kind—neither robust nor minimal.²⁵

IV. *Hard Skepticism and the Case for Atheism*

While it may be true, as has been argued, that Hume is not a theist of any kind, it does not follow that he is an atheist. That is, Hume could be a soft skeptic who is not persuaded by any of the arguments advanced by theists but does not *deny* the existence of God. It is clear, nevertheless, that many of Hume's arguments go beyond the "soft" aims of discrediting theist arguments and pursue the "hard" aim of providing grounds for denying the theist hypothesis (in all its forms). Even those who endorse the view that Hume was a minimal theist generally accept that his attitude with respect to *robust* theism is *hard* and not soft. This attitude is particularly apparent in the various passages where Hume ridicules the anthropomorphic hypothesis, such as we find in his remarks at the end of D,5.

. . . a man who follows [Cleanthes's] hypothesis, is able, perhaps, to assert, or conjecture, that the universe, sometime, arose from

25. Several commentators have suggested that Hume was a theist who accepted "the irregular argument" for belief in God, as presented by Cleanthes (D, 3.7–8/ 154–55; also D, 10.36, 12.2/ 202, 214). [See, e.g., Pike, 1970: 228–34.] The basic claim being made is that belief in God rests with (immediate) feeling or sensation, not on argument (which is not to say that the belief is unreasonable). Related to this, it also claimed that Hume regarded belief in God as a natural belief, understood as beliefs that are universal, inescapable, and essential to human life. In my view these claims have been effectively discredited by a number of other commentators, most notably by Gaskin (*Hume's Philosophy of Religion*, Chap. 7; see also, O'Connor, *Hume on Religion*, Chap. 5). For our present purposes, there is no need to repeat these criticisms here.

It should be noted, nevertheless, that in his *Natural History of Religion* Hume points out that (a) even the most rudimentary belief in "invisible, intelligent power" is not universal (NHR, Intro. 1) and that (b) *polytheism* appeared long before theism (NHR, 1). Both these claims provide (strong) evidence against the suggestion that Hume accepted some form of "the irregular argument" or regarded theism as a natural belief. This is consistent with the fact that Hume also makes (pro forma) statements endorsing the inescapable evidence of an intelligent designer (NHR, Intro. 1, 15.1; 15.1) – statements that are discredited by Hume's other observations and arguments throughout this work.

something like design: But beyond that position he cannot ascertain one single circumstance; and is left afterwards to fix every point of his theology by the utmost license of fancy and hypothesis. This world, for aught he knows, is very faulty and imperfect, compared to a superior standard; and was only the first rude essay of some infant Deity, who afterwards abandoned it, ashamed of his lame performance: it is the work only of some dependent, inferior deity; and is the object of derision to his superiors: it is the production of old age and dotage in some superannuated deity; and ever since his death, has run on at adventures, from the first impulse and active force which it received from him. (D, 5.12/ 169)

With respect to all such (robust) conjectures, Hume regards them as incredible and absurd and manifests a skeptical attitude that goes well beyond “suspending belief” with respect to such hypotheses.²⁶

Hume's skeptical hard attitude to robust theism is perhaps most apparent in his views concerning the moral attributes, especially as this concerns the problem of evil. On the weaker, soft reading, as we have noted, Hume limits his argument to rejecting the inference to God's moral attributes (e.g. D, 10.35/ 201; 11.4/ 205); and also EU, 11.17–18/ 138–39). Contrary to this, however, the stronger hard reading notes that, among other considerations, Hume's observations suggest that we have considerable evidence of unnecessary evil in the world (D, 10.4–19/ 193–97; 11.5–17/ 205–12). Hume provides an extensive list or catalogue of forms of evil and suffering that plague both humans and animals, “none of them appear to human reason, *in the least degree*, necessary or unavoidable; nor can we suppose them such, without the utmost license of imagination” (D, 11.5/ 205, my emphasis). Although Hume does allow that the limits of human understanding are such that it is *possible* that there are “good reasons” why these evils may be necessary and unavoidable, none of them are in any way apparent to us (D, 11.5, 11.8/ 205, 207). The tendency of his discussion of evil, while it may stop short of *dogmatically* denying that God exists on the ground that there is (unnecessary) evil in this world, suggests, nevertheless, that from our limited human perspective we have *considerable evidence* that provides us with grounds for *denying* this conjecture or hypothesis. Clearly, then

26. See, e.g. Hume's remarks at NHR, 15.5–6: “But consult this image [of the Universal creator], as it appears in the popular religions of the world. How is the deity disfigured in our representations of him! . . .” See also NHR, 12.8: “Every bystander will easily judge. . . .”

with respect to the *robust* theist hypothesis, insofar as it involves the moral attributes, Hume is a *hard* skeptic.²⁷

Hume's harder skeptical attitude to robust conceptions of God, as this involves the moral attributes, has a number of sources. Not only are there the problems generated by evidence of evil and suffering in this world, there are also further problems arising from the assumption that God's thought and passions are in any way similar to those of human beings (D, 3.12/ 156; also D, 4.3/ 159). Hume singles out, in particular, the unreasonable supposition that God has moral sentiments or could be the object of ours (see, e.g., EU, 8.35/ 102–03; D, 11.16/ 212: LET, I/ 40, I/ 51). In the final Part of the *Dialogues* Hume emphasizes the general point that “we have reason to infer that the natural attributes have a greater resemblance to those of man, than his moral have to human virtues” (D, 12.8/ 219). The significance of these observations, for our interpretation of Hume's skepticism as it relates to the theist hypothesis, is that his skepticism does *not* take the form of a uniformly soft attitude that all such conjectures are beyond reasonable assessment. On the contrary, Hume emphasizes the *harder* skeptical point that some forms of robust theism are especially incredible and ridiculous, and that the moral attributes are particularly doubtful when ascribed to the Deity. In this way, even those who maintain that Hume is a minimal theist may (and must) allow that he is a *hard*

27. This account of Hume's stronger strategy in relation to the argument from evil (i.e., that Hume aims to show that our experience and observation of the world provides some probable grounds for concluding that there is no God with the moral attributes, has been described by Thomas Holden as “the evidential argument from evil” (*Spectres of False Divinity*, Chap. 6). Although Holden agrees that Hume is a “moral atheist,” who denies the existence of a morally praiseworthy God, Holden also claims that the evidential argument would violate Hume's principles of mitigated scepticism and that Hume does not sincerely endorse or advance it. This is not the place for a full reply to Holden's challenge to the orthodox view. However, for our present purposes, suffice it to say that given Hume's detailed description the varieties of evil in the world and how this raises doubts for the theist hypothesis (D, 10 and 11) it seems strained to suggest that we can “more plausibly interpret Hume's statement of the evidential argument as a *parody* of core natural theology in general and of Cleanthes's experimental theism in particular” (p. 175, Holden's emphasis). A more plausible view, I suggest, is that Hume does not strictly adhere to his mitigated skeptical principles on this topic—a point that Holden himself concedes (45–46). Beyond this, it should also be noted that, as Holden's own analysis shows, Hume's “moral atheism” is not based solely on considerations relating to the argument from evil. The crucial point, on any interpretation, is that Hume plainly advances evidence in support of the “moral atheist” view, and this evidence works against any robust theist hypothesis that relies on the moral attributes.

skeptic with respect to a *robust* theism that involves the moral attributes.²⁸ The case for Hume's hard skepticism with respect to robust theism in its various forms is widely accepted and not particularly controversial (although identifying the specific grounds that Hume appeals to generates more debate). The more controversial issue concerns Hume's attitude to minimal theism. Moreover, even if it is true, as has been argued, that we may not, on Hume's account, *believe* minimal theism for the reasons already provided, we still do not have reasons for *denying* minimal theism. Hume need not have been consistently a hard (or soft) skeptic across the robust–minimal spectrum.²⁹ The interesting and problematic challenge for any atheistic interpretation, therefore, concerns making the case for Hume's *hard* skepticism in relation to *minimal* theism.

There is, I suggest, at least one key argument that serves to establish that Hume makes a hard skeptical case against minimal theism. The argument concerns the mind-body relation. For minimal theism, in order to pass the requirement of being a form of genuine theism, the hypothesis advanced must be that “the first cause of all” (D, 4.1/ 158) is an invisible, intelligent power that is distinct and independent from the world (NHR, 4.1–2). In D, 6 Hume presents evidence against this hypothesis, leading to a hard skeptical conclusion about it. Our experience suggests that body and mind always accompany each other. Any reasonable hypothesis we form should be *consistent* with this. “Nothing is more repugnant to common experience,” Philo suggests, “than mind without body” (D,6.5/ 171). Philo continues (addressing Cleanthes):

But the *vulgar prejudice*, that body and mind ought always to accompany each other, ought not, one should think, to be entirely neglected; since it is founded on *vulgar experience*, the only guide which you profess to follow in all these theological inquiries. And if you assert, that our limited experience is an unequal standard, by which to judge of the unlimited extent of nature; you entirely abandon your own hypothesis, and must thenceforward adopt our

28. This is, for example, Gaskin's view of the matter. Put another way, Hume could be what Holden describes as a “moral atheist” consistent with being what Gaskin describes as an “attenuated deist.”

29. A view of this kind is defended in Russell, *The Riddle*, Chap. 19. The account that follows (slightly) modifies and amends my earlier position.

Mysticism, as you call it, and admit of the absolute incomprehensibility of the Divine Nature. (D, 6.6/ 172; cp. 8.11/ 186, Hume's emphasis)

This general argument, concerning our uniform experience of the union of mind with body, is, of course, relevant to the issue of the immortality of the soul, as well as the existence of God, where in both cases we are invited to accept the existence of invisible, active, intelligent beings that exist independent of body.³⁰

Faced with this evidence that Hume is a hard skeptical atheist, even with respect to the minimal hypothesis, it may be suggested that Hume's minimal theism could be understood in even *more* minimal terms. More specifically, it may be suggested that we should not assume that the "intelligent power" that is the cause or origin of the world is an *immaterial* being. For example, Hume explicitly considers the hypothesis that matter may itself be inherently a self-ordering and self-existent being (D, 6.12; 9.7/ 174, 190). This is a hypothesis that he regards as not only conceivable but at least as plausible as the available alternatives. He also considers "the old Epicurean hypothesis" which supposes that matter is eternal and essentially active and in motion (D, 8.6/ 183–84). Although any hypothesis of this kind is unorthodox, why may we not accept this as a form of "minimal theism" that Hume does *not* reject or deny?

There are three important points to be made in reply to this. First, even if we allow that Hume's remarks leave a gap between God being "invisible" and being immaterial (and some of Hume's remarks make clear that he intends there to be no such gap), there is an obvious problem with the notion of an "intelligent power" that is both invisible *and* material. The "intelligent power" of minimal theism is, per hypothesis, no object of our senses and is concealed or hidden in this sense. According to Hume's principles, however, any object that is a body or material object must be either tangible or visible (i.e., visible in one or both of these terms) (T, 1.4.2.12; 1.4.4.6–15; 1.4.5.9-12/ 38–39, 192, 227–31, 235–37). While he grants that "an object may exist, and yet be no where" (T, 1.4.5.10/ 235), this cannot

30. The argument that Hume advances in the *Dialogues* is anticipated in his essay "Of the Immortality of the Soul," where he claims that "the physical arguments from the analogy of nature are strong for the mortality of the soul" (ESY, 596). See also T, 1.4.5.30), where Hume emphasizes the causal dependency of thought on matter and motion. On this, see Russell, *The Riddle*: Chap. 14.

be true of a *material* object or body. For this reason, the hypothesis of an invisible material God is *absurd* on Hume's account.

Second, setting aside the problem of invisibility, while we may agree that Hume does not deny the hypothesis of a self-existent and self-ordering material being, capable of thought and activity, he considers hypotheses of this kind as *alternatives* to theism. Put another way, as already briefly noted earlier, any suggestion that the (material) world is in some way self-existent and self-ordering was recognized by all the parties involved in the relevant debate that Hume participated in as *paradigmatic* atheism. Proposals of this kind were categorized as forms of "Stratonic atheism" or, closely associated with this, "Spinozism."³¹ Spinoza was, of course, widely regarded as "the most celebrated patron of atheism" of this age, and he was the principal target of countless replies on behalf of theism and the Christian religion.³² Any broadly "Stratonic" or "Spinozist" hypothesis of this kind cannot serve as evidence that Hume was not an "atheist" in the relevant terms of this debate. On the contrary, giving credibility to views of this nature would be clear evidence to all those involved that Hume had atheist leanings.³³ While our own contemporaries may be willing to consider a view of this kind under the heading of "genuine theism," Hume and his contemporaries took no such view.³⁴

The third and final point to be made here is that behind the verbal issue about what is or is not to be included under the label of "genuine theism," there is a significant distinction to be drawn between some mode of "Stratonic" or "Spinozist" atheism and "genuine theism" *as it has been described here*. The relevant hypothesis that we are concerned with—and that Hume and his own contemporaries were concerned with—is that

31. "Strato's atheism" is discussed at some length in Bayle's *Pensees diverse* (1682) (see esp. #CVI, which is translated and reprinted in Kemp Smith's Introduction to the *Dialogues*: D, 80–86). It is also discussed in Cudworth's *True Intellectual System of the Universe* (1678) [see esp. I, 214–16]. The young Hume was a close reader of both these influential philosophical works.

32. Clarke, *Demonstration*, III (pp. 20–22, 36–37, 38). Clarke's *Demonstration* was itself a work of enormous importance at this time and it is central to understanding Hume's philosophy, beginning with the *Treatise*. On this, see Russell, *The Riddle*, *passim*.

33. In his "Early Memoranda," in a note referring to Cudworth's "four kinds of atheist" (which includes the "Stratonic atheist"), Hume adds the "Spinozist" as another kind of atheist (along with "the Pyrrhonian or Sceptic") [MEM, #40/503].

34. One particular irony about this is that Spinozist atheism was generally regarded as especially *dangerous* by Hume's contemporaries precisely because of its effort to *disguise* its real nature under the verbal mask of *identifying* Nature with "God."

there exists an *immaterial*, intelligent mind that is the origin or cause of the world and is, as such, independent and distinct from it. It is this hypothesis that serves as the relevant standard of “genuine theism” in the context of this interpretation of Hume’s philosophy (however elastic the use of this label may be in other contexts). With respect to *this* hypothesis Hume was a *hard* skeptical atheist—and this would still be true even if he remained agnostic about (or even accepted) some form of the Stratonic or Spinozist hypothesis.

Let us now return to the central argumentative thread of the *Dialogues*. Hume’s argument, as presented primarily through the voice of Philo, confronts Cleanthes and other defenders of the argument from design with an intractable dilemma—we may call it “Philo’s dilemma.” On one side, defenders of experimental theism may allow us to draw from our narrow and limited experience of the universe to assess the credibility of their hypothesis. Hume, through Philo, consistently suggests that our experience and observations of this world tell *against* the theist hypothesis, not only in its robust forms but also in the minimal form that remains wedded to the hypothesis of mind as ontologically and causally prior to the material world or Nature. On the other hand, if theists find these hard skeptical conclusions unacceptable, they may follow Demea and other “mystics” to the view that God’s nature is mysterious and incomprehensible (D, 2.4, 2.15, 4.1/ 143, 146, 158; cp. D, 3.13/ 157). This conclusion, as Cleanthes points out, is not to be welcomed by the theist:

The Deity, [says Cleanthes] I can readily allow, possesses many powers and attributes of which we can have no comprehension: But if our ideas, so far as they go, be not just, and adequate, and correspondent to his real nature, I know not what there is in this subject worth insisting on. Is the name, without any meaning, of such mighty importance? Or how do you mystics, who maintain the absolute incomprehensibility of the Deity, differ from Sceptics or Atheists, who assert, that the first cause of all is unknown and unintelligible? (D, 4.1/ 158)

It is Hume’s view, therefore, that either way theists are driven into skepticism and atheism. If we take the path of experience and observation we are led to hard skeptical conclusions. If we try to avoid this by embracing mysticism we fall prey to rendering all talk about “God” empty and meaningless. We could say of this notion of God what Hume says elsewhere

of talk about matter when stripped of all its intelligible qualities: “. . . you in a manner annihilate it, and leave only a certain unknown, inexplicable something, as the cause of [the universe]; a notion so imperfect, that no skeptic will think it worthwhile to contend against it” (EU, 12.16/ 155). While the path of mysticism may cut off the hard skeptical conclusions licensed by the alternative approach, it reduces to a soft skepticism that cannot be any more welcome to the theist—an empty and useless doctrine that is indistinguishable from an atheism that denies the existence of God altogether (pace hard skepticism).

V. Atheism and Hume's Mitigated Skepticism

The atheistic interpretation of Hume that has been provided has been constructed around two basic distinctions:

1. The contrast between robust and minimal theism.
2. The contrast between soft and hard skepticism.

These two distinctions track the two core arguments that have been advanced in defence of the (hard skeptical) atheistic interpretation. The robust/minimal theism distinction allows us to frame the most plausible case for Hume's theism, which rests with a minimal conception of God. It has been argued that Hume's theory of belief is inconsistent with the attribution of any such view to Hume. The soft/hard skepticism distinction shows that a number of Hume's objections to theism are not soft but hard in nature and that this applies to minimal as well as robust conceptions of God. The arguments and evidence advanced aim to show that, whatever its philosophical merits, this is the position that Hume is committed to.³⁵

An objection to this account immediately presents itself: surely this “hard” interpretation would violate Hume's mitigated skeptical principles? To the extent that Hume is committed to mitigated skepticism, the critic says, he is limited to soft skeptical claims. To assess the merits of this criticism let us return to the two key principles involved. The first is that the

35. It is, of course, a mistake to suppose that interpretation and criticism are wholly unrelated exercises in philosophy. Interpretation and criticism are, on the contrary, two sides of the same coin. Even those who may doubt that Hume's (harder) arguments present a real challenge to theism or soft scepticism must first address the relevant interpretative issues before they can carry on to dismiss Hume's contributions.

conclusions of all our investigations must avoid dogmatism and show a suitable measure of doubt and modesty in any claims that we may make (LG, 19; EU, 12.24/ 161–62; D, 1.3/ 131–32). Clearly, however, Hume’s hard skeptical arguments, as directed against theism, are not dogmatic and make no claims to “absolute certainty.” They are presented as simply *probable* in light of the (limited) available evidence.³⁶ There is, therefore, no *general* conflict between the first principle of mitigated skepticism and the hard skeptical stance. Contrary to what is implied by some commentators, there is no more reason why an atheist need be a dogmatist than a theist.³⁷

If there is a conflict between Hume’s mitigated skepticism and hard skeptical atheism then it must rest with the second principle. The second principle of mitigated skepticism prohibits investigations and conjectures relating to matters beyond the sphere of common life and practice—which specifically includes “the two eternities” (EU, 12.25/ 162; D, 1.3, 1.10/ 132, 134–35). It is here that there exists a *prima facie* conflict between Hume’s mitigated skepticism and hard skeptical atheism. In order to determine how real this conflict may be, we need to consider Hume’s actual philosophical practice. As we have noted, the central argumentative thread of the *Dialogues* turns on what has been described as “Philo’s dilemma.” The dilemma, as Hume presents it to the theist, is that either we are *permitted* to rely on our limited and narrow experience of the world and draw inferences on this basis or we are *prohibited* from doing so. If we are permitted to do this, then the conclusions that Hume draws are hard skeptical conclusions in respect of the theist’s hypothesis. If we are prohibited from doing this, then this restriction applies equally to the theist, who will be denied any support for their hypothesis. Hume plainly operates on both sides of this dilemma—both of which are equally hostile to the religious hypothesis.

It is especially important to note, with respect to the atheistic interpretation, that Hume does not hesitate to meet proponents of experimental

36. While it is true that Hume accepts that some issues that fall within the scope of human experience and observation allow for “moral certainty” (see, e.g., his remarks in LFG, 22 about the sun rising tomorrow . . .), many of our ordinary beliefs fall well short of this standard.

37. There are, of course, dogmatic atheists. A prominent example of this, among Hume’s own contemporaries, is D’Holbach. More recently, the charge of dogmatism has been directed at the school of “new atheism” (e.g., Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, et al.). To the extent that this charge is justified, it suggests there is some distance between Hume’s atheism and “new atheism.”

theism on their own terms and finds that their hypothesis runs contrary to experience and observation (i.e., he holds that it is improbable). At the same time, he is also willing to retreat to the other horn of the dilemma and insist only that all such reasoning and speculation should be abandoned on the ground that it is beyond the "narrow reach" of human understanding (e.g., EU, 12.25/ 162; and also 1.10, 8.12/ 134–35, 186–87; NHR, 15.11). In this way, Hume's own position, as constructed around the core dilemma that he poses, *oscillates* between hard and soft skepticism. What needs emphasis is that it is not simply and solely a soft position that he pursues.³⁸

This methodological point about Hume's skeptical practice suggests that we should draw one more important distinction. With respect to the second principle of mitigated skepticism, Hume slides between a *strict* and a *relaxed* attitude to its application. The soft skeptical stance flows from a strict understanding that prohibits all speculations about the first cause of the world (D, 5.1, 6.6, 7.8, 8.11/ 165, 172, 177, 186). It would simply misrepresent Hume to read him as taking a one-sided stance of this kind. This would, in the first place, entirely overlook and ignore the various *hard* skeptical arguments that he advances and that manifest a more *relaxed* application of the second principle of mitigated skepticism. Beyond this, Hume's own attitude to theological speculation regarding the "two eternities," as they inform his own personal attitudes and practices, strongly suggests that he does not limit himself to soft commitments. This is particularly apparent in his attitude to the doctrine of a future state (i.e., the other "eternity"), which he dismisses as "a most unreasonable fancy."³⁹ Similarly, Hume's attitude to various forms of *robust* theism is far from soft, given that he repeatedly *ridicules* anthropomorphic theism in its

38. Bertrand Russell distinguishes between two kinds of agnostic, one who suspends belief and the other who regards the theist hypothesis as possible but improbable. Agnostics of the latter kind, he suggests, "are, for practical purposes, at one with atheism" ("What Is an Agnostic?," 557). The distinction Russell draws between two kinds of agnostics is, more or less, the same as the distinction that we have drawn between soft/hard skepticism. Having noted this, Russell's framework still endorses the view that atheists claim to advance "conclusive arguments" and to know there is no God. As we have already noted, this assumption encourages a false opposition between skepticism and atheism.

39. When Hume was dying (in 1776) he met with James Boswell who, famously, recorded Hume's hard attitude to this hypothesis: "I asked him if it was not possible that there might be a future state. He answered it was possible that a piece of coal put upon the fire would not burn; and he added that it was a most unreasonable fancy that we should exist forever . . ." (cited in Mossner, *Life of Hume*, 597–98; see also Hume's related remarks in T, 1.3.9 and his essay "Immortality of the Soul").

various forms as absurd, barbaric, cruel, and so on (D, 5.12, 8.12, 12.31/168–69, 186, 226; and also NHR, 12.8, 13.6, 15.5–6). Since Hume does not confine himself to a soft attitude with respect to these matters, there is no (principled) reason to suppose that his attitude to minimal theism is soft. On the contrary, Hume applies hard skeptical arguments right across the spectrum of theism—covering minimal as well as robust conceptions. Even if Hume’s attitude to minimal theism is *softer* than his attitude to robust theism, it remains hard enough. In light of all these considerations, we may conclude that Hume was a *hard* skeptical atheist.⁴⁰

Appendix: Abduction and Hume’s Atheism

The design argument, as Hume presents it in the *Dialogues*, is generally interpreted as an inductive argument. The weakness that Hume identifies rests primarily with the weakness of the analogy that it relies on. In response to this, it may be argued that, even if the (hard skeptical) atheist reading defended earlier is correct, it is a mistake to assume that the design argument should be understood as an inductive argument. The argument, critics suggest, is better understood as an *abductive* argument and, read this way, Hume’s criticisms fail to refute it (in this form).⁴¹ Related to this point, it may also be claimed that Hume offers “no serious alternative explanation of the phenomena he discusses.”⁴² According to these critics, it is Darwin, not Hume, they say, who delivered the “deathblow” to the design argument. Prior to Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species* (1859), the best explanation for “organized complexity” was intelligent design of some kind. The only alternative to design was mere “randomness.”⁴³

This appendix challenges these claims. More specifically, it will be argued that: (a) Hume’s arguments (allowing for anachronism) can be

40. Versions of this chapter have been read to a number of different audiences over period of several years. This includes “Philosophy in Assos,” Turkey (2011); Portland State (2012); Arizona (2012); Yale University [New England Colloquium in Early Modern Philosophy] (2013); the University of California at San Diego (2014); and Basel University (2016). I am grateful to colleagues present on those occasions for their comments and suggestions. I would especially like to thank Kaj Hansen, Anders Kraal and Chris Stephens for additional comments and criticisms relating to the Appendix.

41. Sober, *Philosophy of Biology*, 30–36; Sober, *Core Questions*, 58–66.

42. Sober, *Philosophy of Biology*, 36.

43. This claim is criticized in Oppy, *Arguing About Gods*, 228–36. Oppy also attributes this view to Richard Dawkins (*The Blind Watchmaker*, 5–6).

easily recalibrated to accommodate the abductive framework; (b) It is not accurate to present Hume as providing “no serious alternative” to design other than “randomness”; and, (c) These considerations relating to abductive reasoning and alternative explanations for “organized complexity” in the world provide (further) substantial support for the hard skeptical atheist interpretation. What is important to keep in mind here is that these are all issues of *interpretation*, not efforts to defend Hume’s arguments (much less adjudicate the contemporary debate).

Let us begin with the suggestion that the argument from design was intended by its proponents to be an “inference to best explanation” or an abductive argument.⁴⁴ This involves comparing two (or more) rival hypotheses offered to explain our observations of organized complexity (i.e., features of order, beauty, harmony, functionality, etc., of the kind that both Cleanthes and Philo draw our attention to: D, 2.5, 2.14, 3.7, 12.2–3/ 143, 146, 154, 214–15; and also EU, 11.10/ 135). The task of abductive reasoning is to ask which of these hypotheses is the best explanation for these features of the world. Given two hypotheses [H₁ and H₂] that aim to explain some given observation (O), we may understand the *likelihood* in these terms:

O favors H₁ over H₂ if and only if H₁ assigns to O a probability (Pr) that is higher than the probability that H₂ assigns to O.
More formally: O favors H₁ over H₂ IFF $\text{Pr}(O|H_1) > \text{Pr}(O|H_2)$

The likelihood of a hypothesis H is not the same as its probability. This difference can be represented in notation by the difference between $\text{Pr}(O|H)$ [likelihood] and $\text{Pr}(H|O)$ [probability]. A good explanation, with a high likelihood, may still be entirely implausible (e.g., because the hypothesis itself is antecedently implausible).⁴⁵ Likelihood arguments do not tell you which hypotheses are probably true. They simply evaluate how

44. Sober, *Philosophy of Biology*, 31; *Core Questions*, 60–66. Sober pays particular attention to William Paley’s version of the design argument, as presented in his *Natural Theology*. Paley’s *Natural Theology* was published in 1805, long after Hume died. It was, however, Hume that Paley was responding to (not the other way round). For a different perspective (and useful historical background relating to Hume and Paley and their various sources), see Hurlbutt, *Hume and the Design Argument*, esp. Chaps. 10 and 11.

45. Sober provides this amusing example: “Suppose you hear a noise coming from the attic of your house. You consider the hypothesis that there are gremlins up there bowling. The likelihood of this hypothesis is very high, since if there are gremlins bowling in the attic, there probably will be noise. But surely you don’t think that the noise makes it very probable that there are gremlins up there bowling. In this example, $\text{Pr}(O|H)$ is high and $\text{Pr}(H|O)$ is

the observations we are presented with serve to discriminate among the hypotheses that are being considered. For this reason, likelihood arguments are evidently (much) more modest in their aims and ambitions.⁴⁶

How, then, should we understand the likelihood version of the design argument (in contrast with the inductive version)? All that the theist claims, according to this version, is that the religious hypothesis (G) is a better explanation than the alternative materialist hypothesis (M). According to the theist, the relevant observations relating to ordered complexity (O) stand in these relations to the available rival hypotheses:

- (1) If G were true we would expect O to be true.
 - (2) If M were true we would expect O to be false.
-
- (3) It follows that G is a better explanation of O than M [i.e., $\Pr(O|G) > \Pr(O|M)$]

This line of reasoning does not depend on induction and analogy and can stand on its own. For this reason, Hume's specific criticisms of the inductive version of the design argument are irrelevant. The theist does not need to establish any (strong) analogy between living things and human artifacts. Nor does "sample size" matter here, since abductive reasoning does not rest on these foundations. In light of this, we may conclude that Hume's discussion of the design argument simply fails to engage with the abductive version. While this may not tell against the accuracy of (hard skeptical) atheistic interpretation, it clearly takes away from the power and force of Hume's critical argument.

It is something of an irony that the preceding line of criticism of Hume has been advanced most forcibly, not by theists, but by contemporary Darwinians.⁴⁷ The worry here, as we noted earlier, is that Hume offers no real or credible alternative to the design hypothesis and that, until Darwin, the design argument was the best explanation for the organized complexity that we observe in the world. Whatever its philosophical merits, this line of criticism depends on some crucial interpretive assumptions. One

low. The gremlin hypothesis has a high likelihood (in the technical sense) but a low probability" (Sober, *Evidence*, 10).

46. Sober, "Design Argument," 102; see also Sober, *Philosophy of Biology*, 33; Sober, *Evidence and Evolution*, 120–22.

47. Sober is a particularly prominent and distinguished representative of this view.

of these is that Hume offers no alternative hypothesis or that his hypothesis is nothing better than “the randomness hypothesis.”⁴⁸ This account fails to do justice to Hume’s discussion.⁴⁹

The alternative hypothesis that Hume considers as a genuine (serious) alternative to the religious hypothesis is “the old Epicurean hypothesis” (D, 8.2/ 182). Hume believes that this hypothesis can be “revived” and revised in the following terms:

Instead of supposing matter infinite, as EPICURUS did, let us suppose it finite. A finite number of particles is only susceptible of finite transpositions: and it must happen, in an eternal duration, that every possible order or position must be tried an infinite number of times. This world, therefore, with all its events, even the most minute, has before been produced and destroyed, and will again be produced and destroyed, without any bounds and limitations. . . .
(D, 8.2/ 182; and cp. D, 6.12/ 174)

Nor do we need, says Philo, the hypothesis that motion must begin in matter with some unknown voluntary agent. We may, on the contrary, assume that motion is essential to matter and eternal with it, which in turn “suggests a new hypothesis of cosmology, *that is not absolutely absurd and improbable* (D, 8.5/ 183, my emphasis). Philo sums up this alternative as follows:

Thus the universe goes on for many ages in a continued succession of chaos and disorder. But is it not possible that it may settle at last, so as not to lose its motion and active force (for that we have supposed inherent in it), yet so as to preserve an uniformity of appearance, amidst the continual motion and fluctuation of its parts? This we find to be the case with the universe at present. Every individual is perpetually changing, and every part of every individual; and yet the whole remains, in appearance, the same. May we not hope for such a position, or rather be assured of it, from the eternal revolutions

48. Sober, *Philosophy of Biology*, 36; see also Sober, *Core Questions*, 61, 65. Elsewhere Sober associates the Random Hypothesis with “Epicureanism,” and suggests that before Darwin it was the main alternative to design (*Evidence and Evolution*, 116).

49. The discussion that follows draws from Oppy, *Arguing About Gods*, 232–36; see also Oppy, “Hume and the Argument for Biological Design,” 524–28.

of unguided matter; and may not this account for all the appearing wisdom and contrivance which is in the universe? (D, 8.8/ 184)

In these passages Hume suggests sources of order that plainly anticipate some of the features of Darwinian theory.⁵⁰ Any “defects” in the way parts are related to each other or the whole will destroy the form and “the matter . . . is again set loose, and is thrown into irregular motions and fermentations, till it unite itself to some other regular form” (D, 8/6/ 183).

It is in vain, therefore, to insist upon the uses of the parts in animals or vegetables, and their curious adjustment to each other. I would fain know, how an animal could subsist, unless its parts were so adjusted? (D, 8.9/ 185; and cp. D, 10.26/ 198)

Philo (and Hume) suggest that while this thesis may well have its own difficulties, it does not run into the sorts of contradictions with our experience that we find with the theist hypothesis that gives thought “precedence” to matter (D, 8.11/ 186).

Given this more detailed account of Hume’s Epicurean hypothesis (E), it is clear that it should not be put into the same basket as the Random hypothesis (R). Although Hume’s Epicurean hypothesis certainly lacks the sophistication of the Darwinian hypothesis (D), it aims to provide an alternative explanation of how order, structure, and functionality may arise in a physical system without appealing to intelligent design of any kind. The processes Hume describes—however sketchy—cannot be assimilated to a tornado that blows through a junkyard and “randomly rearranges pieces of junk.”⁵¹ We are now in a position, therefore, to compare the following hypotheses: Theism (G), Randomness/chance (R), Hume’s Epicurean hypothesis (E), and the Darwinian hypothesis (D). One immediate difficulty we face is that the theist hypothesis is not in a position to assign relevant probabilities required to assess likelihood. More specifically, we need some relevant information about how probable “ordered complexity” would be in the absence of God and the extent to which that probability

50. Hume’s anticipation of Darwinian theory has been noted by a number of commentators. See, for example, Gaskin, *Hume’s Philosophy of Religion*, 44–45; O’Connor, *Hume on Religion*, 21, 142; Pike, *Hume’s Dialogues*, 181–82; and also Hurlbutt, *Hume, Newton & the Design Argument*, 180–81.

51. Sober, *Philosophy of Biology*, 37.

would be increased if God exists. Critics have argued that the required probability assignments “are simply not available.”⁵² In the absence of this information, the critic continues, abductive versions of the design argument collapse “into arguments relying upon an unsupported prejudice in favor of the superior probability of mental order over physical order . . . [a prejudice] that Hume rightly rejects.”⁵³

It may be that this general line of criticism of the likelihood version of the design argument, which questions the possibility of assigning nonarbitrary likelihood probabilities, can be attributed to Hume. There remain, however, other resources in Hume's text for dealing with abductive reasoning in relation to the design argument and that make some concession to the sort of probability assignments that a theist such as Cleanthes regards as reasonable. The crucial question for Hume, given that the Darwinian hypothesis is off the table, is how the Epicurean hypothesis (E) stands in relation to Randomness (R) and Design (G). Hume's comments suggest that this “new hypothesis of cosmology is not absolutely absurd and improbable” (D, 8.6/ 183; and 6.12/ 174), although he also says that there is “no probable conjecture concerning the whole of things” (D, 7.8/ 177; and D, 8.12/ 186). Nevertheless, he plainly regards E as a better hypothesis than R (which is not unreasonable, given that E is a rudimentary version of D). His remarks also suggest that he finds E to be *as good or better* an explanation than any other available alternative, including G. In practice, therefore, Hume is willing to *rank* these hypotheses and distinguishes some as better than others.

The degree of likelihood that we may assign to the religious hypothesis (G) will obviously vary depending on how robust or minimal our conception of God (“the intelligent designer”) is. When the religious hypothesis is interpreted in terms of a robust conception (e.g., as per Cleanthes's idea of God), it will include the moral attributes. Let us identify this robust conception as G*. Another variable, relevant to the evaluation of likelihood,

52. For a discussion of this issue see, e.g., Bailey and O'Brien, *Hume's Critique of Religion*, 122–24. (Bailey and O'Brien draw on LePoidevin, *Arguing for Atheism*, 49–54.) Bailey and O'Brien argue: “Hume's decision to concentrate on supplying Philo with criticism of the analogical version of the design argument is not, therefore, a product of a failure to grasp the possibility of construing it as an argument to best explanation. Instead, Hume's emphasis on the analogical version stems from his desire to examine the merits of the design argument when it constitutes a genuine argument from experience rather than an argument relying on *a priori* assumptions about matters of fact. . . .”

53. Bailey and O'Brien, *Hume's Critique of Religion*, 124. Sober presents a similar line of criticism (“The Design Argument,” 108–14).

is the content of the observation (O) which is to be explained. This consideration is fundamental to Hume's concern with evil in the world and it is directly relevant to the likelihood of the religious hypothesis. Let us say that, along with evidence of "organizational complexity" in the world (O_1), we also find evidence of unnecessary evil and imperfect or defective existence (O_2). Hume's general point is, then, that the likelihood of the theist hypothesis collapses to near 0 if the concept of God is G^* and the relevant observations to be explained are ($O_1 \& O_2$). The more the theist hypothesis approximates G^* as opposed to G , the less likely it becomes: $\Pr(O_1 \& O_2 | G) > \Pr(O_1 \& O_2 | G^*)$. The argument from evil is, therefore, relevant to the likelihood assigned to the theist hypothesis on Hume's account. In this way, we may read Hume as taking a *hard* skeptical stance in respect of G^* , since it is plainly (much) less likely than G (given $O_1 \& O_2$). Indeed, since $\Pr(O_1 \& O_2 | G^*)$ is near 0, Hume would seem to have reason to endorse $\Pr(O_1 \& O_2 | E) > \Pr(O_1 \& O_2 | G^*)$. These considerations serve to show that Hume is not constrained, in practice, by his skeptical principles, to avoid taking a hard skeptical stance in relation to G^* . This makes clear that Hume does not adopt a "total suspense of judgment" in respect of these matters (D, 8.12/186–87). We may conclude, on the basis of the evidence cited, that Hume rejects the likelihood argument on a robust interpretation (i.e., he believes that G^* is relatively weak and there are better explanations available to us, such as G and E).

With regard to the more minimal interpretation of the religious hypothesis (G) Hume's stance is more cautious. A case can be made, nevertheless, that Hume regards E as a better explanation than G (in relation to $O_1 \& O_2$) and also takes a hard skeptical stance on this issue. The irony of the theist's position is that, on one side, if they adopt a more robust conception of God (G^*) then their hypothesis is less likely; on the other side, if they reduce the content to a minimal idea of God (G) then they are in no position to assign any relevant probabilities to the intentions and designs of such a being or agent.⁵⁴ What is more important, however, is that even if (contrary to the evidence cited) Hume held that G is a *better* explanation than E [$\Pr(O_1 \& O_2 | G) > \Pr(O_1 \& O_2 | E)$], this would tell us *nothing* about the probability or truth of G .⁵⁵ Given the "modest pretensions" of

54. In other words, if the content G is entirely obscure then the probability assigned to $\Pr(O|G)$ will be indeterminate and arbitrary.

55. We need to keep in mind, in other words, that likelihood is not the same as probability: Sober, "Design Argument," 100–02; Sober, *Philosophy of Biology*, 33.

the likelihood version of the design argument Hume could still maintain that G is highly improbable and unbelievable. In order to decide this issue we must first assign some *prior* probability to the hypothesis G [Pr(G)].

It is evident that the “modesty” of the likelihood account of the design argument comes at some considerable cost from the theist’s point of view. In particular, any argument of this kind denies the theist the ability to establish the *truth* and *probability* of the hypothesis, much less sustain *belief* in it.⁵⁶ For this reason the theist may turn to a Bayesian version of the argument, which provides the apparatus to make these stronger claims.

Bayes’ Theorem: $\Pr(H|O) = \Pr(O|H) \Pr(H) / \Pr(O)$

Granted that we know $\Pr(O)=1$, the *posterior* probability of the hypothesis [Pr(H|O)] is a product of likelihood [Pr(O|H)] and the prior probability of the hypothesis [Pr(H)]. The issue for the case for theism depends, therefore, on what independent basis we may have to establish the prior probability of the hypothesis (G). Theists may make the case for the high probability of Pr(G) on the basis of the ontological argument, or revealed religion, and so on. Hume, as we have noted, provides a series of arguments for discrediting all such claims, which is consistent with either a soft or hard skeptical reading of his commitments. The crucial question, for our purposes, is whether he offers any arguments for the *hard* skeptical position—one that would need to show that the *prior probability* for G is (very) low?

There are several passages of the *Dialogues* that present arguments of exactly this kind—such as when the concept of God combines incompatible attributes of thought and simplicity and immutability.⁵⁷ More importantly, Hume advances empirically grounded evidence that even the *most minimal* version of the theist hypothesis is not credible. This comes in the form of his claim, as described earlier, that “nothing is more repugnant to common experience than mind without body; a mere spiritual substance, which fell not under their senses nor comprehension, and of *which*

56. It may be argued that consideration of this kind suggests that we have some reason to doubt Sober’s claim that the abductive version of the argument fully captures what theists generally aim to establish by means of the design argument (i.e., their aims are not as “modest” as the abductive version supposes).

57. Sober claims that Hume offers no arguments to show that the theist hypothesis is incoherent or self-contradictory (Sober, *Philosophy of Biology*, 27).

they had not observed one single instance throughout all nature” (D, 6.5/ 171, my emphasis). Hume (Philo) carries on to suggest that “it could not but seem reasonable to transfer this experience to the universe,” leading to the conclusion that we have (substantial) reason to reject any hypothesis that assumes that God is prior to and independent of body. If this is correct then the prior probability of the religious hypothesis [$\text{Pr}(G)$], even on the *most minimal* interpretation, is close to 0. It follows that the posterior probability of the hypothesis—however great its likelihood—is also vanishingly small.⁵⁸

While there is, no doubt, some anachronism in reading Hume as responding to abductive and Bayesian versions of the design argument, we can, nevertheless, make modest adjustments to his arguments that allow for this. With respect to *likelihood*, Hume presents considerations that show that the assignment of relevant probabilities must be sensitive to both the idea of God (G) involved in the theist hypothesis and to the content of the observations (O) to be explained. In respect of both these variables Hume’s arguments plainly damage the case for theism (even if they do not deliver a “deathblow”).⁵⁹ Moreover, Hume presents an alternative hypothesis—the old Epicurean hypothesis—that he plainly regards as stronger than mere randomness and that may also be judged stronger than theism (certainly in its more robust forms). We have also noted that even if Hume were to concede—as he does not—that some form of minimal theism (G) is the best explanation (i.e., in terms of likelihood), none of this would imply that Hume regarded such a hypothesis as probable, true, or believable. On the contrary, the arguments that Hume puts on the table, when inserted into the apparatus of Bayes’ Theorem, lead to the conclusion that the prior probability of the theist hypothesis is extremely weak and so too, therefore, is the posterior probability of the hypothesis. In all these respects, therefore, we may conclude that Hume is a hard skeptical atheist.

58. Critics of Hume’s (atheistic) position may argue that we are still left with the existence of the world as an unexplained brute fact and that the theist hypothesis serves to fill this explanatory void. On the interpretation defended here Hume’s response to this line of criticism runs parallel to what we might say to someone who insists that only bowling gremlins can explain the noise in the attic. Even in the absence of any available alternative explanation, we still have good reason to reject this hypothesis as wholly implausible and unbelievable.

59. See Sober, *Philosophy of Biology*, 30: “When (if ever) was the argument [from design] shown to be fatally flawed? Many philosophers nowadays think that Hume dealt the deathblow. . . .”

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