

David Hume on Religion

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I

What did David Hume really think about religion? Is it possible to answer this question? Peter Hartl observes, correctly, that ‘regarding the question of the existence of God all logically possible positions have been attributed to Hume’.¹⁾ This is true, but the general consensus, over a long period of time, is that Hume was a religious skeptic. And though he never expressly said so, probably to all intents and purposes, he was an atheist. Raised in post-Reformation Scotland, Hume endorsed the Protestant view that popular Catholicism is mere ‘superstition’. At the same time, he was no more sympathetic to the Protestant alternative. This too he rejected, identifying it as a manifestation of the kind of religious ‘enthusiasm’ that tends to dogmatism, and almost invariably leads to intolerance and fanaticism. The terms ‘superstition’ and ‘enthusiasm’ provide Hume with the title of one of his essays, but his negative attitude to both is reflected in several philosophical works published in his lifetime which include sustained attacks on the central theological concepts of miracle, providence, and immortality. His posthumously published *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* go still further by systematically scrutinizing, and as many think, demolishing the traditional cosmological and teleological arguments for the existence of God.

This view of Hume on religion is not universal, but it is widespread

1) Peter Hartl, ‘Hume and that Art of Theological Lying’, *Journal of Scottish Philosophy*, 18 (2) pp.193-211

enough to be regarded as the current orthodoxy. Thus, writing about 'Hume and the Proofs for the Existence of God' in the authoritative *Oxford Handbook of Hume*, Martin Bell unreservedly endorses Paul Russell's claim (in *The Riddle of Hume's Treatise*) that the key to understanding Hume's combination of naturalism and skepticism, is to be found in appreciating the central critical role that a 'systematic destructive critique of natural religion and the metaphysical doctrines that support it' played in his thought.²⁾

The problem with this view of Hume as a skeptical atheist is the existence of certain passages in his writings that have long puzzled interpreters. There is, for example, his repeated reference to 'true religion', which he contrasts with both superstition and enthusiasm. The essay on miracles certainly appears to be an attack on Christian orthodoxy, and yet it ends with this striking concession.

Upon the whole we may conclude, that the Christian religion not only was at first attended by miracles, but that even at this day cannot be believed by any reasonable person without one. Mere reason is insufficient to convince us of its veracity: And whoever is moved by faith to assent to it, is conscious of a continued miracle in his own person.³⁾

Given the critical onslaught to which the idea of miracles has been subjected up to this point, this conclusion is to say the least surprising, especially since it suggests a line of thought rather similar to one invoked by defenders of Christianity from Augustine to Kierkegaard.

No less puzzling is the conclusion to the *Dialogues*. The work ends, famously, with an apparent *volte-face* on the part of Philo, the most skeptical of the participants in the conversation. Contrary to what his arguments seem to imply, Philo declares them to be consistent with, rather than contrary to,

2) *Oxford Handbook of Hume*, ed. Paul Russell, Oxford University Press, 2016, p.621

3) *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Tom L Beauchamp, Oxford University Press, 1999, p.116

Christian belief. 'To be a philosophical sceptic' he assures Cleanthes, 'is, in a man of letters, the first and most essential step towards being a sound, believing Christian'. More strikingly yet, in the final sentence to the work, Pamphilus, who has been recounting the whole debate to a friend, concludes that, 'upon a serious review of the whole, I cannot but think, that [the views] of CLEANTHES approach still nearer the truth [than those of Philo]'.⁴⁾

What is to be made of passages like these? J C A Gaskin, in the *Cambridge Companion to Hume* expresses very plainly a view that many have held: this 'problem of interpretation', he suggests, 'results from Hume's "abundant prudence" in covering his real opinions with ambiguous irony and even on occasions, with denials of his own apparent conclusions'.⁵⁾ In other words, the occasions on which Hume appears to speak favourably of religion should not be taken seriously. David Berman takes an even stronger line and speaks of 'theological lying' which he thinks others besides Hume engaged in as a form of social and political self-protection.⁶⁾ The problem with explanations of this sort, however, is that we lack any clear criterion of when Hume is speaking insincerely and when he is not. In a letter to Andrew Millar, Hume himself declared that 'As to my opinions, you know I defend none of them positively: I only propose my Doubts, where I am so unhappy as not to receive the same Conviction with the rest of Mankind'.⁷⁾ This suggests the strong possibility of genuine ambivalence on his part.

Nor can the text of the *Dialogues* resolve this. Although it is now the case that the skeptical Philo is generally identified with Hume himself, this was not always the majority opinion among philosophical commentators. In times past, most were happy to identify Hume with Cleanthes or Pamphilus, and it was only Norman Kemp Smith's sustained argument in

4) *David Hume: Dialogues and Natural History of Religion*, ed. J C A Gaskin, Oxford World's Classics, Oxford University Press, 1993, p.130

5) 'Hume on Religion' in *Cambridge Companion to Hume*, ed. D Norton, Cambridge University Press, 1993, p.312

6) David Berman, 'David Hume and the Suppression of "Atheism"', *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, 21 (3) pp.375-87

7) *Letters of David Hume*, ed. J Y T Greig, Vol 1 p.265

the introduction to his 1935 edition of the *Dialogues* that brought about the current inclination to identify Hume with Philo.⁸⁾ Besides, James A Harris had made a strong case for thinking that Hume's whole purpose was to compose a dialogue in which no one voice can be, or should be, identified as that of the author.⁹⁾

II

If resolving the inconsistencies in Hume by supposing that when he appears to say anything positive about religion he is being disingenuous, or even lying, is much harder to sustain than has often been supposed, what are the alternatives? Kemp Smith offers a different explanation. Hume, he argues, is not being inconsistent. He does indeed think there is such a thing as 'true religion'. But, Kemp Smith contends, it is a very pale version of what we normally take religion to be.

Hume's attitude to true religion can be summed up in a threefold thesis: (1) that it consists exclusively in intellectual assent to the somewhat ambiguous, at least undefined proposition, 'God exists'; (2) that the 'God here affirmed is not God as ordinarily understood; and (3) as a corollary from (1) and (2), that religion ought not to have, and when 'true' and 'genuine' does not have, any influence on human conduct – beyond, that is to say, its intellectual effects, as rendering the mind immune to superstition and fanaticism.¹⁰⁾

This interpretation does not easily accommodate the conclusion to the essay on miracles, but it does accord well with Hume's remark in the first

8) *Hume's Dialogues*, ed. Norman Kemp Smith, London, Thomas Nelson and Sons, second edition 1947

9) James A Harris, *Hume: an Intellectual Biography*, Cambridge University Press, 2015

10) Kemp Smith, *op.cit.* p.24

Enquiry that religion is really a 'species of philosophy'. It accords a little less well with the concluding remarks in the *Dialogues*, but if Kemp Smith is right, consistency can be preserved by interpreting Philo's conception of 'a sound, believing Christian' as someone who affirms only the thin version of 'true religion'. 'Sound believing' in this context, is to be contrasted with the fanciful beliefs that Hume held to be the mark of 'vulgar' or popular religion.

Kemp Smith's explanation, however, raises another puzzle. The philosophical religion Hume thinks it is rational to endorse stands at an enormous distance from the real world of religion by which he was surrounded. Seemingly rational people, it has to be allowed, have always advocated and endorsed beliefs and ideas that by Hume's account are unintelligible. In Hume's day, such beliefs were carefully formulated, hotly debated and generated vast quantities of print. Is this to be placed alongside spells and incantations as a further manifestation of 'vulgar' religion? If so, what is he to make of 'vulgar' religion's near universality?

One answer is that he can make nothing of it. This is what he virtually concedes at the end of the *Natural History of Religion*.

Examine the religious principles, which have, in fact, prevailed in the world. You will scarcely be persuaded that they are anything but sick men's dreams, . . . more the playsome whimsies of monkeys in human shape than the serious positive dogmatical asseverations of a being who dignifies himself with the name of rational. . . . [Yet] Look out for a people, entirely destitute of religion: If you find them at all, be assured, that they are but a few degrees removed from the brutes. What so pure as some of the morals included in some theological systems? What so corrupt as some of the practices, to which these systems give rise? . . . The whole is a riddle, an enigma, an inexplicable mystery. Doubt, uncertainty, suspense of judgment appear the only result of our most accurate scrutiny concerning this subject.¹¹⁾

11) *Natural History of Religion*, ed. J C A Gaskin, Oxford World's Classics, pp.184-185

St Augustine, in the discussion of miracles alluded to earlier, makes the claim that if something that appears unreasonable is very widely believed, it is unreasonable to dismiss it as mere error. He applies this contention to belief in the Resurrection of Christ in particular, but it has wider application. The near universality of religious belief among otherwise rational beings gives us reason to doubt any philosophical theory that would lead us to construe them as 'sick men's dreams' and 'playsome whimsies'. Hume must himself have felt something of this tension. Though for the greater part of his life he absented himself from Christian worship, he nevertheless made and maintained close friendships with several prominent clergymen. Could he have regarded William Robertson, Hugh Blair, Alexander Carlyle and Adam Ferguson as sick men dreaming? He evidently felt more comfortable in their company than among the avowed French atheists, with whom he was also familiar, and even spoke favorably of the 'consolatory spiritual assistance' they could be expected to give him in the last weeks of his life. The practice of religion, then, even if based on irrational beliefs, is not to be dismissed contemptuously in terms such as he uses in the *Natural History*. This militates against the strictly intellectual conception of religion Kemp Smith attributes to Hume. But if this richer conception is not to be dismissed as 'sick men's dreams', how then is it to be regarded?

III

At an early stage of the discussion recounted in the *Dialogues*, Philo draws an interesting distinction with respect to the use of religious language. While asserting that the *existence* of God as First Cause is incontestable, he denies that we can say anything about God's *nature*. He notes, however, that people do as a matter of fact ascribe to God all manner of perfections, and warns of an error into which this might lead us.

Wisdom, thought, design, knowledge; these we justly ascribe to [God]; because these words are honorable among men and we have no other language or other conceptions, by which we can express our

adoration of him. But let us beware, lest we think, that our ideas any wise correspond to his perfections, or that his attributes have any resemblance to these qualities among men. He is infinitely superior to our limited view and comprehension; and is more the object of worship in the temple, than of disputation in the schools.¹²⁾

The distinction Philo draws here between the God worshipped in the temple and the God disputed about in the schools invites us to differentiate sharply between the practice of religion and the intellectual enterprise of theological speculation. If we go solely by the first *Enquiry's* characterization of religion as a 'species of philosophy', then 'true religion' plainly falls within the activity of 'speculation'. However, this question can hardly fail to arise. How are the two manifestations of religion related? What is the connection between the attribution of divine qualities in worship and the use of the same terms in theology? Hume's answer, effectively, is 'none'. If we try to make philosophical or theological use of the language with which we worship God, the divine attributes become meaningless. Since God's nature necessarily exceeds humanity's ability to comprehend it, nothing meaningful can be said about it.

Why does the same point not apply to the language of worship? How can it be meaningful? Hume's initial answer is that the language of worship is expressive, not descriptive. Theological speculation aims to make claims about God and thus *describe* God's nature. The limited character of human understanding renders this impossible; God passes our comprehension. Used expressively, however, these same words do not make claims about God's nature. Rather, they give voice to the feelings that human beings have when they contemplate the divine. As Hume writes to a friend "It must be acknowledged that Nature has given us a strong passion for whatever is excellent, & of Love & Gratitude for whatever is benevolent & beneficial & that the deity possesses these Attributes in the highest perfection". Since God is "no Object either of the Senses or Imagination, & very little of the

12) *Dialogues*, ed. Gaskin, p.44

Understanding” we cannot meaningfully attribute these perfections to God, and their only use, accordingly, is for the purpose of expressing feeling.¹³⁾

Yet, in the same letter, Hume quickly undermines the significance of the distinction Philo draws. Divine perfection, he claims, is so remote from our experience, God “is not the natural Object of any Passion or Affection”. Parents and grandparents, for example, are ‘natural’ objects of affection, because they are close enough to us in time and memory. The historical remoteness of distant ancestors, on the other hand, even those from whose legacy we have demonstrably benefitted, prevents us from having any real *feelings* of gratitude towards them. Similarly, “the Invisibility & Incomprehensibility of the Deity” means we “may feel no Affection towards him”. What then of the worshipper who professes to love God? “I fear”, says Hume, “that all Enthusiasts mightily deceive themselves” and he goes on to list various psychological causes of this self-deception.

So, despite the distinction Hume, through the mouth of Philo, draws between ‘worship in the temple’ and ‘disputation in the schools’, religion remains for him essentially a riddle and a mystery. This is because, his empiricist assumptions make it a distinction without a difference. All knowledge comes to us through the five senses, and God cannot be an object of any of these. But neither can God be an object of the imagination, because imaginary objects are always composed out of sense experience. Whatever elevated feelings human beings have, then, they cannot be caused by, or directed at, a God they can neither experience nor imagine.

Behind this empiricist restriction on the human mind lies a crucial metaphysical assumption, namely, that human beings stand in relation to the world primarily as observers; the mind is, so to speak, a container, waiting to be acted upon by the external world through the medium of the senses. Hume’s subscription to this assumption is revealed in the simile he employs at the start of Section III in the *Natural History of Religion* - ‘We are placed in this world as in a great theatre’.¹⁴⁾ This alluring image

13) *Letters of David Hume*, ed. J Y T Greig, Vol 1 p.51

14) *Natural History of Religion*, ed. Gaskin, p.140

seems simple enough, until we notice that by conceiving of humanity as an audience, it construes our relationship to the world passively, mere witnesses what happens in the world. The same assumption seems to be at work in the opening sentence of the *Treatise*. Hume begins his monumental exploration of human nature with an exclusive focus on ‘perceptions’.

This conception of human beings as observers, however, is hardly true to human experience. We do not in fact stand outside ‘the world’ as witnesses; rather we are ourselves an integral part of it. New born children are inducted into a world that is structured by intention and response. Their lives are shaped from the very first moment by the intentional actions of those who have care of them. Initially, the infant’s response arises from perception and feeling, but very rapidly it begins to engage in actively eliciting the actions of other. In short, it is practical agency, not passive observation, that provides our most fundamental orientation to the world. Detached observation completely separated from action is in fact a sophisticated skill that has to be learned.

This shift of focus from observer to actor has many consequences, not least for our conception of practical reason, a topic that Hume stimulated Kant to consider at great length. For present purposes, it will be sufficient to note that thinking in terms of agency rather than perception gives us reason to re-conceptualize the idea of perfections. Hume’s empiricism leads him to suppose that, since everything must be rooted in sense experience, a perfection is an extrapolation from the less than perfect instances we encounter in our experience of human beings. To call God perfectly just, therefore, is to project to an infinite degree, the property we witness in the actions of the just, but necessarily finite, people we encounter. We can have no experience of the infinite, and hence no experience of perfect justice, and any attribution of this property is effectively meaningless. We cannot know, consequently, whether the God to whom we attribute such a perfection actually possesses it. This is why, by the empiricist’s account, the worship of God as the sum of all perfections is as unintelligible and a theological ‘speculation’ aiming to assert the same thing.

From the perspective of practical agency, however, perfect justice is not

a property that we might or might not be able to observe. It is a regulative ideal, something towards which we strive every time we try to act justly. We learn from experience, certainly, but in order to do so we need an anterior grasp on evaluative ideals. Otherwise we could not understand or assess the degree to which people and institutions succeed in being just. The role of these ideals is to motivate our efforts at correction and improvement. On this account of the matter, the God of the temple is not an object in the way that the God of the schools is. Rather, worship is the practice of orienting the will by directing it to the set of ideals in accordance with which human conduct is to be judged. Religious devotion is contemplation of, and submission to, the sum of all perfections, which is to say, God.

IV

Exploring this subject further would take us well beyond the interpretation of Hume, and hence beyond the scope of this paper. I shall conclude, therefore, with a brief summary. Hume's writings display a curious ambivalence to religion. It is a topic to which he returned again and again in the course of his thought, and while it seems plain that he could not have subscribed to any orthodox version of Christian theism, he does seem to have accepted the existence of God as a strictly intellectual hypothesis. He denied that anything could be asserted about God's nature, yet at the same time he was evidently intrigued by organized religion and popular religious practices. The combination of their persistence and their apparent irrationality puzzled him greatly. This fact about human kind prompted several attempts at explanation. One of those explanations, voiced by Philo in the *Dialogues*, draws a distinction between the God of the temple and the God of the schools. What Hume says elsewhere, however, undermines the cogency of this distinction. To retain the distinction, and use to some purpose, Hume would have to have abandoned one of the most fundamental assumptions on which his philosophy rests – that our most basic relation to the world is that of an observer.

Abstract

David Hume is widely regarded as a religious skeptic, and probably an atheist. Yet there are passages in his writings which are hard to accommodate with this view. This paper considers some of these passages, and argues that Hume leaves a conceptual space for 'true religion' when he draws a distinction between the practice of religion — 'worship in the temple' and theological speculation — 'disputation in the schools'. This paper argues that Hume cannot capitalize on this distinction since his empiricism cannot properly accommodate such a distinction.

