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Hume's Critique of Religion: 'Sick Men's Dreams'

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Alan Bailey • Dan O'Brien

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Alan Bailey
School of Law, Social Sciences
and Communications
University of Wolverhampton
Wolverhampton, UK

Dan O'Brien
Department of History, Philosophy
and Religion
Oxford Brookes University
Oxford, UK

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Preface

Atheism and agnosticism were such marginalized positions in Western Europe prior to the nineteenth century that many preachers and religious thinkers amused themselves by stridently denying that it was possible for anyone to be so perverse and stupid as to disbelieve in God's existence on the basis of a serious review of the arguments and evidence. This stance was often combined with a high level of paranoia about the dangers posed to morality and true religion by affected atheism and a dull-witted atheism rooted in self-deception and mental laziness. Thus sermons and polemical treatises poured forth in order to attack the atheism and irreligion supposedly propounded by corrupt individuals who sought psychological refuge from the consequences of their immorality by deliberately closing their minds to the existence of a judging God and by intellectual dilettantes who disdainfully posed as speculative atheists in order to ridicule the humble faith of Christian believers.

The situation has now altered so dramatically that there is good evidence from opinion polls and other surveys of social attitudes that over 40 % of people in France and Germany regard themselves as atheists, agnostics or disbelievers in any divine being construed as having the characteristics of a person. The figures for the United Kingdom are more difficult to determine. However, 25 % of the respondents in England and Wales to the 2011 National Census declared themselves as having no religion despite being faced with a question that seemed to link having a religion with issues of cultural and racial background. And the sampling conducted as part of the 2012 British Social Attitudes Survey indicated that 50 % of people in the UK do not see themselves as having a particular religion, while only 44 % regard themselves as Christians. This does theoretically leave scope for a widespread allegiance to some form of inchoate deism, but it is probably more sensible to conclude that lack of belief in a deity with person-like characteristics amongst the population of the UK approaches the same high levels that can be found in France and Germany.

How, then, has belief in God been so undermined that we can easily foresee a time when major nations within Europe will have a majority of non-believers? There is an interesting correlation across the world between social stability and economic prosperity on the one side and the waning of belief in a supreme divine agent on the other. When these factors are combined with enhanced levels of

education, respect for personal freedom, and relatively modest levels of income inequality, the momentum towards secularism and disbelief becomes very strong indeed.

Nevertheless such social forces still require to be given intellectual direction if they are to succeed in undermining an entrenched world-view based around the supposition of a divine intelligence responsible for the creation and ordering of the universe. One hugely important intellectual development since the eighteenth century has, of course, been the emergence of Darwin's theory of natural selection. The explanatory capabilities of this theory have radically reduced the intuitive appeal of the argument to design; and the other principal arguments of natural theology—the ontological argument and the cosmological argument—have lost much of their standing as part of a pervasive falling away of the credibility of *a priori* forms of metaphysical reasoning. It is also true that Marxist dialectical materialism and the associated unmasking of the exploitative social role played within capitalism by religious institutions and beliefs have historically done much to subvert the plausibility of religious doctrines. However, there is a case too for attaching some substantial weight to a more diffuse philosophical movement that urges the need for extraordinary claims to be backed by extraordinary evidence and seeks to expose the disanalogies between the quality of evidence adduced in support of religious claims and the evidence that commands our assent in other fields of inquiry. And in the British context, at least, Hume's contribution to that movement has exercised a powerful influence on subsequent developments.

Hume constitutes a key transitional figure between an earlier covert tradition of atheism and irreligion and the open avowal of atheism in the final years of the eighteenth century and the early years of the nineteenth century. Prior to Hume, the pervasive apparatus of legal and social repression meant that atheism and agnosticism could be presented in print only beneath a carapace of disguise and misdirection that severely limited the impact of the argumentative case being put forward by their proponents. Hume, though, succeeded in incorporating within his philosophical and historical works a massive arsenal of arguments against theistic views that lay much closer to the surface of his writings than was judicious for his predecessors. He was, it must be admitted, the beneficiary of a change in the social climate that meant that criticisms of the metaphysical and epistemological foundations of theistic belief were less zealously suppressed than had previously been the case. Nevertheless Hume's literary skills and his wide-ranging vision of a philosophical method incorporating elements of Lockean empiricism and the principles of scientific inquiry defended by Newton gave him unparalleled scope for placing before the public an urbane set of writings from which an attentive reader could readily extract an extensive array of self-contained irreligious arguments along with the premises and rules of inference required to construct still further arguments pointing in the same direction. Moreover, the plausibility and intuitive appeal of many aspects of Hume's overall approach to philosophical issues meant that even people who would otherwise have been instantly repelled by aggressive criticisms of religious belief could readily find themselves enthusiastically endorsing the starting-points for

Hume's arguments before they became aware of their potential implications. In this way Hume not only protected himself against prosecution and social ostracism with a façade of plausible deniability, but he also engaged with a wider readership than would have been attracted to a more obviously polemical approach.

It is not surprising, then, that when we do encounter in 1782 a British writer who is prepared to take the bold step of explicitly declaring that both he and a friend were willing to describe themselves as atheists, the book containing this announcement, entitled *Answer to Dr Priestley's Letters to a Philosophical Unbeliever*, draws extensively for its forthright defence of atheism on Hume's *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion* and Hume's discussion in *An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding* of the credibility of miracle reports. Some mystery remains about the identity of the authors of the *Answer*, though its central section is generally ascribed to Matthew Turner, a Liverpool physician and author of a book on the medicinal uses of ether, and the preparatory address containing the crucial declaration of atheism has appended to it the name of William Hammon. What is certain, however, is that the argumentative case constructed within the *Answer* is heavily influenced both by Hume's writings and *La Système de la Nature*, a book published anonymously in Amsterdam in 1770 by Hume's friend Baron D'Holbach.

Similarly, anyone familiar with Hume's *Enquiry* who also reads Percy Bysshe Shelley's pamphlet 'The Necessity of Atheism' (1811), a work which has a good claim to being the first published in English to bear a title explicitly announcing its atheistic content, is likely to be instantly struck by the close parallels between Shelley's claims about the sources and involuntary nature of belief and the position defended at much greater length by Hume. Moreover, it is very plausible to suppose that Shelley's much longer work 'A Refutation of Deism' (1814) is both a powerful covert defence of atheism and one whose core protective structure is directly inspired by the artful interplay of the main characters in Hume's *Dialogues*.

Our aim in the following pages is accordingly that of drawing together and evaluating the cogency of all the main components of Hume's critique of the epistemological standing and social consequences of religious belief. The wide-ranging scope of this critique and the complex detail of Hume's discussions are often underestimated even by readers and commentators who are broadly sympathetic to Hume's perspective. And when this is combined with a lack of attention to the circumstances in which Hume was writing and the presentational techniques he appropriated from earlier irreligious writers, it becomes difficult to attain a clear view of the position that Hume was ultimately attempting to defend. In our assessment, the balance of probability favours the supposition that Hume was concerned to develop a case for a tentative and undogmatic form of atheism. Although neither his published works nor his surviving correspondence contain an affirmation of atheism like that ventured by the authors of the *Answer*, the arguments that can be recovered from Hume's writings point discreetly but forcefully towards the greater plausibility of atheism when compared both with theism and such irreligious alternatives as minimalist deism and suspensive agnosticism. And particularly after his exposure to the proselytising atheism of some of the *philosophes* in Paris, it is scarcely credible

that Hume would have been unaware of the atheistic implications of his own philosophical principles and arguments.

This interpretative approach does, however, depend for much of its plausibility on Hume's philosophical stance being one that can legitimately be seen as the tightly integrated product of an underlying set of core methodological principles. Thus we have been concerned at several points to show how the apparent tension between some very salient features of Hume's philosophical views can be resolved in a way that exhibits the internal coherence of his overall perspective. One obvious potential source of conflict lies in the relationship between the sceptical arguments deployed in Hume's writing and his reliance on causal reasoning. We maintain that the appearance of inconsistency here is best removed by seeing Hume as presenting causal reasoning as something that inexorably determines our non-epistemic beliefs even when reflection at a higher level of abstraction is incapable of exhibiting that reasoning as conforming to any set of epistemic norms that we find fully satisfactory.

But one other especially salient source of conflict seemingly arises from the limitations Hume ascribes to human intellectual powers in the final section of the *Enquiry concerning Human Understanding* as he expounds the advantages of mitigated scepticism. Can the intellectual modesty that Hume enjoins upon us really accommodate a thesis as positive as atheism instead of a more diffident suspension of judgement about the existence of a deity? Our suggestion in this latter instance is that Hume would draw a distinction between hypotheses on the basis of their specificity. There are competing hypotheses about the origin of the universe that are sufficiently indeterminate and lacking in detail that it would be foolish to suppose that human beings could ever gather persuasive evidence either for or against them even though they do constitute genuine alternatives. However, the hypothesis of the existence of a supernatural entity that constitutes an intelligent and purposeful agent with the power to create all things or to give coherence and order to the universe is far more specific than the hypothesis that matters do not stand that way. Thus we are entitled, even as fallible Humean inquirers fully aware of our intellectual limitations, to reject the former hypothesis as false unless substantial experiential evidence is forthcoming in its support.

Just as Hume's presentation of his arguments against the underpinnings of theism and Christianity is shaped and guided by the writings of his predecessors within a substantial tradition of covert irreligion, so too our interpretation of his position owes a great deal to earlier commentators. One of the great pleasures of writing about Hume is the assistance offered by the voluminous body of insightful scholarship that has been created by the efforts of an extensive array of previous writers. Thus we are keen to place on record our appreciation of the efforts of the many people who have applied themselves in an unprejudiced manner to the task of elucidating and commentating on Hume's philosophical views.

There are, however, four principal works that we wish to single out as having made a particularly important contribution to the development of our understanding of the significance and cogency of Hume's discussions of religious beliefs. The first

of these is Norman Kemp Smith's edition of Hume's *Dialogues*. This edition sets out crucial evidence about the nature and timing of the changes Hume made to the text before its eventual publication by his nephew in 1779. It also includes a lengthy and erudite introduction that both provides valuable information about the intellectual environment in which Hume composed the *Dialogues* and comprehensively demolishes the credibility of the supposition that the character of Cleanthes should be seen as the principal mouthpiece for Hume's own position.

Proceeding in order of date of publication, we arrive next at John Gaskin's pioneering work *Hume's Philosophy of Religion.* This was the first book published in English since the beginning of the twentieth century that attempted to provide a comprehensive and philosophically sophisticated account of the full range of Hume's writings on religion. Moreover, it amply succeeded in providing a lucid and highly illuminating interpretation of Hume's overall perspective. It so happened, however, that Gaskin, like almost all other modern writers on Hume, was misled by the techniques of concealment employed within the *Treatise of Human Nature* into concluding that this book had only a relatively tangential connection to Hume's main case against religious belief.

An improved understanding of the fact that Hume's arguments and criticisms of religion could plausibly be seen as part of a tradition of covert atheism inspired by the writings of Hobbes, Spinoza, and Bayle, and given specific shape by such authors as Anthony Collins, John Toland, and Albert Radicati emerged with the publication of David Berman's *A History of Atheism in Britain: From Hobbes to Russell*. Berman's detailed account of the repressive techniques directed against early atheism and the struggle to overcome those techniques within a legal framework that prescribed heavy punishments in an attempt to deter the promulgation of atheistic or anti-Christian opinions succeeds in placing Hume in a fresh ideological context that makes it much easier to see him as obliquely defending opinions that receive no direct and unqualified expression in his own writings.

Finally, we owe a substantial debt to Paul Russell's recent and formidably researched study of Hume's *Treatise*. Thanks to the mass of evidence presented in Russell's *The Riddle of Hume's Treatise: Skepticism, Naturalism, and Irreligion*, it is now clear that Hume's first and lengthiest philosophical work is permeated throughout by an intense concern with the dispute between theistic and Christian authors on the one side and those thinkers intent instead on undermining the credibility of a religious world-view. Moreover, despite the bland surface appearance of the *Treatise* as viewed by a modern reader unacquainted with the details of the controversies attracting Hume's attention, the party with which Hume chooses to align himself is incontrovertibly that of irreligion and opposition to the philosophical and moral pretensions of Christianity.

We hope, accordingly, that we have been able to build on the insights presented in the above works and other research on Hume to provide a credible account of Hume as covertly building a powerful case for atheistic conclusions. In the first section of the *Dialogues*, Hume presents Philo as claiming that contemporary atheists can scarcely be very formidable because they are so imprudent as to announce their

atheism in words rather than retaining it secretly in their hearts (1779, 1.139). It is our contention that Hume is himself a subtle and formidable atheist who avoids such imprudence by presenting his undogmatic atheism only through oblique and indirect methods.

Oxford, UK — Dan O'Brien
Wolverhampton, UK — Alan Bailey

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Alan Bailey and Dan O'Brien

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Alan Bailey

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Dan O'Brien

References and Principal Texts

References are primarily by author, date, volume number where this is applicable, and page number. In the case of Hume's *Enquiries* and the *Treatise* we have provided references to the Oxford Philosophical Texts editions and also to the earlier editions prepared by Selby-Bigge and Nidditch.

Hume, 1772a, 12.2/149, for example, refers to Section 12, paragraph 2 of David Hume, *An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*, ed. T. L. Beauchamp, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999, and to page 149 of *Enquiries concerning Human Understanding and concerning the Principles of Morals*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge, 3rd edition, revised P. H. Nidditch, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975.

Hume, 1772b, 3.1/183 refers to Section 3, paragraph 1 of David Hume, *An Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals*, ed. T. L. Beauchamp, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998, and to page 183 of the above edition of the *Enquiries* by Selby-Bigge and Nidditch.

Hume, 1739, 1.3.7.4/95 refers to Book 1, part 3, section 7, paragraph 4 of David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. D. F. Norton and M. F. Norton, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000, and to page 95 of *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. L.A. Selby-Bigge, 2nd edition, revised P. H. Nidditch, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978.

References to Hume's *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion* (Hume 1779) are by part and page number to the edition prepared by N. Kemp Smith (2nd edition, Edinburgh: Thomas Nelson, 1947). In the case of Hume's *Natural History of Religion* (Hume 1777c) we have used the edition prepared by J. C. A. Gaskin (*Dialogues and Natural History of Religion,* Oxford: Oxford University Press 1993).

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"Credulity, Superstition and Fanaticism" by William Hogarth, 1762. Permission granted by Ashmolean Museum, Oxford

Chapter 1
Hume the Infidel

1.1 Hume's Eighteenth-Century Reputation

When David Hume died in Edinburgh in 1776, his reputation as one of the leading British critics of Christianity and all forms of religion was sufficiently firmly established in the popular mind that many people in the city expected his funeral to be the occasion for either some form of public disorder or, even more extravagantly, a miraculous sign of God's displeasure at the life led by so unrepentant and prosperous an infidel. According to Samuel Jackson Pratt:

> notwithstanding a heavy rain, which fell during the interment, multitudes of all ranks gazed at the funeral procession, as if they had expected the hearse to have been consumed in livid flames, or encircled with a ray of glory. (1777, 312)

He reports too that 'the grave-diggers, digging with pick-axes Mr. Hume's grave … attracted the gaping curiosity of the multitude', and says that even 'people in a sphere much above the rabble … sent to the sexton for the keys of the burying-ground, and paid him to have access to visit the grave' (ibid.).

The level of public interest in Hume's death and burial led to his brother, John Home of Ninewells, becoming worried about the safety of Hume's body. Pratt tells us that:

> on a Sunday evening (the gates of the burying-ground being opened for another funeral) the company, from a public walk in the neighbourhood, flocked in such crowds to Mr. Hume's grave, that his brother actually became apprehensive upon the unusual concourse, and ordered the grave to be railed in with all expedition. (ibid.)

And as an additional precaution against any unauthorised disinterment, armed guards were posted to watch over Hume's grave for a period of some eight nights, and 'candles in a lanthorn were placed upon the grave, where they burned all night' (ibid., 312–13).

The view that Hume was no friend of Christianity or religious belief can readily be traced back to the initial publication of the first two books of the *Treatise of*

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Human Nature in 1739. According to Mossner (1980, 120), the first notice of the *Treatise* in a learned journal appeared in the *Neuen Zeitungen von gelehrten Sachen*, dated 28 May 1739. The first sentence of the notice immediately identifies Hume as seeking to undermine orthodox religious beliefs: 'A new free-thinker has published an exhaustive *Treatise of Human Nature*, 2 volumes, octavo'. And Mossner reports the notice's author as concluding with a forthright verdict based in part on the *Treatise*'s sub-title: 'The author's evil intentions are sufficiently betrayed in the sub-title of the work, taken from Tacitus: *Rara temporum felicitas, ubi sentire, quae velis; & quae sentias dicere, licet*'. ['The rare good fortune of an age in which we may feel what we wish and may say what we feel'.] The modern reader might legitimately be puzzled about what is supposed to make this sub-title constitute decisive evidence of 'evil intentions',[1] but what is entirely plain is that this particular eighteenth-century reviewer was convinced that the *Treatise* had the aim of calling into question and potentially subverting orthodox religious beliefs.

Other early notices and reviews of the *Treatise* seem to have concentrated primarily on Hume's epistemological scepticism and his analysis of causation (see Mossner 1980, 119–33). However, this should not be interpreted as showing that the initial readers of the *Treatise* generally regarded it as sound on matters of religion. When Hume's name was put forward in 1744 as a candidate for the Chair of Ethics and Pneumatical Philosophy at Edinburgh University, it was the *Treatise* that provided Hume's opponents with ammunition to use against him.

Hume (1932, I, 57–8) mentions in a letter to William Mure of Caldwell dated 4 August 1744 that 'the accusation of Heresy, Deism, Scepticism, Atheism &c &c &c. was started against me', but at that point he seems to have rather complacently assumed that it had failed to damage his candidacy in consequence of its 'being bore down by the contrary Authority of all the good Company in Town'. A year or so later, Hume was forced to acknowledge in a letter to another friend and drinking partner that he had underestimated the damage that these charges had inflicted upon his prospects.

> I am inform'd, that such a popular Clamour has been raisd against me in Edinburgh, on account of Scepticism, Heterodoxy & other hard Names, which confound the ignorant, that my Friends find some Difficulty, in working out the Point of my Professorship, which once appear'd so easy. (1932, I, 59)

Much of the problem seems to have been caused by a polemical pamphlet, or possibly pamphlets, circulating in Edinburgh at this time. At the urging of some of his friends, Hume wrote a brief response to one such critical pamphlet, and this was published anonymously in 1745 as *A Letter from a Gentleman to His Friend in Edinburgh.* It is clear from the content of Hume's own pamphlet that the work to which he is replying is one that made use of quotations from the *Treatise* in order to

[1] The significance of Hume's choice of sub-title will be explored in more detail in Chap. 3, where we shall look at some evidence that has been brought forward in support of the contention that it does indeed indicate that the *Treatise* is written from a strongly anti-religious perspective.

attack the religious orthodoxy of its author.[2] In the second paragraph, Hume presents his decision to write a reply as arising from the following considerations.

> I was perswaded that the Clamour of Scepticism, Atheism, &c. had been so often employ'd by the worst of Men against the best, that it had now lost all its Influence; and should never have thought of making any remarks on these *maim'd Excerpts*, if you had not laid your Commands on me, as a Piece of common Justice to the Author, and for undeceiving some well-meaning People, on whom it seems the enormous Charge has made Impression. (1745, 1)

Unfortunately for Hume, his attempted rebuttal of the charges against him seems to have had little effect, and on 5 June 1745 the Town Council elected William Cleghorn to the vacant chair.

Hume would make only one other attempt to secure a university appointment. In 1751 Hume allowed his friends to put him forward for the post of Professor of Logic at Glasgow University. Once again his alleged enmity towards religion in general, and Christianity in particular, proved a major stumbling block. In a letter to John Clephane, Hume placed the blame for this second academic misadventure squarely on the shoulders of the clergy and the Duke of Argyll.

> You have probably heard that my friends in Glasgow, contrary to my opinion and advice, undertook to get me elected into that College; and they had succeeded, in spite of the violent and solemn remonstrances of the clergy, if the Duke of Argyle had had courage to give me the least countenance. (1932, I, 164)

By this point in Hume's career the *Treatise* had been overtaken as a source of clerical disapproval by subsequent publications. The contents of the first edition of Hume's *Essays* were generally seen as innocuous and helped to push forward his reputation as an elegant writer and subtle thinker. However the *Philosophical Essays concerning Human Understanding*,[3] first published in 1748, contained much more controversial fare. Section 10 of the *Philosophical Essays* struck many readers as a blatant attack on the supposition that reports of miracles can sometimes be legitimate evidence for the truth of a religion; and the central role played in Christianity by the alleged miraculous bodily resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth means that the status of miracle reports is potentially an acutely sensitive issue for Christian believers. Furthermore, Section 11 consists of a dialogue, supposedly between Hume and 'a friend who loves sceptical paradoxes' (1772a, 11.1/132) that contains a defence of freedom of speculation in matters of religion and raises serious questions about the adequacy of the inference from an orderly universe containing organisms displaying means-end adaptation to the conclusion that a deity of the form postulated by traditional theism exists.[4] It is not surprising, therefore, that Hume would later

[2] The fact that an attack on the *Treatise*, which had been published anonymously by Hume, was serving as a potent means of undermining Hume's candidacy for an academic post in Edinburgh means that it must have been widely known amongst the electors for the post, despite Hume's precautions, that he was the author of this controversial book.

[3] This work was given its present title of *An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding* in 1757.

[4] This is the line of argument often referred to as the design argument. It is advisable to refrain from calling it the argument from design because the inference from design to an intelligent designer is

report in *My Own Life* (1777b, 5) that 'Answers, by Reverends and Right Reverends, came out two or three in a Year'.

In 1754 Hume's literary fame and public notoriety took another upwards turn with the publication of the first volume of what was then called *The History of Great Britain* but later became *The History of England.* This dealt with the reigns of James I and Charles I, a period that was seen by Hume's contemporaries as playing a crucial part in the genesis of the political settlement under which Britain was governed in their own time. Consequently, Hume's erudite attempt at writing a genuinely non-partisan history of the events of this highly charged era attracted considerable attention, albeit mainly at first in the form of objections from authors who thought that Hume had been unduly favourable to the constitutional positions and sentiments of their political opponents. It was also criticized for the inclusion of what many readers took to be attacks on the social role of religious beliefs. Hume's own assessment of its initial reception was as follows:

> I thought I had been presenting to the Public a History full of Candor & Disinterestedness, where I conquer'd some of the Prejudices of my Education, neglected my Attachments & Views of Preferment, & all for the Sake of Truth: When behold! I am dub'd a Jacobite, Passive Obedience Man, Papist, & what not. But all this we must bear with Patience. The Public is the most capricious Mistress we can court, and we Authors, who write for Fame, must not be repuls'd by some Rigors, which are always temporary where they are unjust. (1932, I, 221–2)

Although early sales of the *History* were slow, they picked up considerably with the publication in 1756 of a second volume covering the period from the death of Charles 1 to the Glorious Revolution. By then rather more readers were beginning to appreciate the merits of Hume's determination to avoid pandering to party prejudices, and Mossner (1980, 305) notes that 'within 10 years, the completed *History of England* was to become the most popular and best-selling history published in Britain before Gibbon'. It also helped to make Hume a wealthy man.

> But notwithstanding this variety of winds and seasons, to which my writings had been exposed, they had still been making such advances, that the copy money, given me by the booksellers, much exceeded anything formerly known in England: I was become not only independent, but opulent. (1777b, 7–8)

In the period between the publication of these two volumes, one of Hume's more provocative writing projects saw him and his London publisher, Alan Millar, threatened with a public prosecution for blasphemy. Hume had put together for publication a collection of five essays under the title of 'Five Dissertations'. These essays included 'The Natural History of Religion', 'Of Suicide', and 'Of the Immortality of the Soul'. A copy of this proposed work found its way into the hands of William Warburton, Bishop of Gloucester, and he seems to have persuaded the Attorney General that this was such a virulently anti-religious volume

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a verbally trivial one, and the controversial aspect of the design argument is rather the issue of whether the observable order and means-end adaptation in the world around us does constitute good evidence of design. If it is thought desirable to insert a preposition in the argument's name, then it should ideally be referred to as the argument *to* design.

that it would be appropriate to prosecute both the author and his publisher if it appeared in print. A letter from Warburton, quoted in Mossner's *The Life of David Hume*, gives the following account of the affair:

> Hume has printed a small Vol: which is suppressed, & perhaps forever,—on the *origin of Religion,* on *the Passions, on suicide,* & on the *immortality*. The Vol. was put into my hands & I found it as abandoned of all virtuous principle, as of all philosophic force.—I believe he was afraid of a prosecution, & I believe he would have found one: For the Attorney is now in a disposition to support the religious principles of Society, and with vigour.—He finds a generous connivance, infamously abused—and the other day he told me that he was going *to support* & *defend us.* (1980, 323)

In the face of these threats, Hume did excise the two essays on suicide and immortality, and he also made some small changes to the 'Natural History'. A new essay, 'Of the Standard of Taste', was added to the three essays that remained from the original work, and the completed volume was published in 1757 with the title *Four Dissertations.* Significantly, however, continuing rumours about the content of the suppressed essays and the expedients which Hume had been forced to employ in order to avoid prosecution further reinforced his public image as a religious sceptic and critic of Christianity.

The same period of Hume's life also saw him targeted by members of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland as a potential object of censure and even excommunication because of his alleged status as an avowed infidel. A representative example of the charges levelled against Hume is provided by *An analysis of the moral and religious sentiments contained in the writings of Sopho, and David Hume, Esq.* The author denounces 'the public attack which in this country has of late been made on the great principles and duties of natural and revealed religion, in the works of David Hume, Esq; and in the essays of an author who has been distinguished by the name of Sopho' and urges the Assembly to do their 'duty' and 'to give warning of the poison contained in these volumes and to testify to the whole Christian world … [their] abhorrence of such principles' (Fieser 2005, I, 37).[5]

The initial attempt in 1755 to have Hume formally condemned by name was successfully repelled by his numerous friends in the Moderate Party of the Church of Scotland, and Hume described that victory in the following terms:

> You may tell that reverend gentleman the Pope, that there are many here who rail at him, and yet would be much greater persecutors had they equal power. The last Assembly sat on me. They did not propose to burn me, because they cannot. But they intend to give me over to Satan, which they think they have the power of doing. My friends, however, prevailed, and my damnation is postponed for a twelvemonth. (1932, I, 224)

As Hume expected, however, the campaign against him resumed in 1756 in preparation for the next sitting of the General Assembly. This time around, his critics had new ammunition at their disposal in the form of accusations based upon his *History*. In particular, Hume was represented as someone who held Protestantism in contempt and who was unduly sympathetic to Catholicism (see

[5] Although the *Analysis* was published anonymously, Fieser (2005) and Mossner (1980, 341) identify the author as the Reverend John Bonar of Cockpen.

Mossner 1980, 344). The main charge, however, continued to be that of infidelity and anti-Christian views. Eventually a written overture recommending an official Church investigation of Hume was presented to the Committee of Overtures. According to the motion for discussion:

> there is one person, styling himself David Hume, Esq., who hath arrived at such a degree of boldness as publicly to avow himself the author of books containing the most rude and open attacks upon the glorious Gospel of Christ, and principles evidently subversive even of natural religion and the foundations of morality, if not establishing direct Atheism (Mossner 1980, 346).

Once again Hume's friends in the Church engaged in some skilful manoeuvring that eventually led to this overture being watered down to a general expression of abhorrence of doctrines and principles that incited or promoted infidelity. Nevertheless these public discussions of Hume's philosophical and religious views, conducted in a forum that occupied such a central place in the cultural and political life of Scotland, ensured that Hume gained a prominent reputation throughout Britain as an author whose works displayed, at the very least, a keenly questioning and subversive attitude towards religion and Christianity.

This reputation would stay with Hume for the rest of his life, and even his close friends seldom proved able to persuade themselves that any steady commitment to Christian belief lay hidden under the sceptical tone of his published writings. Thus Alexander Carlyle, a prominent minister in the Church of Scotland, took the opportunity in his *Autobiography* to praise Hume's character but combined this with a reluctant acknowledgement of Hume's apparent lack of religious beliefs.

> For though he had much learning and a fine taste, and was professedly a sceptic, though by no means an atheist, he had the greatest simplicity of mind and manners with the utmost facility and benevolence of temper of any man I ever knew. (Fieser 2005, II, 218)

And when we turn to the *Memoirs* of James Caulfeild, first earl of Charlemont, we find a similar mixture of puzzlement at Hume's philosophical stance and praise of his character. Caulfeild was only 18 when he first encountered Hume in Turin in 1746, and when Caulfeild took up residence in London in 1764, their friendship resumed. Caulfeild's testimony is particularly valuable because it seems that Hume made an unusually determined attempt to explain his philosophical views to his young acquaintance.[6] Caulfeild's recollections of Hume place the emphasis on Hume's epistemological scepticism and supposed taste for defending metaphysical paradoxes rather than on his views about religion. Nevertheless Caulfeild's comments still seem to indicate that Hume had repudiated Christianity and other forms of religious belief:

[6] According to Caulfeild (Fieser 2005, II, 215), Hume was reserved in expressing his philosophical and religious opinions in general company, but could be considerably more expansive in private: 'Neither was his conversation at any time offensive, even to his most scrupulous companions: his good sense, and good nature, prevented his saying any thing that was likely to shock, and it was not till he was provoked to argument, that, in mixed companies, he entered into his favourite topics. Where indeed, as was the case with me, his regard for any individual rendered him desirous of making a proselyte, his efforts were great and anxiously incessant'.

> I have sometimes, in the course of our intimacy, asked him whether he thought that, if his opinions were universally to take place, mankind would not be rendered more unhappy than they now were; and whether he did not suppose that the curb of religion was necessary to human nature? 'The objections,' answered he, 'are not without weight; but error never can produce good, and truth ought to take place of all consideration' (Fieser 2005, II, 212).

With the appearance in 1762 of the final volumes of *The History of England from the Invasion of Julius Caesar to the Revolution in 1688*, all the major works that Hume would place before the public in his lifetime had been published, although Hume continued making minor revisions to succeeding editions of both his historical and philosophical writings until a few days before his death. Hume, however, continued to command attention, partly because other authors continued to produce attempted refutations of his views and partly because he was appointed, somewhat unexpectedly, to some important and prominent public offices. Thus in 1763 Hume travelled to Paris with Lord Hertford, the new ambassador to the Court of France, as his unofficial Embassy Secretary, an appointment that would be regularized in 1765.[7] And in 1767, after a brief return to Edinburgh, Hume took over for a while the post of Under-Secretary to the Northern Department of the Secretary of State. Given Hume's keen taste for irony, he was undoubtedly more than a little amused to find that, in this latter office, he was often consulted over clerical appointments within the very Church that had sought to have him excommunicated as an infidel and atheist (see Mossner 1980, 539–40). In the final decade of his life, therefore, Hume constituted an unusual figure: a well-known author who enjoyed considerable Crown patronage and a royal pension of £600 annually, but someone who was also generally thought to harbour strongly anti-religious views that he had defended in his published works under cover of the thinnest possible veneer of deference to more orthodox opinion.

1.2 Ambiguities and Reservations

Despite Hume's widespread reputation amongst his contemporaries for irreligion and hostility towards Christianity, it is far from clear how radical a position he actually held. As we saw above, Hume's attempts at an academic career were undermined by charges of atheism. But there is no explicit denial in any of his published writings or private correspondence of the existence of God, and that observation remains true even if we include comments that Hume has assigned to characters in a dialogue.

[7] Lord Hertford's decision to take Hume as his private secretary caused considerable amusement in Court circles. According to George Macartney, 'questions are ask'd whether Mr. Hume as part of the family will be obliged to attend prayers twice a day, and whether his Lordship has got a good clever Chaplain to keep him steddy, &c. and a thousand Jokes of that kind' (*Letters to Henry Fox, Lord Holland*. London, 1915; cited in Mossner 1980, 438).

Hume clearly favours the potential deniability afforded by the dialogue form, and it is very noticeable that the only section of the *Enquiry concerning Human Understanding* presented as a dialogue is the section where Hume addresses the sensitive issues of what limits should be placed on philosophical inquiry in respect of matters of religion and what conclusions can appropriately be derived from the order and means-end adaptation that can be observed in the world around us. Similarly, Hume's great posthumously published work on the topic of religion, the *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion*, is a set of dialogues between three characters, Philo, Cleanthes, and Demea, who are introduced to the reader by a fourth figure, Pamphilus, who primarily functions as the nominal recorder of the discussion between the three main characters.[8] Significantly, however, these latter characters are all presented at an early stage in the *Dialogues* as assenting to the claim that God exists (1779, 2.141–2), and the subsequent discussion is ostensibly confined simply to the issue of trying to determine what can legitimately be said about God's nature. And the absence of any explicit challenge in this work to the assumption that God exists is potentially all the more telling because Hume was making substantial additions to the text at a time when he could foresee that he would be dead, and hence beyond any possible legal reprisals, before publication (see 1779, 90–95; 1932, II, 332, 334).

The Natural History of Religion, in contrast, sees Hume eschewing the use of the dialogue form: in that work, therefore, he is directly addressing the reader in his own voice. And in the very first paragraph we find an affirmation of God's existence that could readily come from the pages of a treatise written by the most pious and positive of Christian theologians.

> As every enquiry, which regards religion, is of the utmost importance, there are two questions in particular, which challenge our attention, to wit, that concerning its foundation in reason, and that concerning its origin in human nature. Happily, the first question, which is the most important, admits of the most obvious, at least, the clearest solution. The whole frame of nature bespeaks an intelligent author; and no rational enquirer can, after serious reflection, suspend his belief a moment with regard to the primary principles of genuine Theism and Religion. (1777c, 134)

Nor is this the only fulsome endorsement of the design argument on offer in this particular work: Hume expresses robust approval of this argument in three other passages (1777c, 153–4, 155, 183).

What, though, should we say of the *Treatise* as a manifestation of a particular perspective on religion and the existence of God? Given the charges of heresy and atheism to which Hume's authorship of this book gave rise when he sought an academic appointment at Edinburgh University, it might be thought that here at least we should find some clear-cut evidence of Hume's willingness to argue against the truth of theism and Christianity. However, this book actually contains

[8] In the introductory remarks assigned to Pamphilus, he refers to Cleanthes' 'accurate philosophical turn', Philo's 'careless scepticism' and Demea's 'rigid inflexible orthodoxy' (1779, 128). And Cleanthes emerges in the course of the *Dialogues* as the principal defender of the design argument and of the moral significance of religious belief.

very few references to God and no references to Christianity. Most commentators since the beginning of the twentieth century have, in fact, taken the view that the version of the *Treatise* that went forward to publication is so written as to avoid direct engagement with any central issues about the content, justification, or consequences of religious belief.

This interpretation is often backed by an appeal to Hume's private comments about the *Treatise*. In a letter to Henry Home (later to become Lord Kames) dated 2 December 1737, Hume refers to his decision to excise from the *Treatise* a discussion of miracles:

> Having a frankt letter, I was resolved to make use of it; and accordingly inclose some *Reasonings concerning Miracles*,[9] which I once thought of publishing with the rest, but which I am afraid will give too much offence, even as the world is disposed at present. (1932, I, 24)

And Hume goes on to discuss his wish to have the *Treatise* read and commented on by the noted Anglican theologian Joseph Butler, who would later become Bishop of Bristol and Dean of St Paul's Cathedral. According to Hume, this would not be advisable in advance of some changes to the draft text:

> Your thoughts and mine agree with respect to Dr Butler, and I would be glad to be introduced to him. I am at present castrating my work, that is, cutting off its nobler parts; that is, endeavouring it shall give as little offence as possible, before which, I could not pretend to place it into the Doctor's hands. This is a piece of cowardice, for which I blame myself, though I believe none of my friends will blame me. But I was resolved not to be an enthusiast in philosophy, while I was blaming other enthusiasms. (1932, II, 25)

One of the ironies of this letter is that it indicates that Hume did originally have something fairly controversial to say about religion in the *Treatise* while also suggesting that this contentious material is no longer to be found in the text. Moreover, it seems clear from Hume's wording that this process of self-censorship went beyond removing from the *Treatise* his discussion of the evidential value of reports of miracles: according to Hume, he has already excised the proposed section on miracles but he is still in the process of removing other material that might offend Butler's religious susceptibilities. Of course it might turn out to be the case that careful exploration of the *Treatise* and its immediate intellectual context would reveal that Hume's changes to the text were primarily intended simply to introduce an element of disguise to a work that remained centrally concerned with questions of religion. If so, then it has to be admitted that this strategy of concealment has proved highly effective over the past hundred years or so. The remaining explicit references to God appear thoroughly innocuous, and in one passage we even seem to encounter yet another endorsement of the design argument.

> The order of the universe proves an omnipotent mind; that is, a mind whose will is *constantly attended* with the obedience of every creature and being. Nothing more is requisite to give a foundation to all the articles of religion, nor is it necessary we shou'd form a distinct idea of the force and energy of the supreme Being. (1739, 1.3.14.12n30App./633n1)

[9] This material presumably constituted an early draft of the line of argument that would eventually be set out in 'Of Miracles', Section 10 of the *Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*.

Even when we turn from Hume's publications and extant private letters to anecdotes about his actions and opinions recorded by people who knew him personally, it remains true that Hume hardly conforms to any stereotypical image of an enemy of Christianity and an outright denier of God's existence. Many of Hume's friends, for example, were clergymen in the Church of Scotland. In a letter despatched from Paris in 1765, Hume writes:

> I am in debt to all my Friends in Letters, and shall ever be so; but what strikes me chiefly with Remorse are my great and enormous Debts to the Clergy. By this Neglect of my Protestant Pastors, you will begin to suspect that I am turning Papist. But to acquit myself at once, allow me to write you a common Letter (1932, I, 495).

Hume then addresses in turn Drs Robertson, Jardine, Carlyle, Ferguson and Blair. And some of the jokes exchanged in letters between Hume and these friends indicate a remarkable level of intimacy and a very relaxed attitude about theological and Church issues.[10] Moreover, this close friendship and respect for each other's moral character and intellectual abilities is amply confirmed by the many recollections that still survive of the good-humoured conversation and practical jokes that prevailed at dinners and other social events hosted by or attended by Hume.[11]

It is also the case that Hume appears to have had no strong aversion to attending church services and sermons. Hume mentions attending such services in his letters (1932, I, 444, 509), and his friends and acquaintances also provide reports of these occasions (see Mossner 1980, 575–6, and Fieser 2005, II, 220). Moreover, despite his authorship in 1751 of the satirical *Petition of the Grave and Venerable Bellmen, or Sextons, of the Church of Scotland*, a brief work that attacked the attempt of the clerical members of the Church of Scotland to secure an increase in their stipends (see 1932, I, 149, and Mossner 1980, 234–6), Hume was apparently quite prepared to defend public spending on religious buildings. Confronted with the remark that St Paul's Cathedral was a foolish waste of money, Hume is reported to have replied, 'St. Paul's, as a monument of the religious feeling and sentiment of the country, does it honour, and will endure' (Mossner 1980, 545). Even more curiously, there is some evidence that Hume used his own money to facilitate church attendance amongst members of his own household.[12]

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[10] Perhaps the most extraordinary instance of this playful rapport can be found in a letter from the Reverend John Jardine to Hume during Hume's time in Paris as acting Embassy Secretary (Hume 1932, II, 353): 'Believe me, all those fine Ladys of Wit & Beauty, you speak of with so much Rapture, are all Devils. I dont say, that they have that antient visible Symbol of the demoniacal presence, by which Satan was discovered in former times, viz the Cloven foot; The Devil is grown a great deal more cunning than he was in the Days of our Forefathers, and therefore that this diabolical Mark, may be the better concealed, he has placed it more out of Sight; but tho' it is not now so easily seen as it was, yet it may be as easily felt, if you make diligent Search for it'.

[11] See, for example, the entertaining accounts of Edinburgh society offered by such contemporaries of Hume as the Reverend Alexander Carlyle and Henry Mackenzie (Fieser 2005, II, 216–27 & 259–63 respectively).

[12] John Burton Hill, whose biography of Hume includes numerous anecdotes obtained from relatives of Hume's friends, provides the following piece of testimony on this matter: 'Those who know him solely by his philosophical reputation, will perhaps believe him to have been *parcus*

It is not surprising, therefore, that there is considerable dispute over how best to characterize the position with regard to religious issues and the existence of God that is being defended within Hume's writings. The implications of Hume's arguments often seem to point strongly towards atheism, and his comments about the influence of religion as made manifest in the society around him and throughout history are almost invariably negative. Nevertheless, the details of Hume's life and the nuanced nature of his philosophical discourse combine to give the impression of a thinker whose views in this area fail to fit neatly into the standard categories of belief and disbelief that were familiar to his contemporaries or even those categories to which we might naturally turn today.

1.3 Some Modern Interpretations

A brief survey of the interpretations that still command significant support amongst present-day commentators on Hume amply confirms how much uncertainty remains about even the broad outline of the stance that is really being defended in Hume's writings. One striking line of interpretation is boldly advanced by Donald Livingston. He maintains that Hume holds that 'the highest achievement of philosophical reflection is philosophical theism' (1998, 71). In Livingston's judgement, '*The Natural History of Religion* and the *Dialogues* are works of true philosophy in that they attempt to "methodize and correct" our idea of divinity in the direction of the sublime and ennobling idea of philosophical theism' (ibid.). Despite drawing attention to what he describes as Philo's 'devastating arguments against natural theology', Livingston affirms that 'Hume is a theist, not an atheist' (ibid., 78). This interpretation coheres well with Charles Hendel's contention that Hume's writings manifest a sympathetic assessment of the views of religious thinkers like Berkeley and Butler, and that Hume should be seen as endorsing Pamphilus's final adjudication in the *Dialogues* that 'I cannot but think, that Philo's principles are more probable than Demea's; but that those of Cleanthes approach still nearer to the truth' (1779, 12.228). Hendel claims that:

> All the difficulties which Philo has raised do not get rid of the hypothesis of design …. But the only position we have so far is this anthropomorphic theism proposed by Cleanthes. It is the one that we must accept, in lieu of any better system of thought. This is the provisional

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deorum cultor et infrequens [a sparing and infrequent worshipper of the gods]. But this does not seem to have been the case, at least in his outward conduct. We find him, in writing home from France, casually mentioning his not having seen Elliot's sons "in church;" and on another occasion making a like allusion, indicative of his having been a pretty regular attendant at the ambassador's chapel. He is said to have been fond of Dr. Robertson's preaching, and not averse to that of his colleague, John Erskine. A lady, distinguished in literature, remembers that in a conversation with a respectable tradesman's wife, who had been a servant to Hume, she said that her master one day asked her very seriously, why she was never seen in church, where he had provided seats for all his household' (1846, 2.452–3).

> conclusion which Hume had in mind, when he spoke to Elliot of making Cleanthes the hero of his argument. (1925, 347)[13]

In contrast, John Gaskin, the author of a highly respected full-length study of Hume's philosophy of religion, is adamant (1988, 245n22) that any claim that Hume's final position was a theistic one 'is on the face of things, and using "theistic" in any accepted sense, simply false'.

It might be suggested, however, that this particular disagreement is primarily a verbal dispute. Livingston is, after all, careful to present Hume as endorsing only 'philosophical theism' rather than popular theism. So perhaps the position Livingston is ascribing to Hume is actually one that Hume's contemporaries, at least, would have categorized as some form of deism.

How, then, would an eighteenth-century thinker in Europe or in Britain's North American colonies have characterized the difference between theism and deism? Samuel Johnson's *Dictionary* asserts that deism is 'the opinion of those that only acknowledge one God, without the reception of any revealed religion' (1755). And Nathan Bailey's *Dictionarium Britannicum* defines deists as:

> a Sect among the Christians of most of all Denominations, who believe there is one God, a Providence, the Immortality of the Soul, Virtue and Vice, rewards and Punishments; but reject Revelation, and believe no more than what natural Light discovers to them, nor any article of the Christian Religion or any other. (1736)

According to these definitions, then, a deist is someone who accepts that God exists but denies or suspends judgement on the existence of any divinely inspired tradition or message that tells us more about the nature and purposes of this being than can be discovered through the application of our ordinary human powers of observation and reasoning.[14] A theist, in contrast, endorses the existence of one God and also believes that this being has communicated directly with human beings in order to reveal truths about himself that extend beyond the conclusions that can be reached by the unaided human intellect.

These definitions are, of course, not particularly useful if we lack a reasonably robust account of the sense of the word 'God'. Providing such an account is sometimes seen as an immensely complicated and difficult task: however, that view seems to be based on an unhelpful conflation of an exercise in lexicography with the far more challenging attempt to grasp at least partially what would allow a being to possess the powers and nature traditionally ascribed to God. As Richard Swinburne points out in *The Existence of God*:

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[13] Hume's letter to Gilbert Elliot of 10 March 1751 reads: 'Dear Sir, You wou'd perceive by the Sample I have given you, that I make Cleanthes the Hero of the Dialogue. Whatever you can think of, to Strengthen that side of the Argument, will be most acceptable to me. Any Propensity you imagine I have to the other Side, crept in upon me against my Will' (1932, I, 153–4).

[14] It is interesting to note that theists often like to speak of 'mere human reason'. Given their own world-view, however, human reason is a gift from the benevolent and omnipotent creator of everything that exists. It should therefore be a superbly designed and potent instrument for the discovery of the truth about our place in the world and our relation to God.

> Most people have usually supposed that they understood in some very vague way what it meant to say that there was a God; and, so long as they supposed that human words were only a rough guide to what was claimed, that the claim was not demonstrably incoherent. (2004, 1)

Making due allowance, then, for the need to reflect the level of vagueness and ambiguity that is genuinely present in the usage of this portentous and emotionally-charged term, it seems potentially helpful to take as our starting point a rare moment of convergence between one of today's most controversial atheist authors and a similarly uncompromising advocate of theism. In the course of trying to defend the view that there almost certainly is a God, Keith Ward endorses Richard Dawkins' account in *The God Delusion* of what is being asserted when it is said that God exists.

> Dawkins begins by stating the God hypothesis: 'there exists a superhuman, supernatural intelligence who deliberately designed and created the universe and everything in it, including us'. This is one of the few statements he makes about God that I entirely agree with. The question for discussion, then, is whether the God hypothesis is reasonable and true. (Ward 2008, 11)

Initially, then, we might attempt to define theism, as this was understood by Hume's contemporaries, as an acceptance of Dawkins' God hypothesis combined with a belief in direct divine revelation. Deism would then amount to an acceptance of the God hypothesis that is not supplemented by any belief in such divine revelation. But although this is a good start, it is still not fully satisfactory as an account of eighteenth-century usage. At the very least we would need to add to the theist's commitments a belief in the moral excellence of this supernatural intelligence and its active interest in promoting both the collective and individual welfare of human beings. Moreover, a suitably inclusive definition of deism would need to make allowance for deists who saw organic life, orderly planetary systems, and other sophisticated kinds of order as arising from a combination of a supernatural intelligence and a supply of raw material in the form of a co-eternal, uncreated physical substratum. With these refinements in place, however, we do have a way of elucidating the theist/deist dichotomy that conforms closely to educated usage in Hume's era.[15]

Are we now able to confirm, then, that the 'philosophical theism' ascribed to Hume by Livingston is really a form of what Hume's contemporaries would have confidently identified as deism? If so, this would generate some substantial convergence with Gaskin's interpretation of Hume, because Gaskin holds, as we will discuss later in this section, that Hume's writings are best seen as implicitly defending a minimal form of deism. Some of what Livingston says about 'philosophical theism' lends credibility to the notion of such a rapprochement. He maintains that whereas popular theism has its origins in fear and ignorance, the

[15] Although the debate between theism and deism was one of the principal intellectual and religious controversies of the eighteenth century, it appears to retain very little vitality today. Most people who now embrace a belief-system that conforms to what would once have been categorized as deism would identify themselves as theists, and that classification is one that would also be applied to them by most agnostics and atheists.

version of theism that he is attributing to Hume has its origins in 'the unrelenting pursuit of the truth and in the greatness of mind inseparable from that pursuit' (1998, 73). Moreover, in terms of its content, Livingston places great emphasis on the conviction that the universe is an intelligible and entirely orderly system that lies open to human investigation.

> True religion is, first of all, an order of sentiments which naturally arise when the philosopher achieves the thought that what is experienced ('the visible system') constitutes a systematic whole. Just as the experience of constant conjunction prompts the belief in invisible causal power, so the idea of the whole of reality prompts the belief that experience is the result of purposive intelligence, and that this intelligence is 'single and undivided'. (ibid., 73)

Ultimately, however, Livingston's comments about the relationship between 'philosophical theism' and revelation preclude us from interpreting him as ascribing to Hume an outlook compatible with a deist perspective. Treating Philo as serving as Hume's spokesman on this matter, Livingston claims that in Part 12 of the *Dialogues* Philo sets before us 'a defensible philosophical path whereby the philosopher can return to a revealed religious tradition' (1998, 78). Livingston accepts that 'Philo does not argue that a philosophical theist must participate in a revealed tradition', but he does insist that Philo maintains 'that there is a justifiable philosophical inclination to do so'. The deists of Hume's era, in marked contrast, were united in rejecting reliance on religious tradition and putative revelation as independent sources of legitimation for beliefs about a divine being.

Attributions of theism in an eighteenth-century sense to Hume by present-day commentators are sufficiently rare to have made Livingstone's views worthy of sustained attention. A far more popular line of interpretation, however, maintains that the position implicitly espoused within Hume's writings is one that his contemporaries would have classified as deism.

This interpretation was often associated before the publication of Kemp Smith's formidably erudite edition of the *Dialogues* with the supposition that the character of Cleanthes was the principal representative within that work of Hume's considered views.[16] Cleanthes' arguments throughout the *Dialogues* are entirely compatible with the supposition that he unreservedly embraces not only the God hypothesis as this is construed by Ward and Dawkins but also the further theses that God is benevolent and takes an active interest in human welfare. So if we treat the natural theology of Cleanthes as corresponding in its essentials to Hume's own perspective and we are impressed by the thought that Hume's discussion in the *Enquiry* of the evidential value of miracle reports seems incompatible with the supposition that he wishes to defend belief in any form of direct divine revelation, we are led to the conclusion that Hume's aim is to build a case for a very strong form of deism.

Since the appearance of Kemp Smith's detailed analysis of the *Dialogues*, the exegetical consensus has changed to the view that the figure in this work who comes closest to expressing the views Hume ultimately wishes to defend is Philo.

[16] Kemp Smith's commentary includes an extensive list of previous interpreters who had supposed that Hume's views are predominantly those expressed by Cleanthes (1779, 58–59).

Unfortunately it is notoriously the case that most readers find it very difficult to reconcile the stance assigned to Philo in Part 12 of the *Dialogues* with the impression of his position that emerges from the earlier sections. Until we reach Part 12, Philo appears to be committed to the view that the design argument is probatively useless. But Part 12 begins with an unexpected reversal. Instead of being a remorseless critic of the design argument, Philo is now presented as someone who embraces the argument. According to Philo:

> 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, as at all times to reject it. (1779, 12.214)

If we suppose that these remarks need to be fitted into a coherent intellectual stance that can plausibly be seen as Philo's underlying position throughout the *Dialogues*, and we take the view that he is not merely the character who has the most in common with Hume but is actually Hume's spokesman in this work, then the most plausible interpretative route to take would seem to be one that sees Hume as someone who is arguing that a designing intelligence probably does exist but who also endorses as many of Philo's apparent reservations about the design argument as can be made compatible with this acceptance of the existence of a designer. Even if the hypothesis that the order and means-end adaptation in the universe are the products of an intelligent designer is true, this does not, for example, entail the truth of the hypothesis that they are products of an intelligent and benevolent designer. Nor does it require us to accept that they are the products of an intelligent designer who wishes to be worshipped by us or has issued any instructions or laws to us.

Significantly, then, Philo's criticisms of the supposition that the intelligent agent postulated on the basis of the design argument can also be shown to possess such qualities as omni-benevolence and universal compassion have struck many readers as substantially more powerful than Cleanthes' rather anaemic and stumbling attempts at defending this supposition. Moreover, it is very noticeable that Hume portrays Philo as especially confident about the power of his arguments in this area.

> Here, CLEANTHES, I find myself at ease in my argument. Here I triumph … there is no view of human life, or of the condition of mankind, from which, without the greatest violence, we can infer the moral attributes, or learn that infinite benevolence, conjoined with infinite power and infinite wisdom, which we must discover by the eyes of faith alone. It is your turn now to tug the labouring oar, and to support your philosophical subtilties against the dictates of plain reason and experience. (1779, 10.201–2)

Similarly, Philo's final summary of what can be achieved in this area by human reasoning, even after his fulsome late praise of the design argument and his apparent rapprochement with Cleanthes, still leaves us far removed from any endorsement of the principles of strong deism. Philo indicates that some people maintain that the whole of natural theology can be condensed 'into one simple … proposition, *that the cause or causes of order in the universe probably bear some remote analogy to human intelligence*' (1779, 12.227). And Philo goes on to

imply that if we remain with this bare and unadorned claim, then it is a claim that is a legitimate object of assent.

> If it afford no inference that affects human life, or can be the source of any action or forbearance: And if the analogy, imperfect as it is, can be carried no farther than to the human intelligence; and cannot be transferred, with any appearance of probability, to the other qualities of the mind: If this really be the case, what can the most inquisitive, contemplative, and religious man do more than give a plain, philosophical assent to the proposition, as often as it occurs; and believe that the arguments, on which it is established, exceed the objections which lie against it. (ibid.)

Reflection on the foregoing points has persuaded several influential commentators to interpret Hume as arguing in favour of a position that Gaskin neatly terms 'attenuated deism'. According to Gaskin, the metaphysical content of this form of deism is minimal in the extreme, and it amounts to a decisive rejection of a god with whom it is possible to have a personal relationship.

> This position is that a vestigial design argument establishes a weak probability that natural order originates in the activity of something with intelligence remotely analogous to our own. This feeble *rational* datum is united with an insistent feeling in most of us that natural order springs from a designer. When our philosophical assent to the existence of this designer has been given … we recognize that it has no moral claim upon us, nor we upon it. I call this position 'attenuated deism'. (1988, 6–7)

A similar interpretation of Hume's position is offered by both Kemp Smith (1947) and O'Connor (2001). All three authors are at pains to emphasize that this minimalist form of deism does not necessarily involve any kind of religious convictions or feelings, and they are all united in agreeing that the adult Hume did not have a religious world-view. The deism that is being ascribed here to Hume amounts to nothing more than an undogmatic causal hypothesis about the probable origins of certain conspicuous aspects of the universe in which we find ourselves: embracing that hypothesis is of no more moral consequence than assenting to the existence of quarks and dissent from the hypothesis is not something that any well-adjusted person would regard as an appropriate occasion for anger or legal sanctions.

Even attenuated deism, however, is seen by some commentators as a stance that Hume eschews as going beyond the limits of what our evidence entitles us to believe. For these interpreters, Hume's writings are best seen as an attempt to defend a stance of agnosticism.

James Noxon connects this agnosticism to Hume's analysis of causal reasoning and his opinions about the limits of causal explanation. In the *Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*, Hume offers a strikingly deflationary account of what causal explanation can achieve:

> It is confessed, that the utmost effort of human reason is, to reduce the principles, productive of natural phænomena, to a greater simplicity, and to resolve the many particular effects into a few general causes, by means of reasonings from analogy, experience, and observation. But as to the causes of these general causes, we should in vain attempt their discovery; nor shall we ever be able to satisfy ourselves, by any particular explication of them. These ultimate springs and principles are totally shut up from human curiosity and enquiry. (1772a, 4.12/30)

Noxon interprets this and similar passages in Hume's writings as painting a picture of a universe that acts in accordance with a small number of general principles that cannot be further reduced by human inquiry to a unitary, self-explanatory principle. There might be some hidden form of agency, like the will of a deity, underlying these principles; but if there is, it is not something that we are in a position to affirm. Equally, it is not a possibility that we can definitively rule out. Speculation on the topic might be an entertaining diversion in the right literary and conversational contexts, but firm opinions about ultimate agents and powers, especially opinions leading to rancorous disputes with other people, should be eschewed by any sensible person. From Noxon's perspective, the conclusion to which we are ultimately led by Hume's arguments is that 'the only tenable position on the questions discussed in the *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion* is agnosticism' (1968, 376–7).

Another defender of the view that Hume's writings implicitly constitute a sustained defence of an agnostic perspective, at least with regard to issues of what it is reasonable to believe, is Keith Yandell. According to Yandell (1990, 3), Hume holds that 'no one is ever reasonable in accepting a religious belief' because no religious belief can be reasonable without evidence and 'there is no evidence for any religious belief'. However, this lack of evidence for religious beliefs does nothing to show that there is positive evidence in favour of an atheistic world-view, and the same considerations that indicate that religious beliefs cannot qualify as reasonable unless supported by evidence seem to imply that an atheistic world-view also requires to be backed by evidence if it is to be reasonable. Anyone guided by reason in the sense of cleaving only to reasonable beliefs would therefore suspend judgement on the dispute between religion and atheism. We therefore arrive at an important Humean conclusion: the reasonable person is an agnostic.

Yandell emphasizes, however, that we cannot automatically infer that Hume recommends suspension of judgement in accordance with his understanding of what a reasonable person would do. In the *Natural History of Religion* Hume gives an account of pervasive human mental propensities that push people towards forming and retaining religious beliefs even when such beliefs are not genuinely reasonable. Yandell summarizes this account in the following terms:

> religion's lack of secure foundation in human reason does not affect its continuing presence in human affairs because religious belief has its origin in secondary propensities of human nature—propensities that operate in an evidence-irrelevant manner. Religious belief, not being based on natural theology, survives the collapse of natural theology. (1990, 39)

It is quite possible, then, that Hume would accept that a person might retain some vestigial religious beliefs even if that person were simultaneously to lack any inclination to regard those beliefs as reasonable ones. And this possibility plays an important role in shaping Yandell's final interpretation of the stance defended by Hume: Hume emerges as someone who argues that suspension of judgement is the only reasonable position but who also acknowledges that very few people are genuinely able to rid themselves completely of an inclination to think in terms of the order and means-end adaptation displayed by the universe as flowing from some kind of intelligent agent even when they accept intellectually that this inclination is an unreasonable one. The difference between this interpretation of Hume's position

and the supposition that Hume is best thought of as defending an attenuated form of deism is that Yandell represents Hume as thinking of the obdurate religious beliefs arising from this inclination as ones that a fully reasonable person would abandon in favour of suspension of judgement whereas the attenuated deist interpretation regards Hume as maintaining that a bare belief in an intelligent designer is actually more reasonable than disbelief.

Could it be the case, however, that even the supposition that Hume's writings articulate a combative form of agnosticism fails to capture adequately the full extent of Hume's repudiation of a religious world-view? Undergraduate philosophy students who are introduced to the *Dialogues* after becoming familiar with the content of the *Enquiry concerning Human Understanding* frequently leap without any external prompting to the conclusion that Hume is arguing in favour of atheism. In the light of some of the points made in Sect. 1.2 of this chapter, it is perhaps tempting to dismiss this as a naïve interpretation that betrays a lack of real attention to the details of the text. However, an increasing sensitivity on the part of commentators to the existence of a tradition of covert atheism in Britain from the mid-seventeenth century onwards has given renewed respectability to what was, as we have already noted, an interpretation of Hume's writings that was widespread amongst his contemporaries.

The author primarily responsible for the attention being given to early covert atheism is David Berman. In his pioneering work *A History of Atheism in Britain: From Hobbes to Russell*, Berman carefully articulates the social and legal pressures that forced early atheists in Britain to present their atheism in an indirect and oblique manner. As well as making a plausible case for interpreting such thinkers as Hobbes, Anthony Collins, and Albert Radicati as covert atheists rather than deists or unorthodox Christians, Berman sets before us the specific tactics and devices pressed into service by the radical freethinkers of this period to express their views while retaining some protection against persecution. And once these stratagems have been brought to our attention, it becomes very noticeable that Hume's published discussions of religion are suspiciously full of instances where Hume writes in a manner as though he is employing such well-entrenched tactics of concealment.

Berman himself concludes that Hume's writings are examples of an agnostic perspective concealed within a vocabulary that superficially appears to give the victory to theism (see 1990, 103). However, his investigations have undermined much of the evidence that was once seen as ruling out an interpretation of Hume as defending an atheistic position.[17] Thus there is now far more space for well-considered and thoughtful accounts of Hume's discussions of religion that view these as constructing a case for atheism in the sense of a positive belief that God does not exist.[18]

[17] The current status of some of this supposed evidence is a topic that will be discussed further in Sect. 2.3.

[18] The etymology of the word 'atheist' suggests that it refers simply to someone who is devoid of belief in a deity or multiple deities. However, the introduction by Thomas Huxley in the nineteenth century of the word 'agnostic' (see 1992, 160–4) as a way of describing someone who simply suspends judgement on the issue, and who consequently does not possess the positive belief that no deity exists, has led to a pattern of usage in Britain that reserves the term 'atheist' almost exclusively for people who hold that positive belief. This usage is the one that will be followed on all relevant occasions in the present work.

One commentator who has switched from a previous interpretation of Hume as an advocate of attenuated deism to the view that Hume is probably putting forward arguments for embracing atheism is Terence Penelhum. In his paper 'Religion in the *Enquiry*', Penelhum claims that the position allocated by Hume to Philo in the *Dialogues* is less radical than Hume's own position: according to Penelhum, 'Hume is ascribing a minimal, though still positive position to Philo, but is hinting at a more negative position on his own part' (2000, 241). And the more negative position that Penelhum is envisaging here is atheism, albeit a very tentative and undogmatic atheism.

> Is Hume, then, a closet atheist? I think that this is the likeliest possibility if we are trying to guess at his probable private opinions. But it is alien to his sceptical mind to think that we can have sound reasons to accept a view that tells us so definitely what the universe does not contain. (ibid., 242)

Given Penelhum's observation about Hume's sceptical disposition, it is not entirely clear why he supposes that Hume is implicitly engaged in a defence of atheism rather than agnosticism. The latter stance would seem to cohere better with Hume's general pessimism about the intellectual powers of human beings, and it would still be a more radical posture than attenuated deism. Nevertheless, the exegetical approach underlying Penelhum's interpretation seems a sensible one: the context in which Hume is writing on religion means that it is highly likely that he has engaged in a certain amount of dissimulation intended to allow him to make his way more easily in the world and to provide a means of defence against prosecution for blasphemy. Thus we need to be aware of the need to look below the surface features and nominal conclusions of Hume's discussions in order to see what judgements about God and religious belief are actually intended to be supported by his arguments.

This awareness is very much on display in Andrew Pyle's analysis of the *Dialogues* in *Hume's Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* (2006). Pyle readily acknowledges that the text is a deeply ambiguous one that makes it difficult to settle on an interpretation that is substantially more plausible than all of its competitors. However, he also seems to take the view that a reading of Hume as engaged in an oblique defence of atheism has a substantial degree of credibility and is at least as plausible as any equally detailed rival supposition.

Pyle argues that the key to interpreting the *Dialogues* as an atheistic work is recognizing that it can be seen as attempting to impale the theist or deist on an implicit dilemma (ibid., 130–1). This dilemma is whether to accept or reject the analogy proposed in the *Dialogues* between God and the human mind. Cleanthes argues vigorously against Demea that if we reject this anthropomorphic analogy, then our attempts to give sense to talk of God and divine activity inevitably fail. This, of course, does not lead to Cleanthes being assigned any negative conclusion about God's existence because Cleanthes is presented as holding that we should accept the analogy between the mind of God and the human mind. Philo, in contrast, seems inclined to side with Demea on the dangers of endorsing this analogy and also launches what is readily construed as a devastating attack on the pretensions of a design argument when used in conjunction with the anthropomorphic analogy favoured by Cleanthes. Nevertheless, Hume is careful to refrain from assigning to Philo any negative conclusions about God's existence. Philo avoids

such conclusions partly because he is not portrayed as fully endorsing Cleanthes' constraints on meaningful discourse about God, and partly because he is allowed in Part 12 of the *Dialogues* to renege, with a noticeable lack of a compelling explanation, on some of his earlier criticisms of the design argument. But if one puts together Cleanthes' negative arguments with the negative arguments paraded so aggressively by Philo before the final part of the *Dialogues*, we have a seemingly powerful argument against God's existence. Pyle accordingly sums up the case for interpreting Hume as a covert defender of atheism as follows:

> of course you won't find this argument against theism spelled out anywhere in the text. But read the clever way in which Hume has Philo play Cleanthes off against Demea, and Demea against Cleanthes, and judge for yourself the merits of this 'atheistic' interpretation of the *Dialogues*. (2006, 132)

It is readily apparent, then, that thoughtful commentators who have paid close attention to Hume's writings on religion have found themselves in substantial disagreement over even such an apparently crucial issue as whether these writings do or do not constitute an endorsement of what we have been calling the God hypothesis. The weight of present-day opinion does admittedly lie behind the judgement that Hume is arguing against the existence of a God with moral qualities analogous to human virtues, but even this is disputed by Livingston and others. And, as we have already noted, the supposition that Hume's writings reveal him to be someone who embraces a strong form of deism enjoyed considerable popularity in the period after Hume's death and before Kemp Smith's edition of the *Dialogues*. Similarly, there are some commentators who believe that Hume's apparently complimentary references to 'true religion' indicate that he should be seen as possessing something at least similar to full-blooded religious sentiments (Livingston 1998; Sessions 2002), whereas the majority view is that he either lacks such sentiments or is actively hostile towards all forms of religion (see Kemp Smith 1947; Gaskin 1988; Craig 1997; Russell 2008). It seems, therefore, that it would be advisable for any fresh attempt at providing a comprehensive account of Hume's views on religion to set out not just the positive case for a particular interpretation of Hume's position but also a satisfactory explanation of why Hume's writings provide so much scope for seemingly plausible rival interpretations.

1.4 The Way Forward

The controversy between theism and deism on the one hand and atheism and materialism on the other hand is often seen as a manifestation of a fundamental disagreement about the place of intelligent mind within the ultimate nature of reality (see Ward 2008, 12). Theists usually accept that there is a physical world with its own genuine form of reality but they maintain that this physical world was brought into existence by a non-physical mind of extraordinary power and intelligence. Many deists take the same view, though it is not uncommon for deists to embrace the supposition that the physical world is itself uncreated and eternal but has been shaped

and ordered by a non-physical mind. Atheism, in contrast, usually sees matter and the physical world as more fundamental than mind, and materialism affirms either that everything that exists has at least one physical property ('weak' materialism) or that everything that exists has only physical properties ('strong' materialism).

In this book we will argue that Hume's writings express a stance of suspension of judgement in respect of the ultimate status of mind relative to other aspects of reality. In particular, Hume defends an agnostic position on the issue of whether the order and means-end adaptation observable in the world around us is best explained by postulating that it is the product of one or a small number of powerful intelligences that are more similar to a human mind than they are to any set of processes that would not normally be construed as constituting a mind (hereafter the Mindedness Hypothesis). Confronted by this highly abstract and metaphysical question, Hume can see no good philosophical reasons or indeed everyday reasons for favouring either a negative or a positive answer. And in the absence of any such reasons, Hume finds himself unable to hold any settled opinion on the topic.

The interpretation of Hume's writings as expressing an agnostic position on this fundamental issue coheres well with Hume's reservations towards the end of the *Enquiry concerning Human Understanding* about attempts to extend our inquiries too far.

> The *imagination* of man is naturally sublime, delighted with whatever is remote and extraordinary, and running, without controul, into the most distant parts of space and time …. A correct *Judgment* observes a contrary method, and avoiding all distant and high enquiries, confines itself to common life, and to such subjects as fall under daily practice and experience; leaving the more sublime topics to the embellishment of poets and orators, or to the arts of priests and politicians. (1772a, 12.25/162)

However, if Hume does indeed regard suspension of judgement as the appropriate response to questions about whether the order and means-end adaptation displayed within the universe probably have their ultimate origins in processes that resemble a human mind more closely than they resemble non-minds, this would appear to commit him, at least by everyday standards of acceptable reasoning, to rejecting as probably false any particular attempt to be more specific about the kind of intelligence at work here. Yet both theism and strong deism clearly do advance more specific claims about this intelligence's nature and purposes. And even attenuated deism tends to be associated with the view that the intelligent source of order and means-end adaptation in the universe is not dependent for its existence on the existence of the universe it orders and shapes. Consequently our contention that Hume is defending an agnostic stance with respect to the Mindedness Hypothesis is not only compatible with but actually supports the judgement that Hume holds that it is unlikely that the truth about the ultimate source of order in the universe falls within the range of options represented by theism, strong deism, and non-immanent forms of attenuated deism.

One important means of defending this interpretation is through the identification and evaluation of the specific arguments found in Hume's writings. If, for example, an argument in support of theism ascribed to Cleanthes turns out to be stronger than any balancing argument against theism presented elsewhere in the

Dialogues, this would tell against the supposition that Hume is engaged in constructing a case against theism. So we will be arguing that the cumulative force, at an everyday level, of the arguments brought forward by Hume is such that even the weakest and hence most defensible version of the Mindedness Hypothesis is no better supported than the supposition that this hypothesis is false. And having gone that far, we will at times look at argumentative moves that have become popular since Hume's death and which are alleged by their proponents to undermine Hume's agnosticism. Our contention will be that these argumentative innovations are less effective than is generally supposed by present-day religious apologists: Hume's own arguments still seem to remain an excellent starting-point for anyone wishing to construct a strong case, in terms of everyday standards of good reasoning and evidence, against the supposition that we should abandon agnosticism about the Mindedness Hypothesis in favour of theism or any form of deism.

Identifying the full import of Hume's arguments, however, requires us to examine carefully the social and legal context within which Hume was putting forward his writings on religion, and this task will be undertaken in the next two chapters. In Chap. 2 we will look at the pressures and forms of repression that confronted any eighteenth-century thinker wishing to challenge publicly the truth of Christian theism. And we will be particularly concerned to uncover evidence that specifically bears on Hume's personal response to both formal and informal modes of religious censorship. Then in Chap. 3 we turn to the issue of the interrelationships between the various works of Hume's that discuss religion. Unless a reader has a firm grasp on the overall pattern displayed by these writings, there is a significant danger of being misled by Hume's much-used presentational device of engaging in destructive critiques of particular elements of the religious world-view while affecting orthodoxy in areas not of immediate concern to him. Taken cumulatively, however, Hume's arguments appear to leave very few elements of such a world-view unchallenged.

Chapter 2
Blasphemy, Dissimulation, and Humean Prudence

2.1 Persecution and Prosecution

Hume's discussions of religion and the supposed metaphysical truths underlying religious beliefs appeared in print at a time when public utterances or published writings denying the truth of Christianity were liable to legal prosecution in Britain and elsewhere in Europe as blasphemy. Moreover, the penalties that could be inflicted on an author or publisher remained severe even though the power of the self-proclaimed religion of love to engage in the judicial murder of its critics had, at least in Britain, atrophied to the point of permanent disuse.[1]

In the seventeenth century a person rash enough to engage in explicit or implicit public attacks on supposedly fundamental Christian doctrines would have been in danger, even in England, of being executed as a heretic. Thomas Hobbes, for example, found his life seriously threatened on grounds of irreligion and imputed atheism despite the numerous references to God and Scripture contained within his writings. John Aubrey (1626–1697) provides us with an account of the most serious incident.

> There was a report (and surely true) that in Parliament, not long after the King was settled [at the Restoration], some of the bishops made a motion to have the good old gentleman [Hobbes] burnt for a heretic. Which he hearing, feared that his papers might be searched by their order, and he told me he had burnt part of them. (1898, 153)

Hobbes survived this campaign against him, and eventually died peacefully in his bed at the age of 91 without seeing a priest or taking the sacrament (Tuck 2002, 48).

Hobbes died in 1679, and by then 2 years had passed since the final and decisive abolition in England of the death penalty for heresy and all other offences solely directed against religion (see Bonner 1934, 20). In Scotland, on the other hand, Thomas Aikenhead, a student at the University of Edinburgh aged only 20, was

[1] In Scotland the death penalty remained a legally sanctioned punishment for blasphemy throughout the eighteenth century even though no one was actually executed for this offence after 1697. It was formally abolished only in 1813. See Walter 1990, 32–3, 45.

A. Bailey and D. O'Brien, *Hume's Critique of Religion: 'Sick Men's Dreams'*,
The New Synthese Historical Library 72, DOI 10.1007/978-94-007-6615-0_2,

hanged for blasphemy as late as 1697 after making some remarks calling into question the divine authority of the Gospels (Hunter 1992, 221–6). This was the last judicial execution anywhere in Britain for the offences of blasphemy or heresy, although it is worth noting that supposed witches were still being executed in Scotland in the early years of the eighteenth century (Walter 1990, 26). In continental Europe, however, the tradition of legally sanctioned killing in support of Christianity, or some self-serving denomination of this religion, lingered on rather longer. In a case commented on by Hume himself,[2] the Chevalier de La Barre was beheaded in France on July 1, 1766 having been formally condemned as 'an execrable and abominable impious and sacrilegious person, and blasphemer' (Cabantous 2002, 128). Local political manoeuvrings in the town of Abbeville seem to have played a part in the initial prosecution, but Alain Cabantous reports that several of the magistrates in the Parlement of Paris maintained that La Barre and his alleged accomplices had 'drawn inspiration directly from their reading of philosophical works meant to topple true religion' (ibid., 129). Significantly, then, the body of this unfortunate man was consigned to the flames after his execution accompanied by a copy of Voltaire's *Dictionnaire philosophique* (ibid., 130).

Despite the effective abolition even in Scotland of the death penalty for blasphemy, British writers of Hume's era continued to be threatened by worrying sanctions if their criticisms of religion were too overt. They were, almost by accident, free from one mechanism of repression that faced their contemporaries elsewhere in Europe. In France, for example, a writer wishing to publish anti-religious or politically radical views needed to engage in intricate scheming to evade an official regime of pre-publication censorship and the Index of Prohibited Books. So much effort was put into this formal programme of regulation that Louis XVI's financially tottering administration, on the eve of the French Revolution, was still employing more than 160 censors (Porter 2000, 72). In England, however, the Licensing Acts were allowed to lapse in 1695, and the system of prior censorship of books and other printed material was never reinstated. Official action against allegedly inappropriate writings could therefore be launched only after these had already been published (Walter 1990, 32). On the other hand, the authorities retained the option of imprisoning and fining authors and publishers after the event. Steps could also be taken after a successful prosecution for blasphemy to confiscate a publisher's stock of books and close down his business.

In England blasphemy was both an offence against statute law and an offence that could be prosecuted on the basis of the common law. The relevant statute of William III came into force in 1698 after the Lords and Commons passed 'an Act for the more effectual suppressing of blasphemy and profaneness', and it remained in force throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (see Bonner

[2] In a letter to the Marquise de Barbentane, Hume makes the following observations: 'It is strange, that such cruelty should be found among a people so celebrated for humanity, and so much bigotry amid so much knowledge and philosophy. I am pleased to hear, that the indignation was as general in Paris as it is in all foreign countries' (1932, II, 85).

1934, 21–6). This piece of legislation laid down punishments to be imposed in the following circumstances:

> if any person or persons having been educated in, or at any time having made profession of, the Christian religion within this realm shall, by writing, printing, teaching, or advised speaking deny any one of the persons in the Holy Trinity to be God, assert or maintain that there are more gods than one, or shall deny the Christian religion to be true, or the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testament to be of divine authority (Bonner 1934, 22).

An initial conviction disqualified offenders from holding or deriving any benefit from any official appointment, irrespective of whether this was an ecclesiastical, military or civil appointment. Provision was made in the statute for the setting aside of these penalties if offenders made, within the space of 4 months, a public acknowledgement and renunciation of their erroneous opinions in the same court where they had been convicted. However, a second conviction for any of the activities specified in the statute subjected the offender to harsh penalties that could not be removed by any confession of error.

> Then he or they shall from thenceforth be disabled to sue, prosecute, plead, or use any action or information in any court of law or equity, or to be guardian of any child, or executor or administrator of any person, or capable of any legacy or deed of gift, or to bear any office, civil or military, or benefice ecclesiastical, for ever within this realm, and shall also suffer imprisonment for the space of three years, without bail or mainprize from the time of such conviction. (ibid., 22–3)

This piece of law has several interesting features. Firstly, the only practical effect of the clause concerning previous education in or profession of Christianity was to exclude people exclusively brought up in some alternative religion, principally at this period Judaism, from the jurisdiction of the Act. Any other British citizens would have been vulnerable to prosecution even in virtue of an infant baptism, a single attendance at a church service, or any kind of exposure to Christianity in the course of their schooling. Secondly, it skilfully avoided mentioning atheism or even deism by name, and sought instead to suppress attacks on highly specific religious claims whose truth implied the falsity of atheism and deism. Thus the public proclamation of atheism was made illegal without even mentioning atheism as a potential position that someone might espouse (see Berman 1990, 35–6). And thirdly, it was a statute that posed a particularly serious threat to anyone holding an official post or pension as a result of a government appointment or award. These posts and pensions were a crucial and expected source of income for men of good social standing and earnest literary pretensions. However, they were distributed as part of an intricate system of patronage and mutual favours that promoted factious rivalries and resentments. Consequently anyone suspected of irreligious views who had been awarded an administrative post or annuity by the government was potentially vulnerable to losing these advantages as a result of a prosecution instigated by a disaffected rival or opposing faction.

Despite the existence of this statute-based law, the main threat to irreligious writers at this time actually came from prosecutions launched on the basis of the common law, which is law created by established custom, precedent, and the decisions that judges are recorded to have made in trials conducted before them. A key case in

the evolution of this law took place in 1676 with the trial of John Taylor before Lord Chief Justice Hale in the King's Bench (see Bonner 1934, 28–32). Taylor's sanity seems to have been at least questionable, but he was nevertheless convicted of blasphemy for making such remarks as 'religion is a cheat and profession is a cloak', 'I am a younger brother to Christ, and angel of God', and 'Christ is a whoremaster' (Walter 1990, 31). In the course of the trial Hale made a series of pronouncements that shaped for nearly 200 years the interpretation of the law in England concerning blasphemy. In the considered opinion of the Lord Chief Justice:

> such kind of wicked and blasphemous words were not only an offence against God and religion, but a crime against the laws, State, and Government, and therefore punishable in this Court; that to say that religion is a cheat is to dissolve all those obligations whereby civil societies are preserved; and Christianity being parcel of the laws of England, therefore to reproach the Christian religion is to speak in subversion of the law. (Bonner 1934, 30–1)

With this judgement firmly placed on the record, the way was prepared for a series of prosecutions that were pressed home not on the basis of someone's obscene or offensive mode of expression but primarily on the basis of the content of the views expressed by that person. According to Hale, any denial of the truth of Christianity, no matter how restrained the language in which it is put forward, amounted to a repudiation of the legitimacy of the laws of England and hence was rightly punishable by those laws.

Little would be gained at this point from simply listing a string of prosecutions for blasphemy carried out in England and Scotland under the precedent established by Hale. However, an illustrative sample of cases where it is clear that the alleged blasphemers were simply engaged in arguing against the truth of Christianity or the literal truth of specific incidents recorded in the Gospels will help to give an accurate impression of the circumstances under which Hume was attempting to put forward his views about religion. Similarly, an examination of these cases will also make it clear that the penalties inflicted on people convicted of blasphemy were not merely token punishments but were often remarkably harsh and vindictive.

One particularly interesting case of prosecutorial zeal is provided by the trial of Thomas Woolston (see Bury 2007, 111). Woolston was a Fellow of Sidney Sussex College, Cambridge, and the author of six *Discourses on the Miracles of our Saviour*. In these works he argued that many of the incidents reported in the Gospels were, if taken literally, quite contemptible and wholly unworthy of being ascribed to the agency of the omnipotent creator of the universe. He professed to believe, perhaps sincerely, that this showed that we needed to interpret these stories allegorically 'as figures of Christ's mysterious operations in the soul of man' (Bury 2007, 112). And in the case of the resurrection narrative itself, Woolston diagnosed plain fraud: he professed sympathy for the views of a supposed Jewish rabbi and friend who described it as 'the most notorious and monstrous Imposture, that ever was put upon mankind' (1729, 5). Woolston's pamphlets sold extremely well, and this seems to indicate the existence of a burgeoning public appetite for robust criticism and ridicule of biblical literalism. However, his claim to be a sincere Christian engaged in the task of recovering the real message of the Gospels failed to protect him against prosecution for blasphemy. Having been deprived of his Fellowship, Woolston was

sentenced in March 1729 to an initial term of 1 year in prison and a fine of £100 (Bonner 1934, 35). The sentence handed down also included the astonishing provision that he should then 'continue in prison for life unless he himself should be bound in a recognisance for £2,000, and two others for £1,000 each, or four for £500 each,[3] with condition for his good behaviour during life' (ibid., 35). The end result was that Woolston died in prison in 1733 without ever regaining his freedom.

Also worthy of note as showing the type of accusation brought against people who found themselves charged with blasphemy is the case in 1756 of Jacob Ilive. According to the account provided by Bonner (ibid., 36), Ilive was prosecuted because of a work entitled *Some Modest Remarks on the Late Bishop Sherlock's Sermons*. This was described in the following terms in the indictment filed by the Attorney-General:

> a profane and blasphemous libel, tending to vilify and subvert the Christian religion, and to blaspheme our most Blessed Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ; to cause his divinity to be denied, to represent him as an impostor; to scandalise, ridicule, and bring into contempt his most holy life, doctrines, and miracles; and to cause the truth of the Christian religion to be disbelieved and totally rejected, by representing the same as spurious, and chimerical, and a gross piece of forgery and priestcraft. (Bonner 1934, 36)

On being found guilty of blasphemy, Ilive was committed to Newgate prison for 1 month and forced to stand in the pillory at various locations around London. He was then transferred to the House of Correction at Clerkenwell in order to serve out an additional 3 years' hard labour.

The prosecution of Peter Annet in 1763 was a continuation of the same established pattern of repression, but it also had an intriguing connection with Hume's difficulties over the planned publication of his 'Five Dissertations'. As we saw in the first section of Chap. 1, it appears from a letter written by Warburton in 1756 that Hume and his publisher backed away from publishing this work in response to a direct threat of legal action. Significantly, however, the person mentioned by Warburton in that letter as having already been selected by the Attorney-General for prosecution as a deterrent to other authors was Annet. According to Warburton, 'the person marked out for prosecution is one Annet, a Schoolmaster on Tower hill, the most abandoned of all two legged creatures' (Mossner 1980, 323).

The fact that some 7 years elapsed between Warburton's confident claim that Annet would be prosecuted and Annet's actual trial suggests that his prosecution was not quite as high a priority for the authorities as Warburton had been led to believe. Nevertheless when Annet was eventually brought before a court for publishing his deist periodical *The Free Inquirer*, he was convicted and sentenced to both imprisonment and time in the pillory even though he was, at that time, an elderly man of 70 (Walter 1990, 34). Interestingly, the charges brought against him

[3] Some idea of the level of malice behind the stipulation of sums of money as large as these can be gauged from the fact that when Hume was appointed in 1752 as library-keeper to the Faculty of Advocates in Edinburgh, his salary amounted, at best, to a little over 50 pounds a year (see Hume 1932, I, 164).

placed especial emphasis on his denial of the divine authority of the first five books of the Old Testament. His periodical was described as a blasphemous libel:

> tending to blaspheme Almighty God, and to ridicule, traduce, and discredit his Holy Scriptures, particularly the Pentateuch, and to represent and cause it to be believed that the prophet Moses was an impostor, and that the sacred truths and miracles recorded in the Pentateuch were impostures and false inventions (Bonner 1934, 37).

The parallel with Hume in this regard is a striking one. Hume too singled out the Pentateuch for severe criticism in his discussion of miracle reports in the *Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*. According to Hume, if we adopt an interpretative posture of considering these five books 'not as the word or testimony of God himself, but as a production of a mere human writer and historian', then it would be far more plausible to suppose that they were full of lies and falsehood than it would be to suppose that the miraculous events reported there actually happened (1772a, 10.40/130). Hume, however, had wisely taken the precaution of presenting his criticisms as part of a supposed attempt to show how the truth of the Christian religion was best defended.

The above cases of prosecution all took place in England. Nevertheless they remain directly relevant to Hume's own circumstances as Hume resided in England for a substantial number of years and his writings were primarily published by booksellers, namely Andrew Millar and William Strahan, based in England. Moreover, the potential problems that faced him in Scotland were, if anything, even more formidable. As we have already noted, Scottish law retained the death penalty throughout the eighteenth century as a theoretical option in cases of conviction for blasphemy. Although this option was never exercised, lesser penalties of imprisonment and fines were imposed along the same lines as in England (see Walter 1990, 45). Indeed the authorities in Scotland were still enthusiastically prosecuting sellers and distributors of irreligious literature in the middle of the nineteenth century. Thus Edinburgh in 1843 and the early months of 1844 saw a series of connected trials of radical booksellers for distributing allegedly blasphemous books, and these culminated in three men and one woman[4] being sentenced to prison terms ranging from 60 days to 15 months (see Royle 1974, 83–5). Unless we take the highly implausible view that eighteenth-century Scotland was actually far more liberal in these matters, it seems clear that anyone writing or publishing irreligious books or pamphlets in Scotland during Hume's era would have needed to pay very careful attention to the risk of being put on trial in the secular courts.

So far we have been looking at cases of prosecution primarily from the viewpoint of the people subjected to this coercive treatment. It is also possible, though, to focus on the potential fate of a book rather than its author, publisher, or distributors. And an excellent example of the kind of sustained campaign that the authorities were prepared to wage in order to suppress a supposedly irreligious

[4] In the course of defending herself, Matilda Roalfe said that the 'question was not whether Christianity was true or false, but whether Atheists had an equal right with Christians to publish their opinions'. She also declared that she 'did not regret what she had done, nor did she believe that she should' (Walter 1990, 46).

book is provided by the tribulations in Britain of Thomas Paine's *The Age of Reason*. Part One of this work was published in 1794, only 15 years after Hume's death, and Paine was emphatically writing as a deist rather than an atheist or agnostic (Gaskin 1989, 96–7). However, the book's scathing attack on revealed religion and its open onslaught against Christianity generated an avid readership and made it widely notorious.[5] It also provoked a determined attempt in Britain to prevent its distribution and sale by prosecuting anyone publishing the work or making it available to readers.

Paine was not personally affected by this hostile campaign because he never returned to Britain after the publication of *The Age of Reason*: after leaving France, he resided for the rest of his life in the United States. However, the first prosecution in Britain took place in 1797. The bookseller Thomas Williams was put on trial for publishing and selling an edition of Paine's book,[6] and he was sent to prison for 1 year on the basis that *The Age of Reason* constituted a blasphemous libel (see Bonner 1934, 38–41). Other successful prosecutions followed, but the most momentous trial in the attempt to suppress the dissemination of Paine's anti-Christian opinions took place in 1819 when Richard Carlile was brought before a court for publishing *The Age of Reason* and Elihu Palmer's deist work *The Principles of Nature*.[7]

According to the detailed account of the case provided by Guy Aldred (1923, 76–97), Carlile had deliberately set out to draw a prosecution in an effort to bring the law on blasphemy into disrepute. The charges relating to the two books were presented in two successive trials, with *The Age of Reason* being taken first. In his initial trial, Carlile was formally charged with being 'a wicked, impious, and ill-disposed person, who had caused to be printed and published a scandalous and blasphemous libel of, and concerning, the Old Testament' (ibid., 78), and the indictment specifically cited a number of passages from Paine's book. The Attorney-General, Sir Robert Gifford, opened the case for the crown. He reminded the jury that by taking the oath, they 'had pledged themselves to the truth of Christianity' (ibid., 78), and he argued that there was accordingly no need to say anything further about the merit

[5] Paine regarded atheism as an absurd and pernicious position. But he also held that Christianity was as bad as atheism though unfortunately more widely espoused: 'As to the Christian system of faith, it appears to me as a species of Atheism—a sort of religious denial of God. It professes to believe in a man rather than in God. It is a compound made up chiefly of Manism with but little Deism, and is as near to Atheism as twilight is to darkness' (1794, 36).

[6] The prosecution was instigated by a vigilante organization that called itself The Society to Enforce His Majesty's Proclamation for the Suppression of Vice. One of its most zealous vice-presidents was William Wilberforce, the campaigner against slavery. It is worth noting, accordingly, that despite his supposed Christian sympathy for the oppressed, he was an enthusiastic persecutor of people who did not share his own religious beliefs (Bonner 1934, 39–40).

[7] Palmer's book is of considerable interest as the product of a radical freethinker born and raised in America prior to the War of Independence. It also constitutes a very early attempt to argue not just that Christianity has evolved in a morally corrupt direction but also that the original teachings of Jesus of Nazareth are themselves morally disreputable and unworthy of being espoused by any genuinely good person. According to Palmer (1802, 79), 'The maxims of the *New Testament* are a perversion of all correct principles in a code of moral virtue'.

of this religion. The defendant's behaviour was identical with cases that had seen convictions for blasphemy in the past, and the law clearly precluded him from publishing material impugning the truth of Christianity.

> To discuss its veracity was to deny its constitutional authority and to admit that it might be discussed in the manner that had given rise to the present proceedings. Not to be convicted, the defendant must abolish the Constitution and persuade the jury to ignore the solemn obligation that they had taken in the name of their Creator. (ibid., 79)

Carlile addressed the court in his own defence over a period of 3 days. This allowed him to read out and comment on the whole of *The Age of Reason*: his object here being, as Aldred points out, to 'include it in his report of the trial, and thus circulate widely a repetition of the "blasphemy" he was indicted for' (1923, 81). However, this defence failed to persuade the jury to acquit him; and he was similarly unsuccessful in his trial for publishing *The Principles of Nature*.

After some subsequent legal arguments, Carlile was sentenced to 3 years' imprisonment in the county gaol of Dorset and fines totalling £1,500. There was also a provision that even after the completion of this initial prison sentence, Carlile would remain imprisoned until he had paid in full all his fines and given security in the sum of £1,200 for his future good behaviour (Aldred 1923, 97). The clear aim of these fines and the imposed securities was to drive Carlile permanently out of business, and within an hour or so of his sentence court officials had seized the entire stock of books at his premises in Fleet Street.

Carlile and his supporters had, however, made some preparations of their own. After his sentence and imprisonment, Carlile's wife and sister and other employees in his shop continued openly to sell copies of *The Age of Reason* and *The Principles of Nature*. As these in turn were arrested, tried, and sent to gaol, fresh volunteers from freethinking societies and groups all over the country travelled to London to continue this public defiance of the authorities (Royle 1974, 35–7). Other sympathizers sent money to keep Carlile's business running and to pay for extra food and provisions for those in gaol. Bonner estimates that in total about 150 people spent time in prison as a result of taking a place in Carlile's shop as part of this protest, and she adds that their imprisonment 'was seldom for days or weeks, but usually for a year or years' (1934, 54).

One particularly important society that was organized outside of London in support of Carlile was the Edinburgh Freethinkers Zetetick Society. This was founded in December 1821, principally at the instigation of James and Robert Affleck (Royle 1974, 35). However, it soon ran into its own problems with the authorities in Scotland; and in 1823 James Affleck was prosecuted for blasphemous speech, the society was closed, and the books in its library were seized by the police (ibid., 36–7). Amongst the books taken away were Voltaire's *Philosophical Dictionary* and Baron d'Holbach's *System of Nature*.[8] Affleck responded by starting a business as a bookseller in 1824, but this merely led to his being prosecuted again and impris-

[8] D'Holbach and Hume became friends in the course of Hume's time in Paris as Embassy Secretary (see Hume 1932, I, 496; II, 205 & 275). D'Holbach's *System of Nature* was first published in French in 1770, and as it was an explicit defence of atheism, and probably the first such defence to

oned for 3 months for selling the *Republican*, a radical newspaper published by Carlile, and Paine's *Theological Works*.

The upshot of the struggle in London was that the Home Office, under Robert Peel, eventually gave up its efforts to close down Carlile's business and to suppress *The Age of Reason*. According to Edward Royle, no more arrests were made after 1824 and Carlile himself was abruptly released in 1825 after spending more than 6 years in prison (1974, 37). He immediately proceeded to resume his publishing and bookselling activities, and he quickly reprinted both *The Age of Reason* and *The Principles of Nature*.[9] Moreover the very public failure of the campaign to suppress these works seems to have given them *de facto* immunity from subsequent attempts at prosecution. Thus Bonner reports that although other allegedly blasphemous publications continued to generate trials and prison sentences, *The Age of Reason* was never again made the subject of prosecution in Britain (1934, 55).

What the Carlile affair does reveal, however, is the willingness of the authorities in England and Scotland to make a sustained attempt, involving the imprisonment of large numbers of people, to suppress particular irreligious books. Even if an author himself was, like Paine, beyond the reach of legal sanctions, the books resulting from his literary endeavours could still be ruthlessly hounded throughout Britain in an effort to prevent both their commercial and private circulation. And if a book were only issued in a small and limited edition and the author was unable or unwilling to promote its repeated publication, there was a significant risk that the book might ultimately cease to exist in any form whatsoever.

2.2 Humean Prudence

It is clear, therefore, that an eighteenth-century author wishing to question the truth of Christianity or to advance even more radically irreligious views was confronted by a formidable apparatus of legal repression. How, then, might such an author proceed? One option was to avoid all written discussion of matters of religion and to confine these potentially dangerous topics exclusively to private conversation. At the other extreme, there was the option of simply ignoring the threat of prosecution and social ostracism in favour of a bold or foolhardy policy of setting out one's views in a blunt and unambiguous manner. Significantly, though, Berman's very thorough survey (1990) of the early history of atheism in Britain finds no evidence

be published anywhere in Europe, it was wisely put before the public under the name of Jean Baptiste de Mirabaud.

[9] Given the deist nature of these two books, it is perhaps ironic that during their imprisonment Carlile and some of his closest supporters had abandoned deism in order to espouse atheism or aggressive agnosticism. In 1826 Carlile summed up his new position as follows: 'we have ventured to ask–WHAT IS GOD? We find no one to answer the question with an intelligible sentence, and finding no one to answer the question, having no answer of our own, we have found that an honest inquirer after truth can and should proceed without the use of the word god' (see Royle 1974, 42).

of any British author prepared openly to declare himself or herself to be an atheist, or even what we would today call an agnostic, prior to 1782, 6 years after Hume's death. In much the same fashion, deist writers of this period also tended to be very reluctant to deny explicitly the truth of Christianity. The need for such overt denials was averted by the skilful use of some conventional formulae that preserved an appearance of consistency with Protestant Christianity while encouraging the reader to draw conclusions that went beyond anything directly asserted in the text (see Porter 2000, 111–19). One popular formula was to construct a case for the conclusion that Christianity contained nothing of crucial importance beyond what could be established by unaided natural reason. The alert reader would then be forced to reflect on what motive there could possibly be for a separate divine revelation if natural reason was already self-sufficient. Even more widely used, however, was the device of arguing at length against the corruptions that had supposedly arisen to disfigure the true essence of Christianity: either early Christians had been intellectually unsophisticated and had failed to respond appropriately to divine prompting, or the various forms of Christianity prevalent in the modern world had come, under the influence of priests and deranged enthusiasts, to incorporate mistaken doctrines that accordingly needed eradication or revision. Such formulae were not adequate vehicles for insinuating doctrines as radical as atheism, agnosticism, or even attenuated deism. However, the deist manoeuvrings just outlined do point the way towards a middle path for the eighteenth-century irreligious author who wished to avoid prosecution. If one were prepared to engage in a certain amount of textual dissimulation, it was possible to put before the public a powerful argumentative case for some very radical conclusions while remaining free from any serious threat of legal sanctions.

The question that arises at this point is whether Hume is a writer who dons a cloak of dissimulation when he approaches sensitive religious issues or is instead someone whose pronouncements on such topics must generally be taken at face value. Two opposed considerations come into play here. The historical context to Hume's writings plainly suggests that if he does have strongly irreligious views, then it is quite likely that he would choose to express them under the protection of a certain amount of disguise. Moreover, Berman's insightful analyses of the works of such unwarrantedly neglected authors as Collins and Radicati provide substantial grounds for concluding that in adopting such an approach, Hume would have been participating in a well-established tradition of radical dissimulation that had grown up alongside, and partly obscured by, the disguised repudiations of Christianity by deists who regarded themselves as far removed from anything as outrageous as agnosticism or rank atheism (see 1990, 70–92, 93–5). On the other hand, claims of dissimulation and irony run the risk of allowing a person committed to a particular interpretation of Hume's views on religion to disregard in an unhelpfully arbitrary manner any inconvenient counter-evidence. Thus William Sessions raises worries about ascriptions of irony.

> Irony as incongruity between what is straightforwardly said or done and its hidden significance is a handy but much-abused tool for construing a text that appears to say the opposite of what one thinks it ought to say. (2002, 210)

And even Gaskin, who is certainly not averse to diagnosing some important remarks and passages in Hume's writings as instances of irony or protective camouflage, insists on the need for caution in this area: 'We should beware of so relying upon Hume's irony that we read an often repeated declaration as an often repeated denial' (1988, 220).

An important piece of evidence in support of the hypothesis that Hume writes in a way that is intended to insinuate a radically irreligious outlook while allowing him some scope for plausibly denying that this is his aim comes from a letter in which he sets out his attitude towards a policy of pretending to have religious beliefs that one actually lacks. Hume's friend Colonel James Edmonstoune had written to him in 1764 for advice about a mutual acquaintance, a Mr Vivian, whose religious doubts had left him uncertain whether to remain a clergyman or become a layman. Hume's response to Edmonstoune is that this person is not under any obligation to abandon the clerical profession merely because he lacks the beliefs conventionally expected of a clergyman. As Hume acerbically puts the matter:

> it is putting too great a Respect on the Vulgar, and on their Superstitions, to pique one'self on Sincerity with regard to them. Did ever one make it a point of Honour to speak Truth to Children or Madmen? (1954, 83)

Significantly this piece of private correspondence equates mainstream Protestant Christianity with superstition. Hume often criticizes superstition in his published works, but he is usually careful to leave it open to the reader to interpret him as criticizing only such positions as Catholicism, extreme Protestant enthusiasm, Islam, and polytheism. In this particular instance, however, when Hume is in the relatively safe position of engaging in correspondence with a friend he trusts, he appears entirely happy to include the Christianity of his Protestant contemporaries in the category of superstition. Moreover, the suggestion that even educated Anglicans and members of the Church of Scotland are, in respect of their religious convictions, on an intellectual par with 'Children or Madmen' should certainly give pause to anyone inclined to suppose that Hume sees Christianity as a religion that is a genuine option for a true philosopher.

In the same letter Hume goes on to lament his own inability to put into practice the advice he has forwarded to Edmonstoune.

> I wish it were still in my Power to be a Hypocrite in this particular: The common Duties of Society usually require it; and the ecclesiastical Profession only adds a little more to an innocent Dissimulation or rather Simulation, without which it is impossible to pass thro the World. Am I a Lyar, because I order my servant to say I am not at home, when I do not desire to see company. (ibid., 83)

It seems clear from these remarks that Hume would have had no moral reservations whatsoever about adopting a mask of faith and religious conviction in order to make life easier for himself. On the other hand, he also seems to be implying that his past choices and actions mean that this is not a policy that would have any chances of success in his own case. So it might be suggested that by the date of this letter at least, Hume would have had no motive to mask in his writings his real views about religion: his reputation as an irreligious thinker was already so established that it could do him no harm to express his views quite openly.

One response to this suggestion would be to point out that Hume is specifically discussing the merits of affecting Christian belief rather than some more nebulous set of religious sentiments. The former mode of dissimulation might no longer have been an option for Hume, but that would not necessarily have prevented him from successfully presenting himself in public as embracing some religiously significant form of deism. However, this is not a fully satisfactory reply. As we saw in the preceding section, it was the denial of the truth of Christianity that was legally problematic in Hume's time: prosecution could not be averted by showing that one's denunciations of Christianity were combined with a repudiation of atheism and agnosticism. These latter positions were indeed effectively outlawed, but only because they implied a denial, or at least an obdurate refusal to affirm, that Christianity was true. What does need to be kept in mind, though, is that prosecutions for blasphemy were targeted against public speech and published writings rather than private opinions. So a reputation as an apostate did not leave one vulnerable to prosecution even though it might have some unfortunate social consequences. The key consideration in terms of personal safety for an author like Hume was the need to avoid publishing material that explicitly attacked Christianity or any propositions whose truth was entailed by the truth of Christianity. Implied attacks rarely attracted the interest of the authorities unless the overlying disguise happened to be almost non-existent.

It seems legitimate to conclude, therefore, that Hume's awareness that he had acquired a widespread reputation as a critic of Christianity and perhaps as an even more radically irreligious thinker would not have given him any motive to abandon a policy of dissimulation in his published writings. Indeed the acquisition of such a reputation is just what we would expect to happen if Hume were indeed engaged in the covert advocacy of irreligious opinions. If an author's protective camouflage is too perfect, then he fails to convey his underlying message to his readers. But if it is too diaphanous, then it fails to serve as a way of avoiding prosecution. The perfect compromise for an irreligious writer of Hume's time would have been a level of dissimulation that allowed, even prompted, a thoughtful reader to construct from the text powerful arguments against various religious beliefs while preserving a veneer of plausible deniability to hold in check any threat of legal sanctions.

Given that we have been able to confirm that Hume is not an author with moral scruples about misrepresenting his religious views, or the absence of these, in order to make life safer or easier for himself, the next step in building a strong case for supposing that Hume does take steps to conceal how radical a position he is really seeking to defend would be to find some direct evidence that Hume is anxious about how far he can prudently go in setting out his criticisms of religious belief. This turns out not to be a difficult task. One of the main themes of Hume's letters is his concern about the potential adverse consequences of the positions, both religious and political, that he chooses to advance in his writings.

In the case of Hume's worries about the *Treatise*, we have already examined some of the relevant evidence in the second section of the previous chapter. Hume's comments about his cowardice or prudence in revising the *Treatise* in an attempt to ensure that 'it shall give as little offence as possible' (1932, I, 25) plainly indicate

that he has no intention of being a martyr, or indeed of attracting needless opprobrium, in the cause of religious scepticism. Christian enthusiasts might be happy to sacrifice themselves on behalf of their superstitious beliefs, but Hume believes that such deranged enthusiasm is blameworthy rather than something to be commended. Dangerous levels of purely philosophical enthusiasm are, in Hume's opinion, extremely rare (see 1739, 1.4.7.13/272); but given his strictures against enthusiasm in other areas, he was intent on not succumbing to this disorder himself.

This same concern for prudence and discretion also manifests itself in his correspondence with Francis Hutcheson, at that time the Professor of Philosophy at the University of Glasgow, about the content of Book 3 of the *Treatise*. Hutcheson had provided Hume with some comments on a draft version of this part of the *Treatise*, and Hume gives the following account of the revisions he had made as a consequence:

> Since I saw you, I have been very busy in correcting & finishing that Discourse concerning Morals, which you perus'd; & I flatter myself, that the Alterations I have made have improv'd it very much in point of Prudence and Philosophy. (1932, I, 36)

Moreover, in a subsequent letter Hume asks Hutcheson to consider whether there is any way to avoid the conclusion that the connection between moral judgements and human sentiments means that morality 'regards only human Nature & human Life' and cannot be a part of our relationship to any 'superior Beings' (ibid., I, 40). Hume says that this is an objection that has often been raised against Hutcheson's account of morality, and he indicates that it is a matter worthy of further consideration even though it is a delicate and potentially dangerous one.

> If you make any Alterations on your Performances, I can assure you, there are many who desire you woud more fully consider this Point; if you think that the Truth lyes on the popular Side. Otherwise common Prudence, your Character, & Situation forbid you touch upon it. (ibid.)

Turning next to the *Enquiry concerning Human Understanding* in its initial guise of the *Philosophical Essays*, we find from his letters that Hume is still concerned with issues of prudence, but has clearly decided to take a bolder line than is manifest in the *Treatise*. In a letter to James Oswald, Hume discusses his plans to publish the *Philosophical Essays*, and he says that he has been advised not to do this by Henry Home.

> I have some thoughts of … printing the Philosophical Essays I left in your hands. Our friend, Harry, is against this, as indiscreet. But in the first place, I think I am too deep engaged to think of a retreat. In the second place, I see not what bad consequences follow, in the present age, from the character of an infidel; especially if a man's conduct be in other respects irreproachable. What is your opinion? (1932, I, 106)

And in a letter written only a few months later to Home himself, Hume confirms that he is setting about the publication of a new edition of his *Essays* and an initial edition of the *Philosophical Essays*. Once again the issue of the prudence of this latter step is something that engages Hume's attention.

> The other work is the Philosophical Essays, which you dissuaded me from printing. I won't justify the prudence of this step, any other way than by expressing my indifference about all the consequences that may follow. (1932, I, 111)

The question of what has led Hume to think of himself as 'too deep engaged to think of a retreat' is an intriguing one. Two possibilities come to mind. The first is the fact that his authorship of the *Treatise* seems to have been quite widely known in Edinburgh despite the fact that this work had been published anonymously. The other possibility is that Hume was reflecting on the fact that his published philosophical views and his alleged views on religion had already sufficed to bring about the embarrassing defeat of his candidacy for an academic post at Edinburgh. He might well have thought that given his existing reputation, no further harm would result from removing a little more of the disguise from his criticisms of religion.

It does seem clear, however, that Hume is deliberately deciding in the case of the *Philosophical Essays* to be less cautious than he had been when preparing the final version of Book 1 of the *Treatise*. Moreover, his letters indicate that he is expecting this new work to reinforce the impression that he is defending an infidel position. Now Hume's evident mastery of philosophical style in the *Philosophical Essays* would seem to guarantee that if this impression were actually a mistaken one, Hume could readily have written a book expressing his true views in a way that would at least have avoided giving fresh impetus to the view that he had abandoned Christian belief. After all, the reception accorded to the *Treatise* would already have warned him about the ease with which it was possible to acquire an irreligious reputation. It is difficult to avoid the conclusion, therefore, that Hume is anticipating an interpretation of the *Philosophical Essays* as an infidel work because that is precisely what it is, albeit under a certain amount of precautionary disguise intended to ward off prosecution for blasphemy.

The same concern with the delicate balance between prudent and discreet presentation on the one hand and robust argumentative content on the other also extends to the *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion*. Hume had circulated an initial draft of a substantial portion of these dialogues to some of his close friends more than 25 years before his death. However, Hume refrained from publishing them at that time, and in the final year of his life one of his principal preoccupations was trying to find some way of ensuring that they would be published either before his death or without undue delay afterwards.

The reaction to this work when his friends first saw it seems to have been one of consternation. Writing in 1763, Hume complains in a humorous though pointed way to Gilbert Elliot of Minto about his intransigence in insisting that it would be unwise for the *Dialogues* to be published.

> Is it not hard & tyrannical in you, more tyrannical than any Act of the Stuarts, not to allow me to publish my Dialogues? Pray, do you not think that a proper Dedication may atone for what is exceptional in them? I am become much of my friend, Corbyn Morrice's Mind, who says, that he writes all his Books for the sake of the Dedications. (1954, 71)

And we also have a fascinating letter written in 1763 by Hugh Blair, one of Hume's closest friends amongst the Scottish clergy, in which Blair congratulates Hume on his imminent departure for France with Lord Hertford's ambassadorial party but also suggests that Hume might find himself viewed by the French *philosophes* as not sufficiently hostile towards religious belief. However, Blair can envisage a potential

means of remedying this affront to his friend's national status as a standard-bearer for urbane irreligion.

> But had you gone but one Step farther—I am well informed, in several Poker clubs in Paris your statue would have been erected.[10] If you will show them the MSS of certain Dialogues perhaps that honour may still be done you. But for Gods sake let that be a posthumous work, if ever it shall see the light: Tho' I really think it had better not. (1954, 72–3n4)

In Hume's reply, he teasingly implied that if he were to decide to publish 'the work you mention', he would be strongly tempted to dedicate it to Blair (ibid., 72).

In the period immediately preceding his death, Hume became determined that the *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion* should indeed be published. And even at this point, the work still retained the power to alarm both Hume's friends and his usual publisher. A protracted correspondence about publication with Adam Smith saw Smith making a variety of excuses to avoid taking on the responsibility to ensure that the *Dialogues* were published after Hume's death. Smith did express a willingness to keep the manuscript safe so that the option of publication at some point would not be lost, but a letter from Smith to Hume's publisher, William Strahan, indicates that this offer was primarily intended to dissuade Hume from taking more active steps to initiate publication.

> I once had perswaded him to leave it entirely to my discretion either to publish them at what time I thought proper, or not to publish them at all. Had he continued of this mind the manuscript should have been most carefully preserved and upon my decease restored to his family; but it never should have been published in my lifetime. (1932, II, 453)

Nor was Hume any more successful in the case of Strahan himself. Strahan was happy to bring out new and corrected editions of Hume's other writings, but he deflected with great determination all of Hume's efforts to persuade him to commit to publishing the *Dialogues*. In a letter written in June 1776, Hume argued that the *Dialogues* were no more controversial and dangerous than some of the material Strahan was already publishing on his behalf.

> I seriously declare, that after Mr Millar and You and Mr Cadell have publickly avowed your Publication of the *Enquiry concerning human Understanding*, I know no Reason why you shoud have the least Scruple with regard to these Dialogues. They will be much less obnoxious to the Law, and not more exposed to popular Clamour. (1932, II, 323–4)

Strahan remained unconvinced; and despite discussions after Hume's death with Hume's nephew, David Hume the Younger, and Hume's elder brother, John Home, Strahan eventually confirmed that he would not publish the *Dialogues*. The manuscript was then returned to Hume's nephew in accordance with the terms of Hume's will, and the *Dialogues* were eventually published in 1779 (1932, II, 454). They bore Hume's name, but the names of the publisher and editor were conspicuously absent.

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[10] In Edinburgh Hume and many of his friends were members of the Poker Club, a dining and discussion society originally set up to promote the reinstatement of a Scottish militia. See Mossner 1980, 272–3, 284–5.

It is clear, therefore, that Hume's letters show him to have an enduring interest in the issue of how far he can prudently go in expressing his philosophical and religious views. We have also seen that Hume's friends were often very worried about the likely consequences of some of his publications or proposed publications. And it is noticeable that Hume himself distinguishes between two potential sources of danger or social harassment. One such source is 'popular Clamour', which one might perhaps downplay as no more than the abuse and unpopularity that is usually the lot of someone who defends unfashionable opinions. But Hume's reference to 'the Law' makes it evident that he is also well aware of the potential risk of formal legal prosecution run by the authors, publishers, and sellers of irreligious or seemingly irreligious literature. Moreover, these points need to be considered, as we have seen, in conjunction with Hume's candid recommendation of a policy of dissimulation and ambiguity if the open avowal of one's true sentiments in matters of religion would place one at a personal disadvantage. We can hardly avoid inferring, accordingly, that the astute interpreter, when confronted by an apparent tension in Hume's writings between irreligious observations and arguments on the one hand and bland reassertions of more orthodox views on the other hand, would be strongly inclined to conclude that the position for which Hume is really constructing a case is the irreligious one.

2.3 Dissimulation Unmasked

Further grounds for favouring an interpretative strategy that recommends strongly discounting Hume's surface protestations of religious convictions in favour of an emphasis on the irreligious elements in his writings can be drawn from the various occasions when Hume's letters and accounts by other people of his private conversations allow us to be very confident indeed that elements of his published writings deliberately misrepresent his actual views on religious topics. A particularly useful source here is James Boswell's record of a lengthy conversation he had with Hume a few weeks before Hume's death. Boswell had called upon Hume with the specific though, in the circumstances, possibly impertinent intention of questioning him about his views on the likelihood of an afterlife. Hume's answers provide a great deal of information about his candid opinions on both religion in general and the possibility of personal immortality, and they clearly indicate that some of the assertions on these topics in Hume's published works are nothing more than misdirection and protective colouring.

On the topic of survival after death, Boswell's written account of the conversation indicates that he directly asked Hume whether he thought that such survival was possible. Hume was emphatic, however, in saying that belief in an afterlife was not a reasonable option.

> 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 for ever. (Fieser 2005, I, 288)

Moreover, Boswell gives no indication of any grounds for suspecting that Hume was being insincere in thus repudiating personal immortality. The topic was certainly one in which Boswell had a strong interest, and he found the opinions expressed by Hume very disturbing. But the impression he placed on record shortly after the conversation concluded that Hume genuinely did not believe in an afterlife.

> I had a strong curiosity to be satisfied if he persisted in disbelieving a future state [Heaven] even when he had death before his eyes. I was persuaded from what he now said, and from his manner of saying it, that he did persist. (ibid., I, 288)

Boswell's account of his interview with Hume also sheds important light on Hume's religious convictions and his assessment of the moral consequences of religious belief. In respect of the former issue, Boswell says that Hume admitted to being religious when he was young. However, he had subsequently altered his stance. According to Boswell, 'he said he never had entertained any belief in religion since he began to read Locke and Clarke' (ibid., I, 288). Moreover, Hume then went on to attack the influence of religion on people's behaviour.

> He then said flatly that the morality of every religion was bad, and, I really thought, was not jocular when he said that when he heard a man was religious, he concluded he was a rascal, though he had known some instances of very good men being religious. (ibid., I, 288)[11]

And in the course of further explaining these remarks about the dubious moral character of religious believers, Hume made some very significant observations about the opinions of George Keith, 10th Earl Marischal of Scotland. Boswell's report of these particular observations is based on his later memories rather than his entries in his contemporaneous journal, but he is clearly attempting to record Hume's exact words and the context in which they occurred.

> He said, 'One of the men' (or 'The man' – I am not sure which) 'of the greatest honour that I ever knew is my Lord Marischal, who is a downright atheist. I remember I once hinted something as if I believed in the being of a God, and he would not speak to me for a week'. He said this with his usual grunting pleasantry, with that thick breath which fatness had rendered habitual to him, and that smile of simplicity which his good humour constantly produced. (ibid., I, 290)

Boswell's account of Hume's lack of belief in an afterlife seems convincing enough in its own right, and it is usefully corroborated by a conversation set down in Caulfeild's *Memoirs*. When Caulfeild asked Hume for his opinions about the immortality of the soul, Hume gave him the following reply:

> 'Why troth, man,' said he, 'it is so pretty and so comfortable a theory, that I wish I could be convinced of its truth, but I canna help doubting.' (Fieser 2005, II, 213)

In the *Treatise*, by way of contrast, Hume includes a passage that strongly implies, if read as sincerely expressing his position, that he views the case for supposing that the soul is immortal as a thoroughly convincing one (1739, 1.4.5.35/250).

[11] See also Philo's claim: 'And when we have to do with a man, who makes a great profession of religion and devotion, has this any other effect upon several, who pass for prudent, than to put them on their guard, lest they be cheated and deceived by him?' (1779, 12.221).

The context of this passage is a somewhat complicated one because Hume is primarily intent on arguing that the supposition that the soul is a simple and unextended substance offers no more support to the doctrine of the immortality of the soul than is offered by the supposition that the soul is an extended compounded substance. His assessment, though, of the implications of these rival suppositions takes the following form:

> In both cases the metaphysical arguments for the immortality of the soul are equally inconclusive; and in both cases the moral arguments and those deriv'd from the analogy of nature are equally strong and convincing. If my philosophy, therefore, makes no addition to the arguments for religion, I have at least the satisfaction to think it takes nothing from them, but that every thing remains precisely as before. (1739, 1.4.5.35/250–1)

In the light of the evidence we have just been reviewing, our suspicions are likely to be immediately aroused by Hume's claim to have the satisfaction of believing that his investigations do no harm to 'the arguments for religion'. Why would that chain of reflection give any satisfaction to someone who does not entertain any belief in religion? Even more clearly, however, the contrast Hume has drawn between the metaphysical arguments on this topic and 'the moral arguments and those deriv'd from the analogy of nature' would be a profoundly misleading one unless he believes that these latter arguments are genuinely sufficient to ensure that it is true or at least probably true that we have immortal souls. Yet both Boswell and Caulfeild agreed, after interrogating Hume on the topic in person, that Hume did not have a belief in personal immortality or an afterlife.

Further strong evidence of Humean dissimulation on the topic of personal survival after death can be found in the essay 'Of the Immortality of the Soul' (1777a, 590–8). This essay ends with the following observations:

> By what arguments or analogies can we prove any state of existence, which no one ever saw, and which no wise resembles any that ever was seen? Who will repose such trust in any pretended philosophy, as to admit upon its testimony the reality of so marvellous a scene? Some new species of logic is requisite for that purpose.….
>
> Nothing could set in a fuller light the infinite obligations, which mankind have to divine revelation; since we find, that no other medium could ascertain this great and important truth. (1777a, 598)

The wording of the concluding paragraph is calculated to suggest to the unwary reader that Hume does believe in an afterlife, albeit on the basis of revelation rather than natural reason. But even if we set aside the sustained attack on revelation that Hume seems to mount in Section 10 of the *Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*, his private conversations surely allow us to conclude that he has no belief whatsoever in an afterlife, no matter what source for that belief might be proposed. Similarly, Hume's pronouncements in this essay on the cogency of the arguments for personal immortality clash jarringly with the position implied by his comments on the same issue in the *Treatise*. As we have just seen, the *Treatise* contains a dismissal of the merits of the metaphysical arguments for immortality but includes an implied endorsement of the moral arguments and those based on analogy. In 'Of the Immortality of the Soul', however, Hume presents a far less favourable assessment of these latter arguments. No such arguments are capable of

establishing the existence of an afterlife, and any belief in personal immortality can only be supported by revelation.

We can also readily locate in Hume's writings and conversations some obvious dissimulation over the issue of the existence of atheists. Hume is happy to describe the 10th Earl Marischal as 'a downright atheist' to Boswell. There is doubtless some element of levity in Hume's anecdote: it is extremely unlikely that the good-natured Earl Marischal, who was on very friendly terms with Hume (see Hume 1932, I, 372, 413; II, 365), would genuinely have refused to speak to Hume for a period of a week merely because he had inadvertently said something that could be construed as though he 'believed in the being of a God'. However, it is equally unlikely, given the opprobrium attached to atheism at that time, that Hume would have misrepresented as an atheist someone for whom he had the utmost respect.[12]

It is also the case that letters written by Hume well before his final conversation with Boswell portray the Earl Marischal's views on religion in a manner that would fit very well with the supposition that Hume believed him to be an atheist. In a letter sent in 1762 to Benjamin Franklin, Hume discusses the efforts of Frederick the Great of Prussia and the Earl Marischal to arbitrate in a vicious theological dispute that had broken out amongst the clergy in the Republic of Neuchâtel. Hume had been kept informed of this controversy by the Earl Marischal himself, and it is clear that Hume regards the involvement of these particular arbiters as richly ironic.

> But surely, never was a Synod of Divines more ridiculous, than to be worrying one another, [u]nder the Arbitration of the K. of Prussia & Lord Marischal, who will make an Object of Derision of every thing, that appears to these holy Men so deserving of Zeal, Passion, and Animosity. (1954, 67)

Moreover, in a letter of 1773 to Sir John Pringle, Hume refers to the judgements of the Earl Marischal and Helvétius, one of the leading French *philosophes*, concerning the character of the Young Pretender, Charles Edward Stuart. These judgements were extremely unfavourable except in regard of his freedom from bigotry. Both the Earl Marischal and Helvétius viewed him as purporting to hold all religion in contempt. Hume reports this as the one element of praise they were prepared to confer on this particular prince.

> You must know that both these persons thought they were ascribing to him an excellent quality. Indeed, both of them used to laugh at me for my narrow way of thinking in these particulars. However, my dear Sir John, I hope you will do me the justice to acquit me. (1932, II, 274)

We can safely conclude, therefore, that Hume was not amusing himself in his conversation with Boswell by passing off one of his particularly pious friends as an obdurate and thoroughgoing atheist.

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[12] Writing to Hugh Blair from Paris in 1763, Hume encouraged his friends in Edinburgh to extend their best hospitality to the Earl Marischal on his return to Scotland, and included the following fulsome praise of his character: 'Do you imagine, that you ever saw so excellent a Man? Or that you have any Chance for seeing his equal, if he were gone?' (1932, I, 421).

But once we accept that Hume was acquainted with at least one 'downright atheist' in the form of the Earl Marischal, how are we to interpret his reported remarks on finding himself, soon after his arrival in Paris in 1763, in the company of Baron d'Holbach? D'Holbach had been converted from deism to atheism by Denis Diderot in 1763, and thereafter he was an enthusiastic proselytiser on behalf of his new convictions (White 1970, 138). According to Diderot:

> The first time that M. Hume found himself at the table of the Baron, he was seated beside him. I don't know for what purpose the English philosopher took it into his head to remark to the Baron that he did not believe in atheists, that he had never seen any. The Baron said to him: 'Count how many we are here.' We are eighteen. The Baron added: 'It isn't too bad a showing to be able to point out to you fifteen at once: the three others haven't made up their minds.' (Mossner 1980, 483)

Mossner (1977, 18n38) takes Hume's remarks at face value, and he accordingly concludes that 'it is certain that Hume did not regard himself as an atheist'. It is evident, however, that these remarks cannot be given a straightforward interpretation. Hume, as we have seen, thought that the Earl Marischal was an atheist, and the two of them had actually met again in London immediately before Hume's departure for France with Lord Hertford (Mossner 1980, 438–9). It seems plausible to suppose, therefore, that Berman (1990, 102) is correct in interpreting Hume's conversational gambit as a calculated attempt to lure d'Holbach into confirming the wide prevalence of atheism among the assembled diners.

An attribution of dissimulation seems even more necessary in the case of some words given by Hume to Philo in Part 12 of the *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion*. Philo says, 'I next turn to the atheist, who, I assert, is only nominally so, and can never possibly be in earnest' (1779, 12.218). As we saw in Chap. 1, the predominant view amongst commentators since Kemp Smith's analysis of the *Dialogues* is that Philo is the character who comes closest to being Hume's personal spokesman. However, even if we set aside that interpretative supposition, it remains the case that Philo's comments about the non-existence of real atheists are not criticized or questioned by any of the other characters in the *Dialogues*. Yet these comments seem to have been added to the text in the course of Hume's final revisions to the manuscript in 1776. By this time Hume had enjoyed a lengthy friendship with the Earl Marischal and had met and discussed philosophy with Baron d'Holbach and his coterie of atheist friends in France. It seems most unlikely, therefore, that Hume could have sincerely believed at that stage in his life that no genuine atheists existed. But if Hume did not believe this, then Philo's unchallenged comments about atheists insinuate in the reader's mind a conclusion that Hume himself regarded as false even as he was engaged in the process of shaping the *Dialogues* to lead his readers, or at least some of them, in that direction.

Finally, it is important to note Hume's tendency to take on, at potentially delicate or hazardous moments within his writings, the persona of a Christian believer. In the very first paragraph of the essay 'Of the Immortality of the Soul', we find him making the following assertion: 'But in reality, it is the gospel, and the gospel alone, that has brought life and immortality to light' (1777a, 590). While engaged in his attack in the *Enquiry concerning Human Understanding* on the credentials of revelation,

Hume refers to Christianity as 'our most holy religion', and he professes to be delighted that his discussion 'may serve to confound those dangerous friends or disguised enemies to the CHRISTIAN religion' who have rashly or mischievously suggested that it can be founded on reason rather than faith (1772a, 10. 40/129–30). In *The Natural History of Religion* Hume maintains that there is an almost irresistible tendency for religions to incorporate gross inconsistencies as a result of the conflict between 'the natural conceptions of mankind' and the disposition of religious worshippers to seek to ingratiate themselves with their deity or deities through flattery and exaggerated praise. However, he singles out one religion as managing to overcome this tendency:

> Nothing indeed would prove more strongly the divine origin of any religion, than to find (and happily this is the case with Christianity) that it is free from a contradiction, so incident to human nature. (1777c, 157)

And in the concluding part of the *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion*, Philo is made to refer to 'our Faith' only two sentences before he delivers the following aphorism for the supposed edification of Pamphilus: 'To be a philosophical sceptic is, in a man of letters, the first and most essential step towards being a sound, believing Christian' (1779, 12.227–8).

In the case of these attempts to masquerade as a Christian, it seems entirely clear that Hume is simply engaged in some unsubtle misdirection. As Christianity is definitely an example of a religion and eighteenth-century thinkers show no inclination to embrace the curious idea that one can adhere to a religion without embracing any distinctive creedal content, we could simply refer once again to Hume's avowal to Boswell that after his youth, he 'never had entertained any belief in religion'. However, an early letter to William Mure of Caldwell (Hume 1954, 10–14) usefully reinforces this avowal. In the course of his letter, Hume discusses a sermon by William Leechman in which it is argued that prayer is a pious and efficacious activity. Hume cannot resist making the point that according to an alleged Platonic classification of three kinds of atheist, Leechman turns out to be an atheist. The main thrust of the letter, though, is an argument Hume constructs against 'Devotion and Prayer, & indeed to every thing we commonly call Religion, except the Practice of Morality, & the Assent of the Understanding to the Proposition *that God exists*' (ibid., 12–13). Hume does not insist that this argument is unanswerable: indeed he expresses the hope that Leechman will address the issue in any second edition of his sermon. But the letter does strongly imply that Hume himself is not aware of any effective answer to the argument he is putting forward. Moreover, the residual content left to religion if this argument goes through does seem to be very similar to Philo's account, in the concluding pages of the *Dialogues*, of what some people say is the content of the whole of natural theology: 'one simple, though somewhat ambiguous, at least undefined proposition, *that the cause or causes of order in the universe probably bear some remote analogy to human intelligence*' (1779, 12.227). Clearly, there is much more to Christianity as a religion than ordinary morality and intellectual assent to the undefined claim that God exists. So if Hume himself is not prepared to go any further, his show of Christian piety is mere pretence.

We can also point to the account of Hume's last days preserved by William Cullen, one of the physicians attending Hume during this period. Cullen reports, like Adam Smith, a conversation in which Hume runs through some possible excuses he might make to the mythical ferryman Charon in order to avoid being carried across the river Styx to Hades. In Smith's more discreet version, one that was written with a view to publication in conjunction with Hume's *My Own Life*, Hume is described as contemplating the following appeal:

> But I might still urge, 'Have a little patience, good Charon, I have been endeavouring to open the eyes of the public. If I live a few years longer, I may have the satisfaction of seeing the downfall of some of the prevailing systems of superstition' (Fieser 2005, I, 300).

Cullen, however, is more forthright: in his version Hume explicitly refers to Christianity rather than unspecified systems of superstition.

> He thought he might say that he had been very busily employed in making his people wiser, and particularly in delivering them from the Christian superstition, but that he had not yet completed that great work. (ibid., I, 294)

Summaries of Hume's views on religion by his friends and acquaintances further confirm the impression that it would be a major mistake to take as sincere Hume's occasional expressions of Christian sentiments. In addition to the judgements by Carlyle and Caulfeild that were considered in Sect. 2.1 of the preceding chapter, it is illuminating to reflect on the opinions of George Dempster and Lady Mary Coke. Dempster is plausibly viewed as a friend of Hume's from his time as a student at Edinburgh University (see Mossner 1980, 45–6). According to Dempster, writing in 1756:

> It seems difficult for me (for me who dotes upon David) to believe that he can have a great regard for even the best mode of religion and the least extravagant if we consider how destitute he is of that only support of it, Faith. Without faith devotion must be faint and cold, the hopes of a future state weak and mixed with doubt. (1934, 22)

This observation plainly tells heavily against the supposition that Hume's attacks on superstition in the *Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*, *The Natural History of Religion*, and the *Dialogues* are intended to leave untouched some particularly refined and intellectually austere version of Christianity. Lady Mary's testimony comes from a time some 11 years later, soon after Hume's appointment to the office of Under-Secretary of State for the Northern Department. Over the course of a stay at the country seat of General Conway, Lord Hertford's brother, she took the opportunity to interrogate Hume gently about his views on religion, concluding:

> You know Mr Hume is a great Infidel: 'tis the only thing I dislike in him. I have had some conversation with him, but I have no hopes of converting him from his erroneous way of thinking, &, thank God, his infidelity does not invalidate my belief. (Coke 1889–1896, II, 314)[13]

This reference to Hume's infidelity provides yet further confirmation that Hume was, after the years of his youth, no Christian. And Lady Mary's evident lack of

[13] Religion was not the only thing about which they disagreed: 'Mr Hume does not like Shakespeare. Would you have thought it possible that a Man of Genius shou'd not be able to discover the Beauties of that admirable writer? We are all against him' (Coke 1889–1896, II, 314).

success in persuading him to reconsider his stance seems to indicate that Hume had long ceased to feel any disquiet or anxiety about this rejection of Christianity.

2.4 Some Provisional Conclusions

In the course of this chapter we have seen that Hume's decision to engage in the public examination of the credentials of religious belief placed him in a potentially dangerous situation. At the time when Hume was writing, publications viewed as denying the truth of Christianity or any proposition whose truth was implied by the truth of Christianity were still vulnerable to prosecution for blasphemy irrespective of the manner in which such denials were framed. And this was far from being a merely theoretical risk. Although no mechanism of pre-publication censorship existed and the enthusiasm of the authorities for launching prosecutions after publication seems to have fluctuated in an unpredictable manner, authors like Woolston and Annet still found themselves in prison for denying the literal truth of key aspects of Christian doctrine.

In the light of this very real threat of prosecution and other sanctions, it is useful to draw a comparison between the views expressed by Paine in *The Age of Reason* and some of the private opinions on matters of religion that can plausibly be ascribed to Hume. *The Age of Reason* was, as we have seen, the target of a determined campaign of suppression that saw more than a hundred people sentenced to substantial terms of imprisonment for reprinting, selling, or distributing that particular work. Yet Paine was a sincere and avowed believer in the existence of a supremely wise and morally exemplary God who offers us the opportunity to enjoy further life after the dissolution of our current physical bodies (Paine 1794, 7, 32–3). In contrast, even our initial survey of Hume's opinions indicates that he did not believe in an afterlife and that he plainly lacked Paine's optimism about the legitimacy of ascribing moral excellence and great wisdom to any deity that might happen to exist. It is clear, then, that in these important respects Hume's private views, if explicitly put into print, would have been even less acceptable to the authorities than those published by Paine. It follows, therefore, that Hume would have had a strong incentive to make use of a substantial degree of dissimulation in his writings on religion in order to stave off the kind of campaign waged against Paine's book. And we have already noted Hume's concern with issues of prudence and his readiness to recommend a policy of hypocrisy or misdirection as an appropriate response to intrusive inquiries into one's personal beliefs. When all this is combined with his evident willingness, when it suited him, to insinuate a level of commitment to Christianity that he did not genuinely possess, we are inevitably led to conclude that any judicious interpretation of Hume's stance with regard to religious belief must allow for the possibility that his works in this area are permeated through and through by protective dissimulation and creative ambiguity. In the next chapter, therefore, we will explore the hypothesis that Hume's writings on religion are best seen as an artfully constructed web of irreligious argument that seeks to push forward a radical outlook that only emerges when the attention shifts from the individual strands of the web to its overall structure and context.

Chapter 3
Hume's Writings on Religion

3.1 Approaching the Texts

When we are seeking to expose as insincere Hume's occasional suggestions in his published works that he is a believing Christian, we have the great advantage of being able to test these pronouncements against the detailed reports of people who have questioned him personally on this topic. Similarly, the testimony handed down in records of Hume's private conversations allows us to be confident that when Hume affects in the *Treatise* and 'Of the Immortality of the Soul' to believe in an afterlife, he is engaged in a policy of prudent dissimulation. Resources of this kind, however, are not available to us if we are endeavouring to construct an interpretation of Hume as seeking to defend in his writings a radically irreligious perspective lying somewhere on the spectrum from attenuated deism to outright atheism.

This is not to say that Hume's correspondence and the recollections of his friends and acquaintances wholly fail to yield pointers towards the conclusion that his writings should be understood as an attempt to construct an argumentative case for a position that is substantially more radical than strong deism. In the previous chapter we drew out some of the implications of Hume's claim that 'he never had entertained any belief in religion'. However, it might be suggested that such a blunt claim, when expressed without any qualification that Boswell considered worthy of noting, is itself an indication of a personal stance that goes considerably beyond the rejection of all revealed religious traditions and the supposition that human beings enjoy a continued existence after death. If that constituted the full extent of Hume's irreligious tendencies, then it seems likely that Hume would have gone on to reassure Boswell that the two of them were in agreement on the existence of a wise, benevolent and supremely powerful God who was responsible for creating or, at the very least, decisively shaping the universe in which we all exist. In his actual account of their conversation Boswell conspicuously fails to include any report of such convergence in their views. That omission suggests that Hume should not be seen as holding or wishing to defend a strong form of deism. Equally, though, it seems plain that Hume did not say anything, despite the subject matter of the conversation, that

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struck Boswell as clear evidence of outright atheism. There is, accordingly, at least some plausibility to the supposition that Hume's forthright repudiation of religious belief, set down as it is by Boswell without any amplification or mitigation, indicates that his writings, seen as a totality, are best seen as expressions of either agnosticism or an espousal of a much thinner conception of a deity than is compatible with strong deism.

Other gleanings that suggest that Hume's underlying stance is substantially more radical than strong deism include the references by friends to his scepticism in contexts where they are clearly thinking of religious scepticism rather than epistemological scepticism. This distinction is an important one because even someone who is radically sceptical about the epistemic justification for a particular claim is not necessarily someone who suspends judgement on the truth of that claim. Thus Hume is often and plausibly identified as a radical sceptic about the justification for the supposition that a world of mind-independent objects exists. Nevertheless it is plain that Hume believes, like anyone else not carried away by metaphysical fantasies, that such a world exists. In the case of religious scepticism, however, the emphasis lies much more decisively on the rejection of the first-order, non-epistemic beliefs, possibly because there is a long-standing and prominent apologetic tradition that maintains that religious belief can be appropriately sustained by pure faith even in the absence of any rational justification. Thus religious scepticism seems, at least when there is an explicit or implied contrast with atheism, to be a position that assigns a central place, like modern agnosticism, to actual suspension of belief.[1]

One relatively straightforward attribution of religious scepticism to Hume by someone who knew him personally is provided by the remarks of Alexander Carlyle that we noted in Sect. 1.1. The same judgement manifests itself too in the following assessment of Hume's views and character by Henry Mackenzie in his capacity as the biographer of Hume's close friend John Home, the playwright and former clergyman.

> He had, it might be said … two minds; one which indulged in the metaphysical scepticism which his genius could invent, but which it could not always disentangle; another, simple, natural, and playful, which made his conversation delightful to his friends, and even frequently conciliated men whose principles of belief his philosophical doubts, if they had not power to shake, had grieved and offended. During the latter period of his life I was frequently in his company amidst persons of genuine piety, and I never heard him venture a remark at which such men, or ladies—still more susceptible than men—could take offence. His good nature and benevolence prevented such an injury to his hearers (Fieser 2005, II, 260).

The above diagnosis by Carlyle and Mackenzie also seems to cohere rather well with a piece of self-appraisal that appears in a letter written by Hume in 1757 to Andrew Millar:

> 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. (1932, I, 265)

[1] The complicated issue of the precise relationship between Hume's epistemological scepticism and the attitude towards religious belief defended in his writings will be considered in much greater detail in Chap. 5.

These remarks by Hume are particularly significant because they occur in the context of the decision by Millar and Hume to withdraw the 'Five Dissertations' from publication in the face of threats of prosecution (see Sect. 1.1). Warburton, the chief agitator for such a prosecution, had written directly to Millar in order to accuse Hume of trying in *The Natural History of Religion* 'to establish *naturalism*, a species of atheism, instead of religion' (Mossner 1980, 325). Moreover, Warburton ('that low Fellow' (Hume 1932, I, 250)) had published a pseudonymous pamphlet attacking *The Natural History* in aggressively abusive terms. Millar had forwarded a copy of this pamphlet to Hume, and Hume refers to it in the paragraph of his letter immediately following the one above as an example of the unreasonable anger that his philosophical writings had provoked. Given this context, we can surely expect that Hume would have been at pains to give as much reassurance as possible to his friend and publisher about the nature of his views on matters of religion. And Hume does, it seems, distance himself from outright atheism. But the furthest he seems able to go in the direction of ascribing to himself a less dangerous and contentious stance is a reaffirmation of doubt and uncertainty.

It is also the case that when Hume attempts to sum up his general attitude to life and intellectual speculation in a letter to James Balfour of Pilrig, he alludes to a Greek quotation that translates into English as 'Be sober-minded and remember to be sceptical' (1932, I, 173). According to Hume, 'in this faith have I lived, and hope to die', and he contrasts this posture with 'those sublime ideas, which you have so well expresst' (ibid.).

This letter concentrates on responding to Balfour's criticisms of Hume's moral philosophy, but Hume's self-ascription of a sceptical posture seems to be making a more general point. Hume shows no inclination in any of his writings to align himself with moral scepticism when this is distinguished from epistemological or religious scepticism. Equally, however, reference to an exclusively epistemological scepticism scarcely seems relevant in a context where it is Hume's views about morality that are under scrutiny. It is plausible to conclude, accordingly, that Hume is ascribing to himself a sceptical attitude to the religious theses and doctrines that are often invoked as underpinning moral values and obligations. And interpreting Hume in this way would fit well with the judgement he makes in a letter to his close friend Gilbert Elliot of Minto concerning the respective moral consequences of philosophical scepticism and popular religion.

> What Danger can ever come from ingenious Reasoning & Enquiry? The worst speculative Sceptic ever I knew, was a much better Man than the best superstitious Devotee and Bigot. (ibid., I, 154)

It has to be admitted, however, that these pieces of evidence are relatively insubstantial. They are suggestive of an underlying agnostic stance, but they certainly do not compel us to interpret Hume as embracing a perspective of that kind. Indeed, there might perhaps be some temptation to argue that if Hume were a radical agnostic, there would surely be more evidence of this fact in his personal correspondence. The need to adopt a cautious policy within those writings intended for publication is understandable enough, but is it really credible, it might be asked, that someone who is supposedly a radical agnostic would fail to give some stronger indications of this stance in private letters written to friends and people he trusted?

That argument, although possessing some initial plausibility, is undermined by the fact that Hume is remarkably reluctant in his letters to apply any particular label to his perspective on religion. If we do not wish to interpret Hume as writing from an atheist or an agnostic perspective, then the only remaining credible option, given the implausibility of regarding him as a sincere Christian, would be to interpret him as a deist author. However, although Hume's letters contain numerous references to other people regarding him as a deist, or indeed an atheist, there is a striking paucity of any passages in which Hume can be seen as assigning this label to himself. The only occasion, in all the letters gathered together by Greig (Hume 1932), Klibansky, and Mossner (Hume 1954), where Hume comes close to describing himself as a deist is in a letter giving an account of his appointment to the post of library-keeper to the Faculty of Advocates.

> 'Twas vulgarly given out, that the contest was betwixt Deists and Christians; and when the news of my success came to the play-house, the whisper ran that the Christians were defeated. Are you not surprised that we could keep our popularity, notwithstanding this imputation, which my friends could not deny to be well founded? (1932, I, 166)

This passage provides further useful confirmation that Hume's writings should not be interpreted as expressing sincere Christian views, but it does very little to rule out the possibility that they should be seen as artful expressions of a commitment to the truth of atheism or radical agnosticism. Even if Hume's friends and supporters were predominantly deists, this does not establish that Hume himself fell into that category. Moreover, even if we read Hume as saying that his friends were unable to deny that he too was a deist, this restriction on their efforts on his behalf might have arisen from the fact that a more accurate specification of his views would have been more damaging still to his candidacy. If allegations that Hume was a deist were already causing some difficulties, his chances of securing the appointment would surely have diminished even further if his supporters had announced that there was no need to worry about his supposed deist views because he was actually an outright atheist. Nor would matters have improved significantly if his supporters had made an effort to represent Hume's personal position as a complex and nuanced one that committed him to suspending judgement on the ultimate role of intelligent thought in generating an orderly universe containing numerous examples of means-end adaptation.

This passage needs, in any case, to be read in conjunction with an explicit denial by Hume that he was a deist. James Caulfeild recounts the incident in the following terms:

> I never saw him so much displeased, or so much disconcerted, as by the petulance of Mrs. Mallet, the conceited wife of Bolingbroke's editor. This lady, who was not acquainted with Hume, meeting him one night at an assembly, boldly accosted him in these words: 'Mr. Hume, give me leave to introduce myself to you; we deists ought to know each other.'—'Madame,' replied he, 'I am no deist. I do not style myself so, neither do I desire to be known by that appellation.' (Fieser 2005, II, 214)

The semi-public nature of this denial makes it rather difficult to interpret. Caulfeild presents the anecdote in the context of some barbed comments about the prevalence of a fashionable and superficial affectation of deism amongst society women in

France. So it is possible that Hume was rejecting not deism as such but simply an intellectually inadequate form of deistic posturing. And as it is not clear how extensive an audience there was for this exchange between Hume and Mrs Mallet, it is possible that Hume was simply adopting the same caution about attaching explicitly irreligious labels to himself that he observed throughout his published writings. On the other hand, Hume's response does provide a clear warning that we should not rush to interpret him as a deist simply because of one passage in which he represents himself as more closely aligned with a group of deists than with a group of Christians.

Ultimately, then, the enterprise of identifying the position on religion and religious belief that Hume is attempting to defend in his writings requires us to find an effective means of using internal features of his published works as indicators of how much dissimulation and camouflage he is deploying in order to minimize social unpleasantness and the threat of legal prosecution. Hume's letters and the recollections of his friends and personal acquaintances make it clear that the passages in his books where he seems to speak as a sincere Christian believer are not to be taken at face value. We also saw in Chap. 2 that Hume would have had a strong incentive to avoid being too explicit about any aspects of his position that could be seen not merely as a repudiation of Christianity but also as a repudiation of the metaphysical foundations of all religious belief. Given, then, that Hume's writings will see him engaging in misdirection and concealment if he is indeed deeply irreligious in the sense of being an attenuated deist, agnostic, or atheist, how are we supposed to peel off this protective carapace in order to identify with any confidence the true thrust of Hume's arguments?

One advantage that we possess is that Hume is writing on these sensitive topics in order to be understood by suitably sympathetic readers. His underlying aim is to achieve plausible deniability of any irreligious intentions rather than thoroughgoing concealment. Moreover, the task in front of him is one that earlier irreligious writers had faced, and a set of conventions had accordingly evolved that facilitated the achievement of a judicious balance between unduly risky directness and self-defeating obscurity.

A useful aid to unpicking some of these conventions is provided by John Toland's discussion of what he calls 'the *Exoteric* and *Esoteric*, or the *External* and *Internal Doctrine*s' (1720, 66). Toland, whose early work *Christianity Not Mysterious* was publicly burnt on the instructions of the Irish Parliament, is often interpreted as a relatively straightforward deist endeavouring to rid Christianity of all its irrational or mysterious elements in favour of the ethical teaching of the man Jesus of Nazareth and the truths of natural religion (see Gay 1977, 376–7; Bury 2007, 105–6). Margaret Jacob, however, has argued that this interpretation seriously underestimates the radical nature of Toland's thinking. In her judgement, 'For Toland, as for all pantheistic materialists, God and nature are effectively one' (2006, 122). Pantheism itself admits of a wide variety of forms including those that see nature and the material universe as aspects of a divine being that transcends those partial manifestations of its creative essence. However, it can also amount to little more than the view that nothing exists beyond a material universe that possesses some characteristics such as eternal and necessary existence that are traditionally ascribed

to God. And if the attributes of this universe are not supposed to include some kind of central organizing intelligence that greatly exceeds in its level of foresight and understanding the finite minds of creatures like us, then we have a view that surely constitutes a variety of atheism. Toland's outlook appears to lie well towards this latter end of the pantheistic spectrum, and it seems significant, as Jacob points out, that d'Holbach's *The System of Nature*, which is plainly an atheistic work, recycles large sections of Toland's *Letters to Serena* with very few alterations (2006, 229).

In *Tetradymus* Toland asserts that the dangers confronting the candid avowal or defence of unorthodox religious views are such that it is difficult to know when the opinions avowed by people reflect their genuine beliefs.

> I have often, I confess, read of desires to some, and defiances to others (not tolerated by the Laws) to produce their arguments: but this was, in other words, desiring them to get themselves disgrac'd or punish'd, depriv'd or excommunicated. (1720, 95)

Toland accepts that some of these requests and challenges are made in a genuine attempt to promote constructive discussion. However, he still regards them as ill-advised and counter-productive.

> Many of those who exprest such desires, having been very good men, wou'd be not a little sorry if the others had comply'd; when they found they had drawn them into a snare, out of which they cou'd not extricate them: and as for those whose invitations tend to decoy and trepan, they must be left to the conscience of their own base designs; as the persons deluded by them, ought to suffer unpity'd for their folly. (ibid.)

Notwithstanding these problems, Toland does venture to offer one key to people's sincere opinions on matters of religion. He cautions us that 'while liberty in its full extent is more to be wish'd than expected' (ibid., 96), we cannot hope to achieve certainty about other people's views; but he does hold that if we apply his formula we can often arrive at judgements that are probably true. His recommendation, then, is that we should judge as follows:

> *When a man maintains what's commonly believ'd, or professes what's publicly injoin'd, it is not always a sure rule that he speaks what he thinks, but when he seriously maintains the contrary of what's by law establish'd, and openly declares for what most others oppose, then there's a strong presumtion that he utters his mind.* (ibid.; Toland's emphasis)

It might initially be thought that Toland's advice is of little help in arriving at an understanding of what position on matters of religion is really being put forward in Hume's writings. Hume is not an author who 'openly declares' in his published works for strongly irreligious opinions. It is tempting to argue, accordingly, that this criterion could, at best, license us to take seriously Hume's arguments in 'Of Suicide' against the supposition that suicide is morally wrong (1777a, 577–89). Given the vigorous proscription of suicide enforced by the Christianity of Hume's era, Toland's interpretative key should certainly encourage us to reject the suggestion that Hume has constructed these arguments and declared in favour of the moral legitimacy of suicide merely as a literary conceit or an exercise in stirring up a literary controversy. But if this conclusion is all that can be extracted from Toland's criterion, it scarcely represents a major advance in understanding the overall position that Hume is intent on defending.

Such pessimism, however, is premature. Toland also refers to occasions when an author '*seriously maintains the contrary of what's by law establish'd*'. This is potentially a subtler criterion than the appeal to open declaration, and there seems to be scope for combining it with an interpretative suggestion that is forcefully advocated by Berman.

Berman recommends that we should concentrate on where the weight of argument resides (1990, 106–8). If an author devotes a great deal of effort to setting out arguments that tell in favour of a particular position P that it would be costly or dangerous to affirm explicitly and he or she counterbalances those arguments only with much weaker ones for the supposed falsity of P, Berman plausibly suggests it is quite likely that this author is engaged in the advocacy or defence of position P. And if there are no counterbalancing arguments but only bare assertions that P is or must be false, then the inference is an even stronger one. Of course the situation is complicated by the fact that there can often be disagreement about the real strength of particular arguments. Thus it might be the case that our assessments as present-day readers of a text fail to match the assessments that the author would have made on his or her own behalf. However, confirmation of the author's own assessments is often provided by such secondary signs as the relative space devoted to the exposition of competing arguments or the vigour and passion with which an argument is expressed. If, therefore, we are confident which arguments are the stronger and this judgement is supported by the appropriate secondary signs, Berman's interpretative proposal appears to be a sound one.

How, then, do we integrate Berman's guidance with Toland's own criterion? Going to the trouble of constructing elaborate and weighty arguments for a position P seems to qualify as a prima facie instance of seriously maintaining that position. That presumption is overturned if these arguments are set out in conjunction with arguments of similar or greater strength that support the conclusion that P is false. However, if counterbalancing arguments of such strength are not present and an author also displays secondary signs of judging the arguments for P to be weighty arguments, this does count as seriously maintaining or defending the position P. Moreover, Berman's guidance leaves open what kinds of costs to the author need to be taken into account. If the potential cost is merely a small amount of unpopularity, then the hypothesis that an author is engaged in indirectly building a case for a particular view while pretending to disown it is not one that would enjoy much credibility. Toland, though, asks us to concentrate on some serious costs to the author. The public and explicit denial during the eighteenth century of '*what's by law establish'd*' in matters of religion incurred, as we have seen, the danger of legal prosecution, years in prison, heavy fines, time in the pillory, and the confiscation and destruction of any publications judged to contain blasphemous libels. Under these conditions the plausibility of the hypothesis that the author is indeed engaging in some judicious dissimulation is much enhanced.

Combining the guidance of Toland and Berman in this way also assists us in discovering the real position that underlies philosophical discussions presented in dialogue form. Even if an argument for a position P is assigned to a character in a dialogue rather than the author himself, it remains the case that it is the author who

has devoted some of his time and energy to constructing and articulating that argument. Thus there is an immediate case for supposing that the author regards this argument as something worthy of serious consideration despite the fact that the author is not addressing us directly in his own voice. And if he fails to counter this argument with opposing considerations of similar or greater weight, then we can legitimately treat him as seriously maintaining this position P even if we are still leaving open the option of supposing that he is seriously maintaining P only for the purposes of discussion and intellectual curiosity. The decision as to whether to embrace or reject this latter option then needs to be made on the basis of the potential costs to the author. When we are concerned with costs as great as those picked out by Toland when he refers to the denial of opinions that are defended by the sanctions of legal prosecution and heavy punishment, then seriously maintaining a position P, even if this is nominally done for the purpose of promoting discussion and inquiry, would appear to be a very strong indication that the sympathies of an author of a dialogue lie with that position P.

With this interpretative methodology at our disposal, we can now hope to make some substantial progress in identifying the views on religion that Hume is actually trying to promote in his published writings. These views do lie partially concealed, and, as we shall see, modern interpreters of Hume are often less skilled than Hume's contemporaries at recognising the clues to his true intentions. However, the combination of an initial overview of the structure of Hume's writings on religion and the detailed examination of some of his principal lines of reasoning should allow us to build a persuasive case in support of the supposition that Hume is engaged in the project of defending a radically irreligious position that goes well beyond mere deism and seems, in fact, to culminate in a deep agnosticism about what we referred to in Chap. 1 as the Mindedness Hypothesis. We accordingly turn in the next section to providing the necessary survey of how Hume's published writings on religion fit together as a way of articulating his irreligious opinions.

3.2 A Succinct Overview of Hume's Writings

Until recently the consensus amongst modern commentators would have been that there was no need to include the *Treatise of Human Nature* in the category of Hume's writings on religion. This is, in some ways, a surprising judgement because, as we saw in Sect. 1.1, a substantial number of Hume's contemporary critics interpreted the *Treatise* as a virulently irreligious work that was intended to promote infidelity and atheism. It is, of course, important to bear in mind that such allegations were thrown around in the eighteenth century in a wild and overexuberant manner. Even John Locke, a philosopher of sincere though less than fully orthodox Christian principles, was accused on occasion of being an atheist.[2]

[2] According to Porter (2000, 30), an informant denounced Locke in 1706 to the Master of University College, Oxford: 'I think that both Locke and my Lord Shaftesbury were as arrant atheists as Spinoza'.

Nevertheless the reaction of Hume's contemporaries to the *Treatise* does have some tendency to suggest that it might contain an irreligious message that is somewhat hidden from present-day readers.

The case for supposing that the *Treatise* does indeed have a strongly irreligious thrust has now been persuasively set out by Paul Russell in *The Riddle of Hume's Treatise* (2008). Russell repeatedly shows how Hume's epistemological and metaphysical arguments in Book 1 of the *Treatise* can be seen as undermining core components of the case for theism as this was characteristically articulated in the eighteenth century.

One example of this is Hume's relatively neglected discussion in the *Treatise* (1739, 1.2.1–6/26–68) of our ideas of space and time. Russell (2008, 99–112) shows that the supposition that infinite space and time have an absolute existence was exploited by prominent Newtonian thinkers, in particular Samuel Clarke, as a premise in an argument intended to refute atheism.[3] Moreover, Hume would undoubtedly have been aware of the existence of this argument in Clarke's *A Demonstration of the Being and Attributes of God* (1705), a work that was widely regarded at the time as one of the most formidable defences of theism constructed by a contemporary thinker.[4] Hume, in contrast to Clarke, argues that we can form 'no idea of a vacuum, or space, where there is nothing visible or tangible' (1739, 1.2.5.1/53). Hume also maintains in the *Treatise*, as Russell emphasises, 'that we can never have reason to believe that any object exists, of which we cannot form an idea' (ibid., 1.3.15.36/172). It seems to follow, as an obvious corollary, that Hume holds that we have no reason to believe in a space that can exist independently of body. And as Hume argues too that 'time is nothing but the manner in which some real objects exist', the plain implication of Hume's discussion is that we have no reason to believe that space and time do have an absolute existence.

This conclusion of Hume's, if correct, utterly undermines Clarke's attempt to demonstrate the existence of a deity using the absolute existence of space and time as a starting point. However, Hume conspicuously fails even to mention in passing this major contribution to an ongoing and extremely heated debate about God's existence. Now it might be suggested that this curious omission merely indicates that Hume has no interest in building a case for irreligion within the pages of the *Treatise*. Perhaps Hume is merely engaged throughout all his lengthy discussion of space and time in the longstanding empiricist project of showing how we can acquire our ideas of space and time purely from experience. As Russell himself points out, a significant number of the thinkers who attacked Clarke's views about the nature of space and time were patently sincere Christians (2008, 109). Thus Hume's denial of the absolute existence of space and time might well have important theological implications; but even after

[3] We will look at this argument in more detail in Sect. 6.4.

[4] Hume refers to Clarke in both the *Treatise* (1739, 1.3.3.5n18/80n2) and *A Letter from a Gentleman to his Friend in Edinburgh* (1745, 23). In the former instance Hume is discussing Clarke's contention that it is an *a priori* truth that everything that begins to exist must have a cause, and in the latter instance Hume is specifically discussing Clarke's 'metaphysical' argument for the existence of a deity.

it has been located in this particular intellectual context, it is no guarantee of irreligious objectives or sympathies.

What does license us to suppose that Hume has such objectives is the overall pattern that emerges in the *Treatise*. Whenever Hume launches into a major discussion of a theologically sensitive topic, he seems to develop a line of thought that sides with the views of prominent freethinkers or potentially undermines the argumentative efforts of the leading contemporary defenders of the metaphysical presuppositions of mainstream Christianity. In the course of his account of causal reasoning, for example, Hume makes the following striking claim about what can be said about the relationship between causes and effects if we are judging on a purely *a priori* basis:

> Any thing may produce any thing. Creation, annihilation, motion, reason, volition; all these may arise from one another, or from any other object we can imagine (1739, 1.3.15.1/173).

Russell has little trouble showing that this Humean contention subverts a whole host of theistic arguments with which Hume must have been closely acquainted. Hume does rather disingenuously acknowledge this fact in the case of Clarke's first cause argument (1745, 23), but he manages to gloss over the fact that his position is equally destructive of, amongst other prominent pieces of theistic reasoning, Descartes' causal argument in 'Meditation III' for God's existence (1641, 2. 27–36) and Locke's contention that the ultimate cause of intelligent thought in human beings must itself possess the excellence of intelligence (1689, 619–25).

Similarly, Russell constructs a strong case for supposing that Hume's treatment of the relationship between ideas and impressions, his account of the content of our idea of necessary connexion, and his discussion of the supposition that the soul is an immaterial substance all evidently carry implications that tend to subvert important aspects of the stock eighteenth-century case for theism or the supposition that a deity that is an appropriate object of religious worship exists. Moreover, Book 2 of the *Treatise* sees Hume aligning himself with the view, strongly associated with irreligion in the minds of many of his contemporaries despite the former prevalence of Calvinist doctrines of predestination, that all our actions are fully determined by antecedent causes and that the only liberty we can possess as agents is the liberty of being free from violence and coercion. And Book 3, as Russell sets out in detail, develops an account of morality that ostentatiously disdains to invoke God or belief in God as an explanation of any desirable aspect of our moral thinking.

An eighteenth-century author of unimpeachable religious orthodoxy could readily have elaborated any one of these lines of thought. However, it is scarcely credible to suppose that an author of that era could have so consistently taken up, in the space of one philosophical work, positions that fall on the irreligious side of the debate without that fact indicating an underlying intention to develop a case against theism and religious belief. It is also significant that Hume only expresses the most perfunctory of worries in the *Treatise* about the potential support his arguments might seem to offer to the cause of irreligion. An eighteenth-century theist or strong deist who had somehow found himself with the highly contentious array of views

defended in the *Treatise* would surely have gone to great pains to reassure his readers that these views did not fatally subvert the case for believing in a powerful deity of surpassing moral goodness. And even someone of irreligious sympathies who was trying to put before the public a philosophical work that could legitimately hope to avoid becoming entangled in the debate about the existence of a deity worthy of religious worship would have needed to exercise much greater care in his presentation than Hume chooses to do.

It seems, therefore, that Russell is quite right to conclude that Hume has deliberately constructed the *Treatise* so that it serves as a major contribution to that debate in the cause of irreligion. This does not necessarily rule out the supposition that the *Treatise* has other philosophical aims that are at least as important to Hume, but it does give the lie to Selby-Bigge's patronizing contention that Hume's inclusion in the *Enquiry concerning Human Understanding* of a discussion of miracles and the design argument was simply a gratuitous addition intended to excite the attention of the '*habitués* of coffee-houses' (Selby-Bigge 1975, xii).

How, though, has the irreligious significance of the *Treatise* managed to elude so many modern commentators? Part of the explanation must lie in the fact that Hume has systematically avoided drawing explicitly irreligious conclusions even when he has presented all the materials required to support such conclusions. Similarly, he seldom explicitly mentions the topic of religion in the *Treatise* except on occasions when he is offering insincere assurances that his arguments pose no threat to religious belief. It is also the case that Hume's letters indicate, as we have noted previously, that he removed from the *Treatise* some of his more obviously pointed and controversial discussions in order to tone down its overall impact. If the extant version of the *Treatise* had retained criticisms of the design argument and the evidential value of miracle reports similar to those later deployed in the *Enquiry*, Hume's irreligious objectives would have been much more obvious even to a present-day reader.

We are also hindered today by the fact that Hume occasionally chooses to express himself in the form of esoteric signs of allegiance that are intended to function rather like a secret handshake. In Sect. 1.1, we saw that the first notice of the *Treatise* confidently moved from the Latin epigram appended to the first two books of the *Treatise* to the conclusion that the work had evil, freethinking intentions. Rendered into English, this epigram from Tacitus (1952, Bk. 1, sect. 1) reads: 'The rare good fortune of an age in which we may feel what we wish and may say what we feel'. These words instantly suggest that the views expressed in the *Treatise* have some connection with a tradition of challenging received opinions and especially opinions supported by legal and social sanctions. Moreover, Russell sets out an impressive set of links between this epigram and various thinkers notorious for their irreligious stance (2008, 70–75). In the *Enquiry concerning Human Understanding,* Hume himself reveals something of the significance of the allusion to Tacitus: he describes Tacitus as a historian 'so free from any tendency to credulity, that he even lies under the contrary imputation, of atheism and profaneness' (1772a, 10.25/123). But Russell convincingly argues that Hume's citation from Tacitus also serves to connect the *Treatise* both with Spinoza's *Theological-Political Treatise* and the group

of British freethinkers centred on John Toland and Anthony Collins. The esoteric significance of this epigram is not, however, something that a modern reader can be expected to recognize instantly, and the same can be said in respect of the allusion to Cato contained in the epigram from Lucan that introduces Book 3 of the *Treatise*.

Finally, it must be admitted that part of the interpretative problem has hitherto lain in a lack of awareness of the detailed controversies about religion and its metaphysical foundations that formed a crucial part of the intellectual background to the *Treatise*. Hume himself rarely names the targets of his arguments, and he also refrains from explicitly aligning himself with those of his contemporaries who were generally regarded as freethinkers and critics of religion. Thus a double problem confronts the present-day interpreter. Not only is it important to be aware of quite specific moves and counter-moves within the eighteenth-century debate about religion, but also it is necessary to uncover what contributions to that debate would have seized Hume's attention. Only with that information to hand can we discern how Hume is, throughout the *Treatise*, deliberately and repeatedly intervening in the controversy in ways calculated to strengthen the case for embracing an irreligious outlook.

Russell's analysis of the *Treatise* clearly constitutes a major advance in our understanding of this particular work by Hume. However, its consequences for the interpretation of Hume's overall stance on matters of religion are not so far-reaching. In the works written after the *Treatise*, Hume adopts a policy of addressing religious issues more explicitly. And even when we take into account the techniques of dissimulation and camouflage that Hume employs within these later works, his underlying irreligious message emerges more clearly than it does in the *Treatise*. It does have to be conceded that Hume's criticisms of *a priori* arguments for the existence of a deity are set out in more detail in the *Treatise* than anywhere else in Hume's writings. But the crucial issues of the merits of the design argument and the credibility of miracle reports receive their definitive Humean treatments in the *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion* and the *Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*. Moreover, even when Hume's later writings on religion do recycle lines of argument from the *Treatise*, they generally adopt a more obviously critical and hostile tone than is present in the earlier material. Thus we now need to examine how Hume sets out his views in his post-*Treatise* writings.

As we noted in Sect. 1.1, the controversy over his potential appointment to the Chair of Ethics and Pneumatical Philosophy at Edinburgh led to Hume writing a short pamphlet that aimed to rebut the charge that the philosophical views expressed in the *Treatise* showed him to be unfit to hold this particular office. Published in 1745, quite possibly against Hume's wishes, *A Letter from a Gentleman to his Friend in Edinburgh* seeks to downplay both Hume's epistemological scepticism and the extent to which the *Treatise* constitutes an attack on a religious world-view. Given the context in which this pamphlet was written, it is clearly unsafe to treat it as a straightforward and honest clarification of Hume's views. Moreover, it is worth noting that Hume, despite his desire to secure an academic appointment, is more inclined to defend a suitably mitigated form of epistemological scepticism than repudiate it entirely (1745, 19–21). And when it comes to answering the charges of promoting atheism, Hume relies extensively on the device of distinguishing between

what the *Treatise* explicitly says and the inferences that his critics have chosen to draw from the passages in question.

> I shall add, that a great Distinction ought always to be made betwixt a Man's positive and avowed Opinions, and the Inferences which it may please others to draw from them. (1745, 23–4)

In his later works, however, it becomes clear that at least some of the inferences that Hume is seeking to deflect point accurately towards the views that he is intent on defending.

When Hume came to write the *Philosophical Essays concerning Human Understanding,* he seems to have taken the view that it was time to engage more openly in the controversy over the legitimacy of religious and, more specifically, Christian belief. As we have stressed before, Hume is careful in this work, even when it is renamed *An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*, to retain sufficient deniability to minimize the threat of legal prosecution, but he is now bolder in advertising the relevance of his philosophical discussions to matters of religion.

In Sect. 3.1, for example, Hume presents abstract philosophy, when properly conducted, as a remedy for intellectual errors that are used by popular superstitions to conceal their falsity and lack of sound foundations.

> Chaced from the open country, these robbers fly into the forest, and lie in wait to break in upon every unguarded avenue of the mind, and overwhelm it with religious fears and prejudices. (1772a, 1.11/11)

There is, of course, no wholly explicit attack here on Christianity and its metaphysical underpinnings. The term 'popular superstition' was frequently employed by Scottish and English writers of this time as a way of referring to the doctrines embraced by Catholics. Thus Hume retains the option, if challenged, of maintaining that he is not in any way attempting to bring into discredit mainstream Protestant Christianity. However, it is unlikely that Protestant believers or even strong deists would actually find congenial the lines of argument that subsequently unfold in later sections of the book.

Briefly tabulated, these later arguments include an account of human freedom that allegedly leaves us unable to explain how an omnipotent and omniscient deity can avoid 'being the author of sin' (1772a, 8.36/103), a discussion of the capacity of miracle reports to be 'the foundation of a system of religion' (ibid., 10.36/127) that concludes that such testimony wholly fails in this regard when judged by the standards of reasoning that prevail in ordinary life, and a critique of the design argument that sees an alleged 'friend who loves sceptical paradoxes' (ibid., 11.1/132) arriving at the judgement that this argument yields a conclusion that is both useless and entirely speculative. Even the discussion of epistemological scepticism that brings the *Enquiry* to an end appears to have a marked irreligious message. Hume maintains that if we are to continue to be active inquirers in the face of our inability to refute the arguments in favour of Pyrrhonean scepticism, then we need to avoid going beyond 'the reflections of common life, methodized and corrected'; and he strongly implies that this involves our suspending judgement on such matters as 'the origin of worlds, and the situation of nature, from, and to eternity' (ibid., 12.25/162).

The next major philosophical work published by Hume was *An Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals.* This was published in 1751, just 3 years after the first publication of the *Philosophical Essays* in 1748. In this second *Enquiry*, Hume further refines his project in the *Treatise* of constructing a comprehensive account of human moral judgement that avoids invoking God's will as an explanation of what makes our moral opinions and prescriptions legitimate ones. Similarly, Hume sets out an account of human motivation that repudiates the supposition that we are entirely selfish agents and also explains how we can be motivated to act in a morally virtuous manner without being coerced by threats of divine punishment or spurious promises of divine rewards. It is noticeable, however, that in the course of this later work Hume does engage in a direct attack on what he calls the 'monkish virtues'. Despite the respect paid by many varieties of Christianity to such personal attributes as celibacy, self-mortification, penance, self-denial, and humility, Hume is happy to assure his readers that these supposed virtues should really be placed in 'the catalogue of vices' (1772b, 9.3/270).

A similar lack of approbation for the moral and social consequences of Christianity as actually manifested in the world seems also to permeate Hume's historical writings. Hume's *History of England* eventually covered the entire period from the first Roman invasion under Julius Caesar to the succession to the throne of William of Orange in 1689. However, as we noted in Chap. 1, the first volume to be published dealt with the early Stuart period rather than the era of the Britons and Saxons. Once Hume had completed his account of the Stuarts in a second volume, he then brought out two volumes covering the Tudors, and finished his narrative with two final volumes encompassing the whole stretch of events from the arrival of the Romans to the death of Richard III at the Battle of Bosworth. One of Hume's many critics accordingly took the opportunity to draw the following malicious comparison:

> For having undertaken to conjure up the spirit of absolute power, he judged it necessary to the charm, to reverse the order of things, and to evoke this frightful spectre by writing (as witches use to say their prayers) *backwards*.
>
> However the end should, in all reason, attone for the perverseness of the means. Accordingly, while one half of his pains is laid out in exposing the absurdities of *reformed religion*, the other half is suitably employed in discrediting the cause of *civil liberty*. (Hurd 1759, 304)[5]

The charge that Hume is hostile towards the cause of civil liberty is an absurd one. In many ways *The History of England* constitutes an attempt to uncover the origins of civil liberty in England precisely in order to explain how it can be preserved and strengthened. However, it might be suggested that Hurd is inadvertently understating Hume's hostility towards Christianity throughout the *History* when he mentions only Hume's criticisms of Protestantism. When Hume addresses, in a

[5] In a later edition Hurd comments in a footnote that 'it is to be presumed that, if so ingenious a writer had begun his work at the right end, he would have been led, by the evidence of so palpable a truth, to express himself more favourably, indeed more consistently, of the *English* constitution' (1765, II, 326n).

letter to John Clephane, the charge that he has written the *History* 'like a Libertine in religion', he offers the following defence of his principles of composition:

> be assured I am tolerably reserved on this head. Elliot tells me that you had entertained apprehensions of my discretion … but you will see little or no occasion for any such imputation in this work. I composed it *ad populum*, as well as *ad clerum*, and thought that scepticism was not in its place in an historical production. (1932, I, 189)

This passage strongly suggests that if Hume had not been concealing to some extent his personal sentiments, then *The History of England* would have been more aggressively critical of Christianity in all its forms. But even with Hume supposedly exercising his discretion on behalf of prudence, the overriding impression left by the *History* is that Hume delights in finding occasions to criticize both the consequences of religious beliefs and the character of people holding ecclesiastical office or possessing a reputation for piety. Admittedly, the actual events that Hume is reporting offer up these opportunities with such frequency that even the most charitable historian could scarcely pass over such a record of folly and moral corruption without making some allusion to the more egregious examples. It remains the case, however, that Hume adorns his narrative with a luxuriant profusion of incidents and personalities that display Christianity in a deeply unflattering light and almost never shows any concern to redress the balance by drawing attention to potentially positive aspects of this, or any other, religion.

While engaged in writing *The History of England*, Hume also embarked on the ill-fated project of preparing the 'Five Dissertations' for publication. As we saw in Sect. 1.1, the inclusion in this work of the two essays 'Of Suicide' and 'Of the Immortality of the Soul' brought Hume to the brink of being subjected to a legal prosecution for blasphemous libel. This gives rise to the interesting question of why these essays, rather than other material to be found in Hume's extensive range of writings on religion, attracted such a threatening response. Part of the answer might lie in a simple matter of unfortunate timing: the incumbent Attorney General in 1756 seems to have been particularly keen to indulge the persecuting zeal of the more bigoted and repressive elements of the Church of England. However, James Noxon has also identified some significant internal features of the essays in question: he argues (1973, 173) that 'Of Suicide' is the only work of Hume's in which he openly condones an act seen as wholly inconsistent with Christian morality, while the other essay has good claim to being the only work where Hume explicitly attacks, in his own voice, all of the standard arguments for an important religious doctrine in a single sustained discussion.

One important work on religion was salvaged from the 'Five Dissertations' and published by Hume during his lifetime, namely, *The Natural History of Religion*. In this work Hume addresses the question of the psychological origins of religious beliefs and also ventures some observations about the consequences of these beliefs as commonly seen in human history. Hume ostensibly seems to allow for the possibility that in a few cases religion arises from, or is at least sustained by, cogent reasoning. However, he is far less sanguine about the origins of religion amongst the generality of mankind. The religious views of most people arise, in

his judgement, from the unedifying influence of ignorance and fear. Even the transition from polytheism to monotheism, which one might expect to see presented as an instance of the benign influence of reason, is explained in terms of base flattery and grovelling appeasement. Similarly, Hume's assessment of the effects of popular religion on personal morality is that such religion mostly has harmful consequences.

If it is really possible to explain the genesis of most people's religious beliefs in terms of degrading and irrational factors, this might encourage some inquirers to entertain the supposition that no religious beliefs require any other form of explanation. Could it be the case, then, that *The Natural History of Religion* is intended to guide us towards such a denigratory conclusion? One obvious obstacle to this interpretation of Hume's intentions lies in the repeated appearance within the *Natural History* of seemingly enthusiastic endorsements of the design argument. Edward Craig's response to these endorsements is to argue that Hume is 'simply taking a strategic approach to his readership' in the sense that he has chosen to avoid provoking his readers by openly attacking religious sensibilities on two major fronts at once (1997, 31–2). Given that the central message of the *Natural History* is an unflattering account of the psychological forces responsible for the overwhelming majority of religious beliefs, Craig maintains that both prudence and the desire to overcome the deep-rooted resistance of his readers to such a negative analysis provide ample motivation for Hume to throw in some insincere reassurances about the rationality of belief in a designer deity. This reading of the text undoubtedly possesses some substantial plausibility in the light of the other instances of Humean dissimulation that we have already identified. However, further confirmation that Hume's pronouncements in favour of the design argument need to be treated with great caution is provided by the excessively strident and emphatic tone in which they are couched. The discussion in the *Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*, in contrast, is plainly calculated to leave the reader with the impression that the design argument has numerous problematic aspects. And it is difficult to see how anyone familiar with the numerous objections deployed against the design argument by the character of Philo in the *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion* could legitimately carry away the conclusion that Hume genuinely holds that the design argument is as decisive as he asserts it to be in the *Natural History*.

In the case of the *Dialogues* themselves we are confronted by what many people would regard as Hume's greatest work on the status of religious belief. However, the task of interpreting this work confronts a major problem in that the discussion is presented in terms of a series of conversations between three characters who all seem at least partially detached from Hume's own views and commitments. And matters are made worse by the fact that Philo, the character whose stance initially seems to have by far the most in common with Hume's position as displayed in his recorded private conversations, personal correspondence, and his other writings,[6] is

[6] In the light of Hume's positive comments about Academic scepticism in the *Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*, it is perhaps worth noting that Philo is the name of a prominent Academic sceptic who was also one of Cicero's principal philosophical instructors. Cleanthes, on the other

presented at the beginning of Part 12 of the *Dialogues* as endorsing the merits of the design argument in a way that is radically at variance with the incisive criticisms he deploys in earlier parts.

This is not the place to attempt a definitive untangling of the intricacies of Hume's presentational techniques in the *Dialogues*: that potentially perilous project will be attempted in Chap. 13. It is appropriate, however, to pick out some of the main themes discussed by the protagonists of the *Dialogues*. The most salient topic is the issue of what legitimate credibility is conferred by the design argument on the supposition that the cause of order in the universe possesses intelligence and foresight. But four other topics also attract considerable attention before we arrive at the concluding Part 12.

The first of these supplementary topics to arise in the *Dialogues* is the rather surprising one of the relationship between religious belief and epistemological scepticism. This rapidly develops into a discussion of the general viability of such scepticism, and it is Philo's distinctively Humean defence of mitigated epistemological scepticism that provides some of the most powerful motivation for supposing that there is a close relationship between Hume's own views and the overall position allocated to this character.

The early parts of the *Dialogues* also see considerable attention devoted to the topic of what meaning can be attached to discourse about a deity or supernatural forces. This frequently overlooked debate is conducted primarily between Cleanthes and Demea, with Demea attempting to defend against Cleanthes' criticisms the supposition that we have a viable conception of God that does not depend on analogies between God and the capacities of human minds.

When we arrive at Part 9 of the *Dialogues*, the third of our supplementary topics, the issue of what cogency is possessed by *a priori* arguments for the existence of God, suddenly becomes the principal object of discussion. Curiously, it is Cleanthes, rather than Philo, who is allocated the role of refuting the version of the cosmological argument that Demea advances as a representative example of such arguments.

Part 10 and Part 11 are then devoted to the topic of what conclusions can be reached from the existence of pain and suffering in the universe. The debate in relation to this fourth topic touches on the well-worn issue of whether the existence of these phenomena is logically consistent with the existence of an omnipotent and infinitely benevolent deity. However, Philo is more concerned to discuss two other issues. How can we legitimately infer from a universe manifesting such phenomena to the existence of such a deity even if we accept that these phenomena do not entail its non-existence? And would it be more appropriate to infer the existence of an intelligent designer who is wholly indifferent to human well-being or possesses, at best, only a very limited degree of benevolence? These four supplementary topics are discussed respectively in Chaps. 5, 4, 6 and 8.

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hand, is listed by Diogenes Laertius as one of the heads of the rival Stoic school, and he is described as follows: 'He had industry, but no natural aptitude for physics, and was extraordinarily slow' (1925, 2.VII.170).

In Part 12 of the *Dialogues* the new topic of the moral and social consequences of religion is introduced, and Philo argues with considerable vigour that these consequences are, in the case of religion as commonly found in the world, generally pernicious. However, the most striking feature of Part 12 is Philo's apparent volte-face in respect of the cogency of the design argument. Before we reach this point in the text, Philo seems to have been ruthlessly dismantling the credibility of the design argument. But in the initial pages of Part 12, Philo is represented as endorsing this argument with what appears to be a blithe and unmotivated lack of regard for all the objections that he has set out so forcefully earlier in the *Dialogues*. This unexpected turnaround constitutes the most intractable exegetical conundrum within the *Dialogues*, and it will accordingly form one of the main issues for discussion in Chap. 13. In the meantime, however, it seems appropriate to recall to mind the interpretative key that we forged from the guidance offered by Toland and Berman: an author who constructs strong arguments in support of a position proscribed by law and opposes them only with much weaker arguments or unsupported disclaimers is likely to be an author who is actually seeking in a partially concealed manner to defend precisely that position.

Chapter 4
Hume on the Intelligibility of Religious Discourse

4.1 Impressions, Ideas, and Linguistic Meaning

In the *Enquiry concerning Human Understanding* Hume sets out an account of how we form our concepts that strongly links our stock of concepts to what we can immediately encounter in experience. Hume's initial step is to acknowledge that there is a distinction between thought and the phenomena of sensation and sensory experience, but he then proceeds to argue that these phenomena play a causally crucial role in providing us with the materials for thought.

According to Hume, the existence of a distinction between thought and experience is something that is readily apparent to all of us as soon as we begin to consider the matter.

> Every one will readily allow, that there is a considerable difference between the perceptions of the mind, when a man feels the pain of excessive heat, or the pleasure of moderate warmth, and when he afterwards recalls to his memory this sensation, or anticipates it by his imagination. These faculties may mimic or copy the perceptions of the senses; but they never can entirely reach the force and vivacity of the original sentiment. (1772a, 2.1/17)

Hume suggests therefore that all the occurrent contents of the mind can be divided into two broad categories. He categorizes both sensation and thought as states in which we have what he calls 'perceptions'. But perceptions, construed in this quasi-technical sense, are then sub-divided into two further classes. One of these classes consists of thoughts or ideas, and the other class consists of impressions. Sense experience and sensation are then presented by Hume as phenomena in which we are conscious of impressions, whereas thought is construed as a matter of being conscious of ideas. And the difference between impressions and ideas is supposed to be that impressions are livelier than ideas and possess more force and vivacity.

How, though, are we supposed to interpret Hume's talk of forcefulness and vivacity? Many commentators hold (see, for example, Bennett 1971, 222–5; Penelhum 1992, 51–3; Stroud 1977, 28–9) that Hume is referring to intrinsic qualities of perceptions that are closely analogous to the sharpness and depth of colour of a photographic image. Unfortunately this interpretation makes it very

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difficult to see how Hume could hope to sort perceptions into the right categories. If we barely see the shape of a chair out of the corner of an eye, we would normally treat this as a case of having a genuine sensory experience. It seems, accordingly, that Hume needs to be in a position to say that we are conscious in such a situation of an impression of a chair. However, our awareness of the chair plainly lacks clarity and sharpness. So if we were to embrace this phenomenological interpretation of Hume's criterion for distinguishing between impressions and ideas, we would find ourselves concluding that Hume is committed to saying, wholly implausibly, that we are conscious merely of an idea of a chair rather than an impression of a chair. Conversely, if we are thinking with a great deal of anticipation of a newly published book with a visually striking cover that we are keen to buy, it seems that our mental representation of this book would be a highly salient feature of our consciousness. On the phenomenological interpretation, therefore, we would be forced to say that Hume cannot legitimately avoid the preposterous conclusion that in this situation we are aware of an impression of a book.

It seems preferable, then, to embrace Stephen Everson's suggestion (1995, 15–17) that Hume wishes us to understand a perception's force and vivacity as lying in its effects on a person's behaviour. It is, after all, the case that most everyday talk of force is best interpreted as a way of referring to something's capacity to bring about effects in the world. And Everson (1995, 15) identifies a very instructive passage in the *Treatise* where Hume not only gives a causal explication of the key notion of force but also indicates that he is using the words 'force' and 'vivacity' as ways of picking out the same feature of perceptions.

> An idea assented to *feels* different from a fictitious idea, that the fancy alone presents to us: And this different feeling I endeavour to explain by calling it a superior *force*, or *vivacity*, or *solidity*, or *firmness*, or *steadiness*. This variety of terms, which may seem so unphilosophical, is intended only to express that act of the mind, which renders realities more present to us than fictions, causes them to weigh more in the thought, and gives them a superior influence on the passions and imagination. (1739, 1.3.7.7/629)

Essentially the core of Everson's interpretation lies in the contention that the difference Hume sees in force and vivacity between impressions and ideas is a matter of the different functional role played by an impression of some object and an idea or thought of that same object. In the case of the contrast between the impressions constituted by our passions and our ideas of those same passions, Hume seems entirely explicit about this functional difference.

> A man, in a fit of anger, is actuated in a very different manner from one who only thinks of that emotion. If you tell me, that any person is in love, I easily understand your meaning, and form a just conception of his situation; but never can mistake that conception for the real disorders and agitations of the passion. (1772a, 2.2/17)

Everson accordingly extends this explanation of the difference between an internal passion and a thought so that it constitutes an explanation of the difference between all impressions and all ideas. No matter what type of impression we are having, the contribution made to a holistic explanation of a person's

behaviour by the impression is different from the contribution made by a mere idea or thought of the same thing. Everson makes use of the example of an impression of a packet of cigarettes to explain how this applies to the central case of sensory impressions:

> I can think about there being a packet of cigarettes in front of me and still continue to sit suffering from the increasingly unpleasant withdrawal symptoms. When I feel (perceive) that there is a packet in front of me, I will reach out to pluck a cigarette from the packet. I will indeed be 'actuated in a very different manner' from that which I would be were I only entertaining the thought. (1995, 17)

Once, though, we have familiarized ourselves with the distinction between impressions and ideas, a question arises about the causal relationship between these two types of perception. Hume's central thesis here is that our ideas are intimately dependent on our impressions. Despite the apparent freedom of our imaginations to generate novel ideas or thoughts at will, we actually find on closer inspection that our capacities in this area are narrowly circumscribed by the impressions that have been vouchsafed to us. We can certainly have ideas of things of which we have no experience, but the constituent elements of those ideas can always be traced back to preceding impressions.

> When we think of a golden mountain, we only join two consistent ideas, *gold*, and *mountain*, with which we were formerly acquainted. A virtuous horse we can conceive; because, from our own feeling, we can conceive virtue; and this we may unite to the figure and shape of a horse, which is an animal familiar to us. In short, all the materials of thinking are derived either from our outward or inward sentiment: The mixture and composition of these belongs alone to the mind and will. (1772a, 2.5/19)

It should be noted that in both the *Enquiry* and the *Treatise* Hume immediately follows his defence of this bold thesis by pointing out that in some rare cases the link between impressions and ideas takes a more indirect form (1772a, 2.8/20–1; 1739, 1.1.1.10/5–6). With the right kind of complicated stage setting, it is sometimes possible to have a simple, uncompounded idea that is derived not from an exactly corresponding element of our impressions but from a graduated series of very similar impressions. Hume illustrates this phenomenon with the example of someone who is familiar with most colours and their various shades but has no previous acquaintance with one particular shade of the colour blue.

> Let all the different shades of that colour, except that single one, be placed before him, descending gradually from the deepest to the lightest; it is plain, that he will perceive a blank, where that shade is wanting, and will be sensible, that there is a greater distance in that place between the contiguous colours than in any other. Now I ask, whether it be possible for him, from his own imagination, to supply this deficiency, and raise up to himself the idea of that particular shade, though it had never been conveyed to him by his senses? I believe there are few but will be of the opinion that he can (1772a, 2.8/21).

Despite his ability to find this kind of counter-example, Hume holds that it represents such an unusual and limited case that it does not constitute grounds for setting aside the general maxim that ideas are copied from preceding impressions. Not only is it very rare for this maxim to be breached, but also the idea in question comes to exist, even in these exceptional circumstances, only because

of our previous acquaintance with impressions that are very similar qualitatively to the impression that would normally have facilitated its presence within the mind. Effectively, then, Hume arrives at the conclusion that any complete and self-contained idea that a person possesses is either taken from the components of impressions vouchsafed to that person or is generated as a response to a discernible gap in an array of impressions that are very similar to one from which it could have been directly copied.

The upshot of this account of the origin of our ideas is that Hume takes himself to be in a position to offer some important guidance on how to interpret the terms used in philosophical discourse or by everyday speakers. If a word or phrase is to have a sense, it must have some idea attached to it. But philosophers and theologians, along with other abstract thinkers, unfortunately have a marked tendency to employ words as though they are meaningful even when they are not appropriately linked to any suitable idea.

> For it being usual, after the frequent use of terms, which are really significant and intelligible, to omit the idea, which we wou'd express by them, and to preserve only the custom, by which we recal the idea at pleasure; so it naturally happens, that after the frequent use of terms, which are wholly insignificant and unintelligible, we fancy them to be on the same footing with the precedent, and to have a secret meaning, which we might discover by reflection. The resemblance of their appearance deceives the mind, as is usual, and makes us imagine a thorough resemblance and conformity. (1739, 1.4.3.10/224)

Everyday speakers, on the other hand, are less susceptible than abstract thinkers to the vice of using words that have no idea whatsoever attached to them, but they remain acutely vulnerable to the error of mistaking similar ideas for each other so that a term comes to be employed without a distinct and clear meaning.

Hume maintains that both of these problems can be significantly alleviated by paying due attention to the implications of his account of how ideas are related to impressions. Ideas might be easily confused, especially by careless or hasty thinkers, but the impressions from which they are derived are easier to distinguish from each other:

> all impressions, that is, all sensations, either outward or inward, are strong and vivid: The limits between them are more exactly determined: Nor is it easy to fall into any error or mistake with regard to them. (1772a, 2.9/22)

Hence we can gain a more precise grasp on the content of any idea that might be affixed to a word or phrase by tracing it back to its source in our impressions. And in the case of a term that is actually being employed without any corresponding idea, the discovery that there are no antecedent impressions capable of generating an idea that would legitimate its pattern of use should disabuse us of the supposition that this term is being used in a meaningful manner.

> When we entertain, therefore, any suspicion, that a philosophical term is employed without any meaning or idea (as is but too frequent) we need but enquire, *from what impression is that supposed idea derived?* And if it be impossible to assign any, this will serve to confirm our suspicion. By bringing ideas into so clear a light, we may reasonably hope to remove all dispute, which may arise, concerning their nature and reality. (ibid.)

4.2 Talking About God

The details of Hume's genetic account of how ideas and the materials of thought are linked to impressions are unlikely to strike modern readers as having much credibility. However, the broader contention that our concepts, and hence what we can meaningfully talk about, are limited in important ways by the boundaries of our experience possesses substantially more plausibility. If we cannot give any specification of how an alleged concept would be appropriately applied in response to differences in the way the world might present itself to us in experience, then that does seem to provide strong grounds for concluding that we are probably confronted by the illusion of a concept rather than an actual concept. And an illusion of a corresponding concept is not sufficient to make a word or phrase meaningful. As Gaskin summarizes the matter:

> In general, if someone claims to employ a word with a distinct meaning but cannot locate the empirical situation in which its meaning could be displayed ('cashed' in Ian Ramsey's useful metaphor), it is at the very least a reasonable question to ask whether and how he understands the word, or, in Hume's more usual terms, whether he has a confused idea or has in fact got any idea. It is a reasonable question because of the very large number of terms for which empirical 'cashability' *does* count as success in a quest for meaning. (1988, 100)

It is important to keep in mind that this line of thought does not amount to a recycling of the verification principle wielded so enthusiastically during the heyday of logical positivism. The logical positivists were primarily concerned with the issue of whether particular sentences were used in a way that allowed us to treat them as conclusively or at least defeasibly verified by potential experiences. If such verification were not possible for a sentence s when employed in a particular way, the logical positivists concluded that s, used in that way, was devoid of meaning. Hume is instead inviting us to concentrate on the sense not of sentences but of the constituent parts of sentences. If all the terms used within a grammatically well-formed sentence have empirically cashable meaning, then Hume seems quite prepared to concede that the whole sentence is intelligible and meaningful even if we cannot devise any empirical test of its probable truth or falsity. Moreover, Hume's conceptual empiricism is couched, as Gaskin indicates, more in the form of a challenge rather than a dogmatic principle. We can be assured that a putative concept that does mark a potential difference in experience is a genuine concept that can give semantic content to an associated word or phrase. However, the discovery that a putative concept does not mark such a difference merely generates a defeasible presumption that it is not a genuine concept. Hume leaves open the possibility that this presumption can be overturned in particular cases. He is clear, though, that in the case of a supposed concept without recognizable empirical content, the working assumption should be that it is not a genuine concept until we have been provided with a full and detailed account of how it manages to overcome this deficiency.

At this point it is natural to ask how the putative concept of God or a deity fares when examined in the light of the conceptual empiricism espoused by Hume. Given Hume's irreligious stance, it might be thought that he would at least be tempted to

argue that we do not have a genuine concept of God and that talk about God is literally nonsense. And we find, in fact, that Philo does set out in Part 2 of the *Dialogues* an argument from empiricist principles for the conclusion that we lack any legitimate conception of God's attributes.

> Our ideas reach no farther than our experience: We have no experience of divine attributes and operations: I need not conclude my syllogism: You can draw the inference yourself. And it is a pleasure to me (and I hope to you too) that just reasoning and sound piety here concur in the same conclusion, and both of them establish the adorably mysterious and incomprehensible nature of the supreme Being. (1779, 2.142–3)

The task of arriving at a proper evaluation of this argument is complicated by the fact that Philo asserts in the immediately preceding paragraph that a deity definitely exists. Arguing in tandem with Demea, Philo ostentatiously repudiates atheism in the following terms:

> But surely, where reasonable men treat these subjects, the question can never be concerning the *being*, but only the *nature* of the Deity. The former truth, as you well observe, is unquestionable and self-evident. (ibid., 2.142)

It seems, therefore, that Philo is, at this stage in the *Dialogues*, purporting to combine the belief that God exists with the view that we can say nothing meaningful about God's nature.

Now it is quite true that Philo's more exaggeratedly pious declamations during all but the final part of the *Dialogues* are frequently accompanied by responses and comments from the other characters that indicate that they have serious reservations about Philo's sincerity. When Philo purports in Part 1 to be supporting Demea's contention that religious belief is best served by emphasising the weakness of human reason, Pamphilus records the following observation about the reaction of the other participants in the discussion:

> While Philo pronounced these words, I could observe a smile in the countenances both of Demea and Cleanthes. That of Demea seemed to imply an unreserved satisfaction in the doctrines delivered: But in Cleanthes's features, I could distinguish an air of finesse; as if he perceived some raillery or artificial malice in the reasonings of Philo. (ibid., 1.132)

Moreover, in Part 11 the nominal alliance between Demea and Philo dissolves in considerable acrimony. Demea accuses Philo of 'betraying that holy cause, which you seemingly espoused', and Cleanthes tells Demea that 'your friend Philo, from the beginning, has been amusing himself at both our expence; and it must be confessed, that the injudicious reasoning of our vulgar theology has given him but too just a handle of ridicule' (ibid., 11.213). Thus it might well be the case that Hume is inviting us to reject as insincere posturing Philo's affirmation of the existence of a God whose nature is, in every respect, utterly beyond human comprehension.

If, however, this affirmation is intended to be read as expressing a position that someone might genuinely attempt to embrace, it is difficult to avoid sympathizing with the pointed question posed by Cleanthes:

> 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? (ibid., 4.158)

It can readily be conceded that God, if such a being exists, possesses many powers and attributes that surpass human understanding. However, if there were nothing at all that we can meaningfully say about God other than that he is an existing thing, it seems that we would not even be in a position to assert correctly and meaningfully that God is not, for example, a banana. Just as we have the idea or concept of a banana, we also have the idea or concept of something that is not a banana. So if none of our ideas were to correspond to God's real nature, then the assertion that God is not a banana would either be false or devoid of sense. And as it certainly does not seem to be appropriate to describe God as being a banana, we would presumably have to conclude that the sentence 'God is not a banana' is meaningless. Worse still, the same attribution of being meaningless would also apply to more traditional and apparently pious descriptions of God as perfect, wise, or immutable. It appears, therefore, that the view that God exists but his nature and attributes are wholly ineffable and entirely beyond the reach of our ideas is one that needs to be rejected.

Significantly, Hume himself explicitly maintains in the *Enquiry* that we can be conceptual empiricists while having a complex idea of an entity that meets many of the requirements for being God even according to the standards of quite sophisticated religious believers. According to Hume's official story, the idea of God is rather like the idea of a golden mountain: even if we have never met or directly encountered either of these two things, we can construct both complex ideas by making use of various components taken from impressions of other entities.

> When we analyze our thoughts or ideas, however compounded or sublime, we always find, that they resolve themselves into such simple ideas as were copied from a precedent feeling or sentiment. Even those ideas, which, at first view, seem the most wide of this origin, are found, upon a nearer scrutiny, to be derived from it. The idea of God, as meaning *an infinitely intelligent, wise, and good Being*, arises from reflecting on the operations of our own mind, and augmenting, without limit, those qualities of goodness and wisdom. (1772a, 2.6/19)

Moreover, this account of the origins and content of our idea of God seems to be the one espoused by Cleanthes throughout the *Dialogues*. Cleanthes proves to be a vigorous critic of all of Demea's attempts to maintain that God has no substantial similarities to a human mind, and he accuses people favouring that view of having stumbled into a confused form of atheism (see 1779, 4.158–9). From Cleanthes' perspective, the analogy between God and the human mind cannot be rejected without subverting all genuine religious belief.

> Thus, in the present subject, if we abandon all human analogy, as seems your intention, Demea, I am afraid we abandon all religion, and retain no conception of the great object of our adoration. (ibid., 11.203)

There is, however, a high price to be paid for Cleanthes' determination to cleave to a concept of God that meets empiricist constraints of the kind espoused by Hume. Although his version of the concept does have some capacity to meet the devotional needs of a significant range of religious believers, it is nevertheless not the concept of God defended by many theologians. This latter concept would include, for example, the requirements that God should be immutable, eternal in the sense of existing outside time, and perfectly simple. And the problem here is

that in so far as we have an adequate idea of human intelligence, we have a conception of something that essentially lacks these further properties. The human mind strikes us as being in a state of ceaseless flux, intrinsically time-bound, and containing within itself a bewildering array of volitions, sensory experiences, passions, mental images, and acts of judgement.[1] Thus the attempt to maintain that divine intelligence is like human intelligence except for the fact that it has these curious additional properties does not enhance our understanding of the divine nature. In fact it can plausibly be represented as generating only incoherence and confusion, as these additional properties seem inconsistent with properties that are actually constitutive of human mental activity.

Of course it might be suggested that the subversion of this ultra-demanding theological conception of God is not something that should be regretted by religious believers. There is a strong case for supposing that live religious belief affecting the heart rather than just the intellect requires the religious devotee to construe his or her relationship with God as a close and intimate relationship with another person, albeit a much more powerful and ethically superior person. Yet the view of God as immutable, existing outside of time, and wholly simple and indivisible has the effect, if it becomes the object of close attention, of making it psychologically difficult to sustain the supposition that God is the kind of entity that can have a close personal concern for the welfare of human beings or any other sentient creatures. Thus there is some temptation to conclude that assimilating the divine mind to the human in the way implied by Cleanthes' explication of the concept of God potentially represents a welcome return from inert theological abstractions to a living religious faith.

In reality, however, religious belief cannot so easily cast aside the impulse to ascribe attributes to God that are in tension with the supposition that God and the religious devotee are mutual participants in a personal relationship. Hume's account of the primary psychological origins of religious belief in the *Natural History of Religion* (1777c, 138–44) stresses the extent to which lively religious belief is bound up with such passions as fear and melancholy.[2] This fear leads to an escalating urge to flatter and court the invisible agents seen as influencing human fortune, and eventually this process reaches its apogee in the identification of one such agent as all-powerful and possessing all possible perfections, including such perfections as immutability, timeless existence, and a unitary nature. Hume acerbically notes (1777c, 159) that 'such refined ideas, being somewhat disproportioned to vulgar

[1] In the *Treatise* Hume places great emphasis on the mutability and inner complexity of the human mind: 'The mind is a kind of theatre, where several perceptions successively make their appearance; pass, re-pass, glide away, and mingle in an infinite variety of postures and situations. There is properly no *simplicity* in it at one time, nor *identity* in different; whatever natural propension we may have to imagine that simplicity and identity' (1739, 1.4.6.4/253). And however much we are inclined to insist that there is more to a human mind than a mere flow of changing perceptions, it does seem utterly unclear how anything at all similar to human thought could take place without change and variability also being present.

[2] Hume's naturalistic account of religious belief, with its emphasis on belief-forming mechanisms that are not oriented towards the discovery of the truth, is discussed in more detail in Chap. 10, especially Sects. 10.2 and 10.3.

comprehension, remain not long in their original purity', but the impulse towards such a sublimation of the concept of God is sufficiently strong, especially when reinforced by early education and the artifice of priests, to make the religious believer uneasy and troubled if forced to deny God these additional perfections. The standard posture of such a believer is therefore one of unacknowledged mental compartmentalisation: in most contexts the focus is firmly on the supposed personal relationship with God, but this is combined with a willingness, when the occasion arises, to ignore what needs to be true of God to make such a relationship possible in favour of emphasizing God's greatness and perfection. Cleanthes' articulation and defence of an empiricist conception of God, in contrast, forces the believer to choose between these two aspects of his or her devotional attitude, and this characteristically leaves the believer with the inchoate feeling that embracing the stance advocated by Cleanthes is insufficiently pious and fails to pay due respect to what Demea calls 'the adorable mysteriousness of the divine nature' (1779, 2.145).

So far, then, we have suggested that Cleanthes' attempt to rely on a concept of God that meets empiricist constraints on intelligibility yields an understanding of God's nature that fails to meet the requirements of many theologians and is also unlikely to satisfy the emotional needs of ordinary religious believers. However, there is at least one further substantial problem with Cleanthes' undertaking. In the context of religious apologetics, there is often some tactical advantage to be gained from invoking the thesis of God's inscrutability. When theists are confronted, for example, by facts about the world that might suggest that God has no concern for the welfare of individual sentient creatures, there is a tendency to reply that God's inscrutability means that his goals and methods of achieving them are so opaque to us that we cannot form any appropriate conclusions, even from an everyday perspective, about God's goodness on the basis of such facts. Cleanthes' stress on the important analogies between the divine mind and the human mind, however, makes this appeal to inscrutability far less convincing. If our conception of the divine mind is, as Cleanthes maintains (ibid., 4.158), 'a mind resembling the human (for I know of no other)', then it seems that everyday standards of inference and evidence give some weight to the conclusion that phenomena that would be construed as signs of malice or indifference if wrought by human agents should also be construed as signs of malice or indifference on the part of God.[3] As no one is maintaining that the divine mind is exactly similar to human minds, this conclusion would only be weakly supported by the existence of such phenomena. But it does seem that there are the materials here for an analogical argument that is at least as compelling as an analogical argument for the supposition that the order and means-end adaptation that can be found in the universe are signs of the existence of a supernatural designer.

[3] As we shall see in the next chapter, Hume is not inclined to embrace the view that beliefs formed in accordance with these everyday standards qualify as genuinely justified by the standards identified by philosophers. Nevertheless, everyday standards of evidence and appropriate inference remain crucially important because they exert far greater influence than philosophical standards over the content of the non-epistemic beliefs that we actually find ourselves forming and retaining.

4.3 Relative Ideas and the Illusion of Piety

Although Cleanthes maintains in the *Dialogues* that the design argument succeeds in proving 'at once the existence of a Deity, and his similarity to human mind and intelligence' (ibid., 2.143), the formal position of the other two principal participants in the discussion is that the existence of God is not open to dispute and hence does not require the support of this or any other argument. Demea holds that God's existence is self-evident.

> No man; no man, at least, of common sense, I am persuaded, ever entertained a serious doubt with regard to a truth so certain and self-evident. The question is not concerning the *being* but the *nature* of *God*. (ibid., 2.141)

And Philo ostensibly concurs with Demea's judgement: an allegedly uncontroversial point about causation is presented as sufficient to assure us that God exists:

> Nothing exists without a cause; and the original cause of this universe (whatever it be) we call God; and piously ascribe to him every species of perfection. Whoever scruples this fundamental truth deserves every punishment, which can be inflicted amongst philosophers, to wit, the greatest ridicule, contempt and disapprobation. (ibid., 2.142)

Philo's suggestion that God is to be construed as whatever is ultimately responsible for the existence of the universe in its current form opens up the possibility of there being a way of understanding discourse about God that does not rely on locating impressions within our experience that can give content to our ideas of God's attributes. Hume holds that in the absence of ideas that have content taken from impressions, we would not be able to think about the world at all. But he also acknowledges the existence of an auxiliary mode of thought that involves the use of what he calls 'relative ideas'.[4]

In the *Treatise*, for example, he makes the claim, when discussing the idea of external existence, that it is 'impossible for us so much as to conceive or form an idea of any thing specifically different from ideas and impressions' (1739, 1.2.6.8/67). This might suggest to the modern reader that Hume holds that it is impossible for us to conceive or meaningfully speak of mind-independent objects lying behind and causing our ideas and impressions. Hume would accordingly emerge as some kind of idealist or phenomenalist. However, this reading of Hume seems to be ruled out by his insistence later in the *Treatise* that we cannot help believing in the existence of 'both an internal and external world' (ibid., 1.4.2.57/218). Similarly, Hume asserts in the *Enquiry* that it is 'a question of fact, whether the perceptions of the senses be produced by external objects, resembling them' (1772a, 12.12/153), and he refers to a conflict between our natural instincts and 'a more rational opinion, that the perceptions are only representations of

[4] Current discussion of the role played within Hume's account of intelligibility and meaningfulness by relative ideas principally has its origins in Galen Strawson's influential critique (1989; 2002) of the supposition that Hume holds a regularity theory of causation. And the suggestion in this section that there is some prima facie scope for construing our idea of God as a relative idea draws extensively on Strawson's account of how a relative idea functions.

something external' (ibid., 12.14/154). If it were genuinely the case that we could not conceive or speak meaningfully of mind-independent objects causing our perceptions, then we could not believe or be of the opinion that such objects exist. Nor would it be a question of fact whether mind-independent objects generate some of our impressions: although we might be under the illusion that such entities could play this role, this apparently coherent hypothesis would actually possess no content whatsoever. If Hume's position here is to be a self-consistent one, then it seems clear that we must interpret him as allowing that there is some way of thinking and meaningfully talking about things that we are incapable of conceiving as specifically different from our ideas and impressions. And Hume's own account of how this is possible invokes relative ideas:

> The farthest we can go towards a conception of external objects, when suppos'd *specifically* different from our perceptions, is to form a relative idea of them, without pretending to comprehend the related objects. (1739, 1.2.6.9/68)

What, though, is a relative idea? Strawson provides some useful assistance here with the following everyday example of a relative idea:

> the idea one has of something when one can refer to it only as, say, 'whatever it was that caused this mess'. In this case one may have no positive conception of the nature of x. (Except, perhaps, that it is a physical phenomenon. But then, who knows? It may not even be a physical phenomenon.) (1989, 52; author's own brackets).

This particular relative idea obviously displays some close similarities to the way in which Philo talks about God when he is asserting in Part 2 of the *Dialogues* that God's existence is unquestionable. As we saw above, Philo maintains that 'the original cause of this universe (whatever it be) we call God' (1779, 2.142); and if we modify this formula slightly to place the emphasis on the regularities and examples of means-end adaptation manifest within the universe, we arrive at the claim that God is whatever it is that has caused or still causes the universe to move from one state to another in so regular and uniform a manner and to exhibit such a profusion of instances of means-end adaptation. It is tempting, therefore, to conclude that Hume's full account of intelligibility and linguistic meaning provides scope for meaningful discourse about God that does not rely upon the expedient of using an analogy between God and human minds to give the concept of God some impression-derived content. Instead of invoking this analogy, we can apparently make use instead of a relative idea of God as something that constitutes the cause of the universe or certain phenomena within the universe.

Strawson's own interest in the notion of a relative idea primarily lies in the attempt to use it to explain how Hume's theory of meaning can allow for thoughts and beliefs about causation without construing causation as nothing more than exceptionless regularities. Strawson's suggestion is that although Hume holds that all the impression-derived content of our idea of causation comes from examples of constant conjunction and our psychological reaction to such regularities, he also manages through the medium of a relative idea to think of and potentially refer to something that underlies and explains these constant conjunctions (1989, 122–4).

The problem with the appeal to the relative ideas in this context is that the most compelling examples of how relative ideas function in ordinary, non-controversial situations are ones where the potential referents are picked out in virtue of their causal relationship to things encountered in experience. In the case of Strawson's own example, messes are things that we can detect perceptually, and our relative idea of x is an idea of something that lies in a causal relationship with one of these perceptually detectable phenomena. We are accordingly in a position to give a specification of the content of this relative idea that does not depend for its own intelligibility on a prior understanding of the very idea we are seeking to comprehend.

When we turn, however, to the supposition that we have a relative idea of a causal relation that goes beyond mere constant conjunction, Strawson seems in danger of falling into the circular procedure of using that very idea within the specification of the formula that is supposed to give it content and a referring function. Thus we find, for example, that Strawson attempts to specify our alleged relative idea of regularity-transcending causation as 'that in reality in virtue of which reality is regular in the way that it is' or 'that in reality which is in fact "the reason of the conjunction" of any two objects' (ibid., 122). The way 'reason' and 'in virtue of' are used here clearly implies that we are supposed to pick out regularity-transcending causation as whatever it is that causes the constant conjunctions that give us our beliefs about causal connections. If the notion of causation invoked in this specification needs itself to be interpreted as regularity-transcending causation, then we are failing to make any progress. However, there appears to be scope to modify this specification so that there is no longer any appearance of circularity. One possibility would be to say that we have a relative idea of regularity-transcending causation as something unknown and lying beyond our apprehension that is nearly always present when constant conjunctions endure over time and survive testing. Alternatively, we might say this relative idea is an idea of something that is such that if it were absent, then the regularities observable in the universe would mostly be absent too. If we do live in a world in which regularity-transcending causation exists, then both approaches seem to yield an intelligible formula that would allow reference to such causation despite our acknowledged lack of understanding of its nature.

In the case of a relative idea of God, however, the issue of potential circularity is far less troublesome. As long as we have any intelligible notion of causation, then we appear to be in a good position to speak meaningfully of whatever has caused the universe or has caused the universe to operate in a regular manner and contain many instances of means-end adaptation. What is problematic, however, is the supposition that all that is required for something to be appropriately classified as God is that it should possess these particular attributes.

At the very least it seems that in order to deserve the title 'God' the cause of the universe or the universe's order would need to possess intelligence and foresight. It also seems essential that this cause should be some kind of person. And intelligence and foresight are not, of themselves, sufficient to guarantee personhood: an ant possesses a primitive form of intelligence but it does not constitute a person. Moreover, it is not implausible to maintain that God needs to be a self-sufficient being in the sense of not depending on a cause other than itself for its existence.

Unfortunately something could satisfy all the formal requirements for being the cause of the universe or the cause of the orderly nature of the universe without being self-sufficient, intelligent, or a person. The idea of whatever is ultimately responsible for the existence of the universe in its current form may well be an unproblematic instance of a relative idea, but it is a relative idea that has such thin content that many things that would not count as God could legitimately play the role of its referent.

It seems, therefore, that Philo's ostensible argument that God must exist because the universe or at least the order within it must have a cause is nothing more than verbal conjuring. Even if we set aside the question of why we should concede that the universe needs a cause, Philo wholly fails to provide any grounds for supposing that such a cause has the attributes required of a genuine deity. Philo has, in effect, hijacked the term 'God' in order to transform it into a way of talking about an ultimate cause of unknown nature: anyone who believes that an ultimate cause certainly or even probably exists thus becomes a nominal believer in the existence of God, and the prejudicial term 'atheist' becomes almost devoid of application. Given the opprobrium faced by genuine atheists in the eighteenth century, such a result would undoubtedly have been welcomed by many people who had arrived at the conclusion that the God hypothesis was false or were suspending judgement on the issue. The upshot of Philo's verbal ingenuity, therefore, is that he opportunely equips the atheist or agnostic with a harmless way of affecting a socially helpful level of piety while making no concessions of substance on the key metaphysical and religious issues.

Chapter 5
Epistemological Scepticism and Religious Belief

5.1 Hume's Scepticism About Justification

Even a cursory examination of the *Treatise* and the *Enquiry concerning Human Understanding* suffices to uncover a large number of passages that indicate that Hume is committed to an extremely wide-ranging and radical form of epistemological scepticism. Unlike some alleged sceptics, Hume is not merely calling into question our ability to know things for certain: his target is rather our supposed capacity to have beliefs that possess any positive degree of epistemic justification. Classical Pyrrhonean sceptics of the kind exemplified by Sextus Empiricus denied that any belief, no matter how seemingly straightforward and initially plausible, possessed more epistemic justification than any other belief (see Bailey 2002, 135–7). And in the case of the overwhelming majority of beliefs, Hume seems content to embrace this Pyrrhonean attitude.[1]

In the *Treatise*, for example, Hume declares that he has shown that 'the understanding, when it acts alone, and according to its most general principles, entirely subverts itself, and leaves not the lowest degree of evidence in any proposition, either in philosophy or common life' (1739, 1.4.7.7/267–8). He also makes the following claim about the senses and the understanding:

> Tis impossible upon any system to defend either our understanding or senses; and we but expose them farther when we endeavour to justify them in that manner. As the sceptical doubt arises naturally from a profound and intense reflection on those subjects, it always encreases, the farther we carry our reflections, whether in opposition or conformity to it. Carelessness and in-attention alone can afford us any remedy (ibid., 1.4.2.57/218).

[1] The only beliefs that might possibly be viewed by Hume as wholly immune to Pyrrhonean doubt are a person's beliefs about the content of his or her present perceptions. In the *Treatise* (1739, 1.4.2.7/190), Hume declares, 'for since all actions and sensations of the mind are known to us by consciousness, they must necessarily appear in every particular what they are, and be what they appear. Every thing that enters the mind, being in *reality* a perception, 'tis impossible any thing shou'd to *feeling* appear different. This were to suppose, that even where we are most intimately conscious, we might be mistaken'.

A. Bailey and D. O'Brien, *Hume's Critique of Religion: 'Sick Men's Dreams'*,
The New Synthese Historical Library 72, DOI 10.1007/978-94-007-6615-0_5,

The sceptical import of the above comments seems to be confirmed by the remarks that Hume makes in the conclusion to Book 1 of the *Treatise* when he repudiates the supposition that abstract and metaphysical reflection never has any significant influence upon us. Hume offers this striking portrait of the results of his philosophical investigations:

> The *intense* view of these manifold contradictions and imperfections in human reason has so wrought upon me, and heated my brain, that I am ready to reject all belief and reasoning, and can look upon no opinion even as more probable or likely than another. Where am I, or what? From what causes do I derive my existence, and to what condition shall I return? Whose favour shall I court, and whose anger must I dread? What beings surround me? and on whom have I any influence, or who have any influence on me? I am confounded with all these questions, and begin to fancy myself in the most deplorable condition imaginable, inviron'd with the deepest darkness, and utterly depriv'd of the use of every member and faculty. (ibid., 1.4.7.8/268–9)

The *Enquiry* too features numerous remarks that seem to be clear manifestations of a commitment to a radical form of scepticism. On the issue of the justification of our beliefs about the external world, for instance, Hume appears quite uncompromising.

> It is a question of fact, whether the perceptions of the senses be produced by external objects, resembling them: How shall this question be determined? By experience surely; as all other questions of a like nature. But here experience is, and must be entirely silent. The mind has never any thing present to it but the perceptions, and cannot possibly reach any experience of their connexion with objects. The supposition of such a connexion is, therefore, without any foundation in reasoning. (1772a, 12.12/153)

And when Hume is discussing broader forms of scepticism, he remarks that when the sceptic displays his more profound arguments regarding the epistemic credentials of our inferences regarding matters of fact, he 'seems to have ample matter of triumph' (ibid., 12.22/159). Indeed Hume insists that the force of this Pyrrhonean doubt is such that nothing but 'the strong power of natural instinct' can free us from it (ibid., 12.25/162). The arguments themselves, according to Hume, cannot be successfully opposed by better arguments. The humbling result of the encounter with the arguments for radical epistemological scepticism is the realization that all inquirers, irrespective of their intellectual pretensions or their sphere of operations, are inevitably constrained to 'act and reason and believe; though they are not able, by their most diligent enquiry, to satisfy themselves concerning the foundations of these operations, or to remove the objections, which may be raised against them' (ibid., 12.23/160).

Nor does the scepticism that seems to emerge so strongly from Hume's writings consist merely of unsupported assertions about the weakness of our intellectual faculties. Within the *Treatise* Hume deploys some lengthy and highly complex arguments in favour of what are frequently interpreted as sceptical conclusions.

The best known of these arguments is Hume's argument in favour of the contention that '*even after the observation of the frequent or constant conjunction of objects, we have no reason to draw any inference concerning any object beyond those of which we have had experience*' (1739, 1.3.12.20/139; Hume's emphasis). Hume

claims that all such inferences are founded on the principle '*that instances, of which we have had no experience, must resemble those, of which we have had experience, and that the course of nature continues always uniformly the same*' (ibid., 1.3.6.4/89), and he argues that it is impossible to justify this crucial presupposition.

Hume also seems to put before us a line of argument that ultimately yields the conclusion that we can never give any reasons for our belief in the existence of external objects. In the course of a discussion of the origins of this belief, Hume maintains that the immediate objects of the senses are always mind-dependent perceptions. He then appears to argue that our resulting inability to observe a positive correlation between our perceptions and independently existing material objects means that we are completely unable to justify our belief in the existence of such objects.

> Tis impossible, therefore, that from the existence or any of the qualities of the former [i.e. perceptions], we can ever form any conclusion concerning the existence of the latter [i.e. external objects], or ever satisfy our reason in this particular. (ibid., 1.4.2.47/212)

Furthermore arguments virtually identical to the two arguments picked out above can be found in the *Enquiry*. The argument that it is impossible to justify the uniformity principle reappears in Section 4, which bears the title 'Sceptical doubts concerning the Operations of the Understanding'. Hume summarizes our epistemic predicament in respect of causal reasoning in the following terms:

> We have said, that all arguments concerning existence are founded on the relation of cause and effect; that our knowledge of that relation is derived entirely from experience; and that all our experimental conclusions proceed upon the supposition, that the future will be conformable to the past. To endeavour, therefore, the proof of this last supposition by probable arguments, or arguments regarding existence, must be evidently going in a circle, and taking that for granted, which is the very point in question. (1772a, 4.19/35–6)

And a more compact version of Hume's apparent argument that we can never justify the supposition that our perceptions are caused by external objects recurs in Section 12, where it is presented as an example of a topic 'in which the profounder and more philosophical sceptics will always triumph, when they endeavour to introduce an universal doubt into all subjects of human knowledge and enquiry' (ibid., 12.14/153).

The most wide-ranging negative epistemological argument to be found in Hume's writings appears only in the *Treatise*. Part 4 of the *Treatise* is entitled 'Of the sceptical and other systems of philosophy' and in the first section of that part, 'Of scepticism with regard to reason', Hume presents a two stage argument that purports to show that even the conclusions reached in the demonstrative sciences cannot legitimately be regarded as more than probably true, and that no purportedly probable claim ever possesses any greater degree of probability than that possessed by its logical contrary (1739, 1.4.1.1–6/180–3). Thus we are apparently confronted by an elaborate piece of reasoning which offers support to a radical form of scepticism that encompasses all beliefs that are capable of motivating human action. Its pervasive nature stems from the fact that all beliefs that require any inferential support plausibly lie within its scope, and Hume appears to hold that the inner and outer senses can, of

themselves, without any form of assistance, tell us nothing about events removed even marginally from us in terms of either space or time. From Hume's point of view, even an expectation about what will happen to us in the next millionth of a second cannot be justified by the senses without supplementation by some form of inference or fallible transition of thought. And the radical nature of the argument is a consequence of the fact that it deliberately targets not just the supposition that we can have certain knowledge as a result of demonstrative reasoning but also the supposition that any form of inference can yield conclusions that enjoy better epistemic justification than contrary claims. It is also significant that Hume's overt reservations about the argument at issue here are confined to his assertion that its power to induce genuine suspension of belief is very limited, and he conspicuously refrains from giving us any indication that he believes that the argument contains an inferential fallacy or a false premise.

This particular argument fails to find a place in the *Enquiry*. However, its role in Hume's overall presentation of the case for radical epistemological scepticism is taken over by two other sceptical lines of thought. Hume argues that the paradoxes that seem to arise in the fields of mathematical reasoning and geometry, particularly in respect of infinite divisibility, serve to cast doubt on the intellectual credentials of demonstrative reasoning (1772a, 12.18–20/156–8). And in the case of reasoning regarding matters of fact rather than relations of ideas, Hume explicitly maintains in the *Enquiry* that his discussion of causal reasoning and the uniformity principle yields sceptical conclusions. In Section 12 Hume refers to the sceptic deploying 'those *philosophical* objections, which arise from more profound researches' (ibid., 12.22/159), and he then goes on to summarize the discussion of causal reasoning that is presented in Section 4. According to Hume, such reflections constitute a powerful component in the sceptic's case against the ability of our inferential practices to yield epistemically justified conclusions.

> While the sceptic insists upon these topics, he shows his force, or rather, indeed, his own and our weakness; and seems, for the time at least, to destroy all assurance and conviction. These arguments might be displayed at greater length, if any durable good or benefit to society could ever be expected to result from them. (ibid.)

Despite this allegiance to a sceptical view of the availability of epistemic justification, Hume is very careful to refrain from endorsing the contention that reflection on sceptical arguments will or should lead to suspension of belief. Indeed it is one of the most characteristic features of Hume's philosophical stance that he seems to delight in exposing the lack of justification for whole categories of beliefs while also maintaining that it would be pointless to attempt to discard these beliefs.

In the *Treatise*, for example, Hume immediately follows his exposition of his most overt and wide-ranging argument for radical scepticism by denying that this argument has any power to push us into wholesale suspension of judgement. Belief and inference are inevitable human activities even in the face of powerful and irrefutable sceptical arguments.

> Nature, by an absolute and uncontroulable necessity has determin'd us to judge as well as to breathe and feel; nor can we any more forbear viewing certain objects in a stronger and

> fuller light, upon account of their customary connexion with a present impression, than we can hinder ourselves from thinking as long as we are awake, or seeing the surrounding bodies, when we turn our eyes towards them in broad sun-shine. (1739, 1.4.1.7/183)

This same theme is also forcefully expressed in the course of the *Enquiry*. In Section 5 Hume praises 'the ACADEMIC or SCEPTICAL philosophy' as serving to keep in check 'the supine indolence of the mind, its rash arrogance, its lofty pretensions, and its superstitious credulity' (1772a, 5.1/41). However, he also reassures us that such scepticism does not pose a threat to the beliefs that are needed to guide our actions towards successful outcomes.

> Nor need we fear, that this philosophy, while it endeavours to limit our enquiries to common life, should ever undermine the reasonings of common life, and carry its doubts so far as to destroy all action, as well as speculation. Nature will always maintain her rights, and prevail in the end over any abstract reasoning whatsoever. (ibid., 5.2/41)

Similarly, the overriding message of Section 12 is that although opposing non-sceptical reasoning cannot rebut Pyrrhonean argumentation, the practical consequences of these sceptical arguments are strictly circumscribed by human psychology. Any suspension of judgement that might be initiated by Pyrrhonean reflections is dramatically unstable, and it is not something that can be sustained for any significant length of time. Moreover, Hume seems to be of the opinion that it is extremely fortunate for us that our natural belief-forming mechanisms are so obdurate and intractable.

> But a PYRRHONIAN cannot expect, that his philosophy will have any constant influence on the mind: Or if it had, that its influence would be beneficial to society. On the contrary, he must acknowledge, if he will acknowledge any thing, that all human life must perish, were his principles universally and steadily to prevail. All discourse, all action would immediately cease; and men remain in a total lethargy, till the necessities of nature, unsatisfied, put an end to their miserable existence. (ibid., 12.23/160)

Hume does hold, however, that a stable and potentially beneficial intellectual posture can ultimately arise from the causal interaction between arguments for radical epistemological scepticism and the psychological mechanisms that underpin our beliefs.

> There is, indeed, a more *mitigated* scepticism, or ACADEMICAL philosophy, which may be both durable and useful, and which may, in part, be the result of this PYRRHONISM, or *excessive* scepticism, when its undistinguished doubts are, in some measure, corrected by common sense and reflection. (ibid., 12.24/161)

It is important to note that this process of correction is not a matter of coming to see any inferential flaws or false premises in the arguments used by radical sceptics of a Pyrrhonean kind. In order to become Humean mitigated sceptics, we need to become both 'thoroughly convinced of the force of the PYRRHONIAN doubt' (ibid., 12.25/162) and convinced that only the raw causal power of our instinctive belief-forming mechanisms stands between us and the total destruction of all action-guiding beliefs. Once this has been achieved, we can calmly embrace the sceptical conclusion that we have no epistemically justified beliefs, with the possible exception of beliefs about the content of our present perceptions, while relying

on those belief-forming mechanisms to provide us with all the other beliefs we need in order to act in the world.

5.2 Epistemological Scepticism in the *Dialogues*

It seems clear that in Part 1 of the *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion* Philo is expounding Hume's mitigated scepticism or Academic philosophy as set out in the final section of the *Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*. Philo's initial exposition of his sceptical stance culminates in a warning against trying to found the principles of religion on rational reflection that closely parallels a key conclusion that Hume draws in his own person in the *Enquiry*. According to Philo, once we have given due consideration to the weakness of human reason, it becomes apparent that this faculty cannot serve as a suitable means of support for religious belief.

> When the coherence of the parts of a stone, or even that composition of parts, which renders it extended; when these familiar objects, I say, are so inexplicable, and contain circumstances so repugnant and contradictory; with what assurance can we decide concerning the origin of worlds, or trace their history from eternity to eternity? (1779, 1.131–2)

In Section 12 of the *Enquiry* Hume expresses the same thought in very similar terms, but the context is one in which Hume is explicitly presenting his own account of the intellectual posture that arises from mitigated scepticism. Thus there is very little scope for denying that Hume has made Philo, at least on this particular occasion, a mouthpiece for a key element of the philosophical outlook defended in the *Enquiry*.

> While we cannot give a satisfactory reason, why we believe, after a thousand experiments, that a stone will fall, or fire burn; can we ever satisfy ourselves concerning any determination, which we may form, with regard to the origin of worlds, and the situation of nature, from, and to eternity? (1772a, 12.25/162)

Philo, then, is a character who draws our attention, as does Hume, to the force of the considerations that can be assembled in favour of radical scepticism. And, also like Hume, Philo seeks to draw a chastening moral from our inability to answer sceptical arguments: we should confine our inquiries to topics that do not lie 'so remote from common life and experience' (1779, 1.131).

The parallels between Philo in Part 1 of the *Dialogues* and Hume in Section 12 of the *Enquiry* further extend to the way in which Philo responds to Cleanthes' opening argument against radical epistemological scepticism. Cleanthes contends that Philo's purported scepticism is exposed as a mere pretence by the fact that his actions in ordinary life do not show any marked contrast with the actions of non-sceptics.

> Whether your scepticism be as absolute and sincere as you pretend, we shall learn bye and bye, when the company breaks up: We shall then see, whether you go out at the door or the window; and whether you really doubt, if your body has gravity, or can be injured by its fall; according to popular opinion, derived from our fallacious senses and more fallacious experience. (ibid., 1.132)

Philo's immediate response to this criticism is to draw a distinction between the permissibility of a belief and its status as an epistemically justified belief. Even if a sceptic is entirely sincere in holding that a particular belief is not an epistemically justified belief, he is not necessarily guilty of some dereliction of his intellectual duties if he retains that belief himself. It is often the case that our beliefs do respond to a perceived lack of epistemic justification, and sometimes we do lay ourselves open to legitimate criticism if we fail to discard beliefs that strike us as no better justified than contrary beliefs. However, Philo maintains that the radical epistemological sceptic is protected against such criticism because his beliefs are shaped by psychological forces that are not under his control.

> To whatever length anyone may push his speculative principles of scepticism, he must act, I own, and live, and converse like other men; and for this conduct he is not obliged to give any other reason than the absolute necessity he lies under of so doing. (ibid., 1.134)

This response does not commit him to the supposition that any specific belief is immune to criticism because it cannot be eliminated from the human mind. All that he need be saying here is that the basic belief-forming mechanisms are ineradicable. With suitable levels of effort and indirect manipulation, along with help from the environment and prolonged education, almost any specific belief can be modified or even eliminated altogether. However, the parameters within which this process of revision can be conducted are set by psychological mechanisms that could only be shut down by making radical alterations to the neurophysiological underpinnings of human thought and consciousness.

In all essential respects, then, Philo's answer to Cleanthes' attack on radical scepticism conforms closely to the views put forward by Hume in the *Enquiry*. Philo's admission that the radical sceptic's behaviour in his daily life is very similar to that of people who are not sceptics corresponds closely to Hume's claim in the *Enquiry* that 'though a Pyrrhonian may throw himself or others into a momentary confusion by his profound reasonings; the first and most trivial event in life will put to flight all his doubts and scruples' (1772a, 12.23/160). And although there is no pronouncement in the *Enquiry* that is quite as explicit as Philo's assertion that an appeal to considerations of psychological necessity provides the radical sceptic with a complete answer to all criticisms that might be directed against him in respect of his failure to behave in a way that no non-sceptic would behave, it does seem plausible to suppose that Hume's emphasis on the irrefutability and power of sceptical argumentation and his claim that a durable and useful form of scepticism evolves when the initial impact of this argumentation is tempered by the influence of our natural instincts serve, when considered together, to convey the same thought (ibid., 12.22, 24–6/160–3).

The foregoing points immediately pose a problem for those commentators (see Pyle 2006, 33–4; Noxon 1968, 380–1) who suppose that Cleanthes has the better of the discussion in Part 1. They are, in effect, committing themselves to the view that Hume is directly repudiating in the *Dialogues* the species of scepticism that is so enthusiastically endorsed in the *Enquiry* (see 1772a, 12.24–6/161–3). This would be a highly implausible supposition even if this portion of the *Dialogues* had been written substantially after the *Enquiry*. However, we have excellent evidence (Kemp

Smith 1947, 87–8) that at least the first three parts of the Dialogues existed in 1751 in much the same form in which we now have them. Thus Part 1 existed within 3 years of the publication of the *Enquiry* in 1748 under its original title of *Philosophical Essays concerning Human Understanding*. And perhaps even more significantly Hume fails to make any changes to the text of the *Enquiry* to reflect this postulated change of mind despite the numerous opportunities offered by the ten subsequent editions published in Hume's lifetime and the posthumous edition of 1777, an edition which contained corrections made by Hume shortly before his death (see Beauchamp 1999, 9; Hume 1932, II, 322). Furthermore, the advertisement composed by Hume in 1775 as an introduction to the second volume of his collected philosophical writings, *Essays and Treatises on Several Subjects*, and a letter written to Gilbert Elliot of Minto after Hume had asked Elliot for comments on an early draft of the *Dialogues* both indicate that Hume remained content to have the *Enquiry* regarded as the definitive account of his epistemological views after he had written Part 1 of the *Dialogues* (see Hume 1772a, 83/2; 1932, I, 158).

It seems, therefore, that even though we have not yet examined Cleanthes' final formulation of his critique of radical scepticism, we should expect to find that Philo is allocated some response that Hume, at least, regards as adequately answering Cleanthes' objections. Somewhat surprisingly, however, Cleanthes puts forward a novel and well-directed argument that does not appear to correspond to any of the criticisms of radical scepticism that are explicitly addressed in the *Enquiry*. Nor, indeed, is it possible to discern in Part 1 of the *Dialogues* any sort of effective response by Philo to this new argument. How, then, can we reconcile these unexpected developments with the clear parallels between the mitigated scepticism of the *Enquiry* and the sceptical stance allocated to Philo?

Cleanthes' innovative argument emerges in response to Philo's attempt to explain the purpose served by engagement with sceptical arguments. Philo's mitigated scepticism means that he has no qualms about accepting that sceptical arguments are psychologically incapable of inducing universal suspension of judgement about all matters of objective fact. But he does maintain that reflection on sceptical arguments produces some enduring changes of a more subtle kind (1779, 1.134). In particular, it accustoms us to confine our inquiries to topics where our reasonings can be strengthened by common sense and experience. And in areas of speculation where such support is not available, our acquaintance with the arguments for radical scepticism does serve to push us towards suspension of judgement:

> it is evident, whenever our arguments lose this advantage, and run wide of common life, that the most refined scepticism comes to be upon a footing with them, and is able to oppose and counterbalance them. The one has no more weight than the other. The mind must remain in suspense between them; and it is that very suspense or balance, which is the triumph of scepticism. (ibid., 1.135–6)

The significance for religious belief of these remarks lies in the fact that Philo is presented as holding this stance in conjunction with the view that theological reasoning is one of those areas of speculation where we outrun any support that can be offered by common sense and experience. When we are confronted by claims about such matters as the creation and formation of the universe or the existence of an

omnipotent universal spirit that exists without beginning or end, Philo maintains that 'we must be far removed from the smallest tendency to scepticism not to be apprehensive, that we have here got quite beyond the reach of our faculties' (ibid., 1.135). Thus Philo appears to be arguing that mitigated scepticism, an intellectual posture that is supposedly incapable of being rejected in good faith by any thinker who genuinely understands the true force of the arguments for Pyrrhonism, leads to suspension of judgement on all the metaphysical principles that underpin religious life and belief.

Cleanthes seeks to counter this threat to theological reasoning and religious belief by pointing to the way in which epistemological sceptics characteristically defer to evidence and reasoning even when the issue under investigation is an abstruse and highly theoretical one. According to Cleanthes it is impossible to identify any area of human inquiry other than the theological where the radical sceptic displays even the slightest tendency to hold beliefs that are at variance with those held by careful and accurate investigators who regard themselves as responding to rationally compelling evidence.

> But I observe … with regard to you, PHILO, and all speculative sceptics, that your doctrine and practice are as much at variance in the most abstruse points of theory as in the conduct of common life. Wherever evidence discovers itself, you adhere to it, notwithstanding your pretended scepticism; and I can observe, too, some of your sect to be as decisive as those who make greater professions of certainty and assurance. (ibid., 1.136)

Cleanthes then proceeds to challenge Philo to state his sincere opinion concerning someone who withholds assent from Newton's explanation of the origins of the rainbow or Copernicus' account of the motion of the earth on the bare grounds that these matters are too difficult 'to be explained by the narrow and fallacious reason of mankind' (ibid.). In effect, therefore, Cleanthes is confronting Philo with a parity of reasoning argument. It would, in Cleanthes' view, be utterly absurd for any intelligent person acquainted with the reasoning advanced by Newton and Copernicus to deny that their theories are overwhelmingly likely to be true. Yet the reasoning of these two thinkers is complicated and takes us far away from the immediate deliverances of the senses. So if Philo and other epistemological sceptics are content to give their assent to the conclusions reached by Newton and Copernicus, how can they legitimately withhold their assent from the conclusions reached as a result of what customarily passes for cogent theological argumentation?

As we noted earlier, it is a striking feature of the way Hume structures the discussion in the *Dialogues* that this particular argument of Cleanthes' does not receive an answer from Philo in Part 1. Philo instead seizes on Cleanthes' comment that as no man who professes scepticism is in earnest, he hopes that the same is true of people who purport to be atheists. Philo takes the opportunity to discuss various remarks of Lord Bacon's about atheism and to denounce the influence of priestcraft. Nothing here, however, provides even a semblance of an effective response to Cleanthes' main line of argument. And the impression that Philo is incapable of constructing any legitimate answer is further reinforced by the fact that Demea takes over the discussion at the start of Part 2 and explicit discussion of the viability of radical epistemological scepticism is quietly dropped.

This impression that Cleanthes has succeeded in exposing a serious weakness in Philo's position does not, however, constitute an accurate assessment of where the advantage lies in the debate between these two characters. As Philo presents himself at all times within the *Dialogues* as a mitigated sceptic whose everyday beliefs arise from the causal interaction of sceptical argumentation and the belief-forming capacities of our core mental mechanisms, there is no obvious problem about any propensity he might have to form beliefs about esoteric scientific matters as long as those beliefs are ultimately rooted in the same doxastic mechanisms that generate his more quotidian beliefs. And Philo seems happy to argue that when scientific inquiry, or natural philosophy as this was called in the eighteenth century, is conducted properly, it is indeed nothing more than systematised common sense.

> Every one, even in common life, is constrained to have more or less of this philosophy; that from our earliest infancy we make continual advances in forming more general principles of conduct and reasoning; that the larger experience we acquire, and the stronger reason we are endowed with, we always render our principles the more general and comprehensive; and that what we call *philosophy* is nothing but a more regular and methodical operation of the same kind. To philosophise on such subjects is nothing essentially different from reasoning on common life. (ibid., 1.134)

The key, therefore, to the controversy between Cleanthes and Philo is the issue of whether religious beliefs of a suitably modest nature can be fully grounded in respectable belief-forming mechanisms of a kind that generate beliefs we value and act upon in science and everyday life. If Cleanthes can succeed in establishing that this is indeed the case, then Philo cannot avoid conceding, if he is to proceed in good faith, that such religious beliefs meet the standards of reasonableness employed in the most rigorous and demanding of non-philosophical contexts and hence are beliefs that it would be absurd and foolish for even a mitigated sceptic to discard. If, however, Philo can establish instead that Cleanthes does not possess any way of arriving at even modest religious beliefs that does not rely on belief-forming mechanisms that lack intellectual respectability within an everyday or scientific context, then it is Cleanthes who cannot sincerely and legitimately deny that no religious beliefs qualify as acceptable beliefs by the non-philosophical standards that prevail in all but situations of intense intellectual reflection.

Detailed examination of this issue commences in Part 2 of the *Dialogues* and it constitutes the main preoccupation of this work thereafter. Cleanthes relies on the design argument as a satisfactory way of establishing the existence of a deity worthy of worship, and he maintains that this argument is at least as forceful, when judged by the standards of doxastic acceptability that intelligent and well-informed people rely upon when making judgements in ordinary life, as the reasoning that can be brought forward in support of any eighteenth-century scientific theory. Philo, in contrast, deploys a host of objections that serve to bring into sharp focus the manifold dissimilarities between the design argument and judicious scientific reasoning.[2]

[2] As Philo is specifically engaging with Cleanthes at the level of what beliefs are acceptable by everyday, non-philosophical standards when these are applied with the care and precision found in the most compelling scientific reasoning, Tweyman (1986, 9–10) is mistaken in interpreting

These objections are likely to strike most readers as amply sufficient to undermine the case Cleanthes constructs in support of the supposition that the design argument, even if this culminates in no more than the bare claim that the cause or causes of order in the universe possess superlative intelligence and foresight, is genuinely an instance of a pattern of reasoning that parallels the explanatory arguments that command assent within the physical sciences (see Chap. 7 below). And in the case of the more ambitious conclusion that this intelligence and foresight is combined with benevolence and a concern for human welfare, Philo's objections appear to amount to a strong case, when assessed against the standards of evidence and reasoning that prevail amongst competent judges of motivation and character, for concluding that this comforting supposition is substantially more likely to be false than true (see Chap. 8).

It appears, therefore, that the explanation for the fact that Philo is not allocated any objections in Part 1 of the *Dialogues* to Cleanthes' parity of reasoning thesis is that it suits Hume's irreligious purposes very well to have the controversy about the origins of order in the universe put onto this footing. Philo and Cleanthes combine forces in Part 9 of the *Dialogues* to dismiss Demea's attempts to found religious conclusions on any kind of *a priori* reasoning, and the rejection of the competence of *a priori* reasoning in this area certainly accords with Hume's own position (see 1739, 1.3.6.1–2/86–7; 1772a, 12.28–9/163–4). If, therefore, Philo's criticisms suffice to establish, by the standards of systematised common sense, that the design argument does not parallel the arguments to best explanation that command assent within science and everyday life, this wholly subverts Cleanthes' case for holding that at least the basic metaphysical suppositions that underlie religious beliefs can be regarded as suppositions that it would be inappropriate to reject.

Of course, it might be suggested at this point that even if Cleanthes' attempts at religious apologetics do collapse in this manner, this simply reveals that it is a mistake to treat religious beliefs as founded on anything other than faith. Even Hume, after all, declares in the final section of the *Enquiry* that in the case of divinity or theology, 'its best and most solid foundation is *faith* and divine revelation' (1772a, 12.32/165).

The potential attractiveness of the contention that religious beliefs are appropriately based on faith is, however, seriously reduced when we take steps to clarify the sense of this claim. For religious believers, belief that constitutes faith is generally supposed to be a legitimate and appropriate form of belief. But a belief that not only fails to meet philosophical standards of epistemic justification but also fails to qualify as acceptable by the standards of scientific or everyday reasoning is usually condemned as inappropriate and lacking intellectual legitimacy. In order to accommodate both of these responses while retaining a contrast between faith and reason,

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Philo's arguments in Parts 2–11 as Pyrrhonean arguments intended to persuade an initially dogmatic Cleanthes to embrace mitigated scepticism. Philo's arguments are intended rather to answer the charge that even a mitigated sceptic should, if he is to act in good faith, embrace various religious beliefs.

we need to exhibit faith as a special form of reasonable belief. And in the *Dialogues* we find Cleanthes attributing this view to Locke:

> Locke seems to have been the first Christian, who ventured openly to assert, that *faith* was nothing but a species of *reason*, that religion was only a branch of philosophy, and that a chain of arguments, similar to that which established any truth in morals, politics, or physics, was always employed in discovering all the principles of theology, natural and revealed. (1779, 1.138)

For Locke, therefore, faith turns out to be belief that is derived from reports of miracles and prophecies in a way that meets at least everyday standards of good reasoning in respect of the assessment of human testimony. Unfortunately Hume's discussion in Section 10 of the *Enquiry* of the credibility of miracle reports and their capacity to make religious beliefs reasonable can plausibly be seen as posing intractable problems for the supposition that everyday standards of evaluating testimony permit us to see such reports as legitimating any system of religion (see Chap. 9). And once we move away from the Lockean view, we are in serious danger of finding ourselves impaled on the uncomfortable dilemma that we can praise faith as legitimate and virtuous only if we are prepared to praise, as legitimate and virtuous, belief that is wholly devoid of both philosophical justification and everyday acceptability.

5.3 Some Benefits of Mitigated Scepticism

As we noted in Sect. 5.1 Hume shows no inclination whatsoever to criticize even Pyrrhonean scepticism on the basis that its epistemological pessimism is founded on unsatisfactory or fallacious arguments. He appears, in fact, to be convinced that the Pyrrhonean arguments for radical scepticism about epistemic justification are exemplary arguments that, once properly understood, can be sincerely viewed as lacking decisive rational force only by inquirers who have already embraced a radically sceptical stance. Hume does maintain, however, that Pyrrhonism and other forms of epistemological scepticism are potentially vulnerable to the objection that they are intellectual postures that are devoid of practical benefits.

> For here is the chief and most confounding objection to *excessive* scepticism, that no durable good can ever result from it; while it remains in its full force and vigour. We need only ask such a sceptic, *What his meaning is? And what he proposes by all these curious researches?* He is immediately at a loss, and knows not what to answer. (1772a, 12.23/159–60)

As the above objection and the contention that near-universal suspension of belief is psychologically impossible constitute Hume's chief criticisms of Pyrrhonean scepticism, it seems to follow that Hume must hold that his favoured form of scepticism, that is mitigated or Academic scepticism, is capable of being successfully defended against these objections. Now mitigated sceptics do not purport to suspend belief on all or even most topics. So the observation that such

suspension of belief cannot be achieved does not seem to pose any direct threat to the acceptability of mitigated scepticism as a way of responding to the world and our epistemological predicament. But what practical difference does mitigated scepticism make, and can it plausibly be represented as conferring any benefits that constitute an adequate recompense for all the voluntary intellectual effort that goes into constructing or following the chains of reasoning that lead to sceptical conclusions about justification?

Essentially Hume's position seems to be that mitigated scepticism constitutes an effective way of enhancing the ability of inquirers to follow the canons of best scientific practice. In the *Dialogues* Philo is happy to defend a pattern of philosophico-scientific inquiry that 'is nothing essentially different from reasoning on common life … [although it is an] exacter and more scrupulous method of proceeding' (1779, 1.134). Philo concedes the point that by engaging in such inquiry, he is carrying his speculations further than brute psychological necessity constrains him, but he is 'allured by a certain pleasure and satisfaction, which he finds in employing himself after that manner' (ibid.). Moreover, it is surely significant that as the *Dialogues* unfold, it seems clearly to be Philo rather than Cleanthes who is responding correctly to the empirical evidence and avoiding reliance on unsupported *a priori* assumptions. And when we turn to the *Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*, we can again detect this idea that mitigated scepticism helps to guide us towards best practice in our inquiries rather than towards some aberrant stance of excessive and damaging suspension of belief. According to Hume, mitigated scepticism induces a 'degree of doubt, and caution, and modesty, which in all kinds of scrutiny and decision, ought for ever to accompany a just reasoner' (1772a, 12.24/162), and it also assists in limiting 'our enquiries to such subjects as are best adapted to the narrow capacity of human understanding' (ibid., 12.25/162).

How, then, does mitigated scepticism achieve this desirable outcome? Firstly, the blow it delivers to our intellectual pretensions helps to make us more co-operative inquirers who are suitably modest about our own expertise. Most people tend to be quite dogmatic and aggressively convinced of the truth of their personal opinions. However, when we 'become sensible of the strange infirmities of human understanding, even in its most perfect state, and when most accurate and cautious in its determinations' (ibid., 12.24/161), this reduces such arrogance and makes us more willing to give weight to the judgements of other inquirers.

Secondly, mitigated scepticism delivers a double check to the promptings of the imagination. In Hume's judgement, the imagination tends to push us into wasting our efforts in fields of inquiry where true and stable judgements are unlikely to be forthcoming.

> The *imagination* of man is naturally sublime, delighted with whatever is remote and extraordinary, and running, without controul, into the most distant parts of space and time, in order to avoid the objects, which custom has rendered too familiar to it. (ibid., 12.25/162)

And once our restless imaginations have pushed us into tackling questions beyond our capacities, even relatively weak and variable associative links allow the

imagination to generate superficially persuasive but nevertheless spurious answers to these questions.[3]

Reflection on the arguments for radical scepticism about justification, however, constitutes a powerful way of subverting these spontaneous creations of the imagination. As Philo explains in the *Dialogues*, these sceptical arguments fail to generate suspension of judgement only because they are psychologically overwhelmed in most circumstances by a more powerful causal influence:

> we could never retain any conviction or assurance, on any subject, were not the sceptical reasonings so refined and subtile, that they are not able to counterpoise the more solid and more natural arguments, derived from the senses and experience. (1779, 2.135)

But when they are not opposed by strong and enduring associative links, such as the links that underpin respectable causal reasoning and our belief in the existence of mind-independent objects, then sceptical arguments re-emerge as psychologically compelling. Consequently these arguments turn out to be a powerful treatment for the doxastic infections generated by weak and variable transitions of the imagination. Instead of unpicking each of these imagination-induced errors by opposing them directly with reasoning based on experience and more stable associative links, we can simply expose ourselves to the full force of Pyrrhonean argumentation about justification. This conveniently sweeps away all beliefs founded merely on weak associative links. It therefore enhances our capacity to be guided by legitimate causal reasoning, and the effects on the truth-generating capacities of our overall set of belief-forming mechanisms are wholly positive.

> Our reason must be consider'd as a kind of cause, of which truth is the natural effect; but such-a-one as by the irruption of other causes, and by the inconstancy of our mental powers, may frequently be prevented. (1739, 1.4.1.1/180)

We find, therefore, that reflection on the arguments for epistemological scepticism helpfully enhances the efficacy of this truth-tracking causal nexus by ensuring that our mental powers work in a more regular and uniform manner.

Moreover, once we have become accustomed to seeing the beliefs founded on weak associative links collapsing under sceptical attack, we automatically begin to form the expectation that this pattern of dispiriting collapse will continue in the future. This, in turn, gives us a new and powerful motive for keeping clear of areas of inquiry where belief cannot be built on stronger associative links. And this motive serves to counterbalance the exaggerated curiosity that is otherwise the product of our restless and lively imaginations.

Thirdly, and finally, mitigated scepticism helps to promote productive and properly focussed inquiry by repressing the influence of inappropriate epistemic standards and rules. Human beings are not just confined to making inferences and

[3] Hume is not objecting here to the imagination playing a crucial role in our philosophical and everyday deliberations. By Hume's own admission, we would have no beliefs about any matter of fact beyond the content of our present perceptions without the assistance of the imagination (see 1739, 1.4.4.1/225; 1.4.7.3/265). Hume's strictures are directed solely towards the human tendency to form beliefs in an indiscriminate and promiscuous fashion even when prompted by weak rather than strong associative links.

judgements in response to causal influences that lie below the level of conscious awareness. They also explicitly set themselves epistemic norms and paradigms that they attempt to follow and emulate. In particular, there are patterns of inference and argument that are presented by their adherents as more profound and illuminating than our instinctive belief-forming responses and even the experimental science or natural philosophy that consists of 'the reflections of common life, methodized and corrected' (1772a, 12.25/162). Mitigated scepticism, however, responds to such claims of epistemic superiority by displaying these supposedly superior methods of reasoning as no more capable than our most basic and animal-like instincts of conforming to philosophical standards of epistemic success.

Ultimately our explanatory and predictive successes simply terminate in brute contingencies and our good fortune in having adaptive, truth-achieving methods of belief-formation. If we insist on having only beliefs that fully satisfy the regressive aspects of our concept of epistemic justification, then we will have no useful beliefs whatsoever. In so far as that standard can be met anywhere within our doxastic system we would, at best, be confined exclusively to beliefs about the content of our present ideas and impressions. But if this standard cannot ultimately be met, what is the point of merely delaying the point at which this failure explicitly emerges? Being able to manufacture such a delay does not seem to be a satisfactory inducement from a dispassionate and intellectually reflective perspective for favouring one form of reasoning over another. And if the stable bedrock for our world-view will eventually be provided by nothing more than the power of natural instinct no matter what type of reasoning we favour, then it seems appropriate for us to grant ourselves a much greater freedom to appeal to such instinctual foundations at an earlier point in our inquiries.

Embracing mitigated scepticism does not, therefore, lead to a form of intellectual paralysis, not even at the level of abstruse theoretical inquiry. What it generates instead is an undogmatic mode of forming beliefs that is highly responsive to experience and strong associative links but is not easily distracted by the more transient and variable elements of the imagination or the unearned pretensions of supposedly profound forms of reasoning. And Hume holds that with the assistance of this intellectual outlook and its capacity to curb the more wayward promptings of the imagination, we can hope to make additional progress in philosophy and theoretical science.

> While a warm imagination is allow'd to enter into philosophy, and hypotheses embrac'd merely for being specious and agreeable, we can never have any steady principles, nor any sentiments, which will suit with common practice and experience. But were these hypotheses once remov'd, we might hope to establish a system or set of opinions, which if not true (for that, perhaps, is too much to be hop'd for) might at least be satisfactory to the human mind, and might stand the test of the most critical examination. (1739, 1.4.7.14/272)

This does not, of course, mean that these opinions could qualify as rationally justified: Pyrrhonean arguments make it impossible for us to maintain in good faith that any belief about a matter of objective fact genuinely possesses a positive degree of epistemic justification. Nor, indeed, can we interpret Hume as maintaining that it is possible to locate some philosophico-scientific beliefs that are so stable that

sceptical arguments cannot leave us even transiently alienated from them. Hume's account of the psychological mechanisms responsible for the genesis of even our simplest and most basic beliefs identifies so many problematic features of those mechanisms that it seems impossible, unless the nature of human beings radically alters, for any abstruse and refined belief to be proof against temporary disruption when its origins are carefully investigated and the resulting discoveries are at the centre of our attention. At that high level of reflection and critical scrutiny, even beliefs we cannot discard can briefly take on the characteristics of the beliefs associated with phobias or compulsive disorders: we believe that *p* and hence take it to be true that *p*, but we regard that belief as one that is only accidentally true because we hold it to be formed as a result of mechanisms and circumstances that generate a predominance of false beliefs in close possible worlds.[4] Consequently we become alienated from these beliefs despite their continued existence and we fleetingly cease to attach a positive value to them.

What Hume does seem to be envisaging here is that embracing mitigated scepticism will assist us to construct philosophical and scientific theories that have the same high levels of persuasiveness and stability that are displayed by such exemplary intellectual performances as Newton's anatomisation of light and Galileo's theory of planetary motion. These particular theories were constructed without the aid of a background sceptical posture, but Hume holds that a stance of mitigated scepticism would help us to develop further theories that can withstand any criticisms that might be raised against them when judged by the standards prevailing in everyday life. Cleanthes is right, therefore, to maintain that no mitigated sceptic can sensibly withhold assent from all abstruse and refined theories. What he fails to appreciate, however, is that mitigated scepticism is intended to serve as a way of eliminating abstruse theories that are built on flimsy principles of the imagination and as a means of guiding us towards theories that are supported by the more substantial foundations of forceful impressions and strong associative links. No mitigated sceptic would reject the design argument or any similar piece of theological reasoning on the bare grounds that it is a complicated chain of thought that purports to deliver a conclusion about something that lies outside daily experience. But a mitigated sceptic would immediately repudiate such religious arguments if it emerges that they fail to meet the standards of acceptability that are implicit within that systematised version of everyday reasoning that grounds our best scientific practice.

[4] This analysis of the conception of veritic epistemic luck is taken from Duncan Pritchard's highly illuminating discussion of the relationship between the epistemic standing of beliefs and different varieties of epistemic luck. See Pritchard 2005, 145–52, 173–8.

Chapter 6
That Simple and Sublime Argument

In Part 9 of the *Dialogues* Hume considers one particular *a priori* argument, one that has its source in Clarke's (1705) *Demonstration of the Being and Attributes of God*. It is, however, a hybrid of various *a priori* arguments.[1] We will see, though, that the resources he musters against this argument are aimed at refuting all *a priori* arguments for the existence of God.

We will start by spelling out Hume's exposition of what Demea calls 'that simple and sublime argument *a priori*, which, by offering to us infallible demonstration, cuts off at once all doubt and difficulty?' (1779, 9.188). First, 'Whatever exists must have a cause or reason of its existence; it being absolutely impossible for any thing to produce itself, or be the cause of its own existence' (ibid.). Thus:

> In mounting up … from effects to causes, we must either go on in tracing an infinite succession, without any ultimate cause at all, or must at last have recourse to some ultimate cause, that is *necessarily* existent. (ibid.)

The theist must therefore rule out the first suggestion, that there is an infinite succession of causes. Demea continues:

> In the infinite chain or succession of causes and effects, each single effect is determined to exist by the power and efficacy of that cause which immediately preceded; but the whole eternal chain or succession, taken together, is not determined or caused by any thing: And yet it is evident that it requires a cause or reason, as much as any particular object, which begins to exist in time. (ibid.)

Thus, even if there is an infinite chain of causes, this chain itself must have a cause. Various questions are then raised by Demea:

> why [has] this particular succession of causes existed from eternity, and not any other succession, or no succession at all. … What was it, then, which determined something to exist rather than nothing, and bestowed being on a particular possibility, exclusive of the rest? (ibid., 9.188–9)

[1] See Yandell 1990, 228–9 and Sessions 2002, 137.

A. Bailey and D. O'Brien, *Hume's Critique of Religion: 'Sick Men's Dreams'*,
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It cannot be down to chance that this particular succession of causes has occurred since '*chance* is a word without a meaning' (ibid., 9.189). Chance should not be seen as some kind of independent causal power, that is, as a positive causal force. Also, if chance is to have the suggested causal role in the origin of nature, it cannot be seen as referring to nothing: 'was it *nothing*? But that can never produce any thing' (ibid.); rather, 'chance' purportedly refers to when certain happenings or events are not determined by antecedent states of affairs. However, even though we do talk of such happenings, Hume claims that 'what the vulgar call chance is nothing but a secret and conceal'd cause' (1739, 1.3.12.1/130). We seem to base some of our actions on the supposition that some events are prey to chance—we roll die, and when booking a skiing holiday we gamble with meteorology and likely snowfall—but in such cases the more sophisticated reasoners realise that there are deterministic causal factors at work here. If we had knowledge of all the relevant causal factors we could predict with complete accuracy the roll of the die and the snowfall at a particular resort at a particular time. This is also the case when the usual run of events breaks down—when, say, one's snowdrops do not bloom as they usually do at this time of year. This is not a chance happening; it is, rather, explained by a 'contrariety of causes' (ibid., 1.3.12.21/139). Chance cannot therefore be the cause of the universe. If it appears to be down to chance, that is because of our ignorance of the causal factors involved.

Since we are attempting to explain the existence of the entire causal nexus of the empirical world, our explanation—the 'ultimate cause'—must lie outside of that world; otherwise, if the proffered cause was just another link in the causal chain—the first link—then it would not be 'ultimate' and would itself require explanation. The only type of candidate qualified to play this causal role is an entity about which no further causal questions can be raised. This entity must *necessarily* exist; questions must not arise concerning the causal origin of its existence or whether it exists by chance: it just exists; it has to; it is part of its nature that it exists. Necessary existence, though, is not a property of material things or of ourselves. The mountain Fleetwith Pike exists as does the mountaineer Chris Bonington, but they need not have done. Only a special kind of entity has this property; that entity is a god 'who carries the REASON of his existence in himself; and who cannot be supposed not to exist without an express contradiction' (1779, 9.189).

6.1 Necessary Existence

To dismantle this argument Hume, in the voice of Cleanthes, questions the nature of necessary existence.

> I shall begin with observing, that there is an evident absurdity in pretending to demonstrate a matter of fact, or to prove it by any arguments *a priori*. Nothing is demonstrable, unless the contrary implies a contradiction. Nothing, that is distinctly conceivable, implies a contradiction. Whatever we conceive as existent, we can also conceive as non-existent. There

> is no Being, therefore, whose non-existence implies a contradiction. Consequently there is no Being, whose existence is demonstrable. I propose this argument as entirely decisive, and am willing to rest the whole controversy upon it. (ibid.)

Conceptual questions, those concerning relations of ideas, can be decided *a priori*. It is contradictory to claim that a triangle does not have three sides and thus it is an *a priori* truth that triangles have three sides. But how things actually are in the world requires one to have experience of the world. Whether any perfect triangles actually exist, for example, cannot be decided *a priori*. In fact, whether *any* particular kind of thing actually exists cannot be decided *a priori*, and that includes God. Relations of ideas may be necessary, but matters of fact are contingent.

The empiricist principle at work here could however be questioned. Hume's argument for the claim that all matters of fact are contingent is derived from the conceivability principle. It is conceivable that any allegedly necessary being does not exist, and, since conceivability entails possibility, it is possible that that being does not exist and thus its existence is not necessary.

The theist, however, could deny that we can conceive of the non-existence of God. The idea of God and the idea of his existence cannot be separated. This is what Descartes claims in one of his proofs for the existence of God.

> Existence can no more be separated from the essence of God than the fact that its three angles equal two right angles can be separated from the essence of a triangle, or than the idea of a mountain can be separated from the idea of a valley. Hence it is just as much of a contradiction to think of God … lacking existence … as it is to think of a mountain without a valley …. But from the fact that I cannot think of God except as existing, it follows that existence is inseparable from God, and hence that he really exists. (1641, 2.46)

I may think I can easily slip between the ideas of his existence and his non-existence—the transition between 'God exists' and 'God does not exist' as easy as that between 'She loves me', 'She loves me not'—but I cannot; if I am clearly and distinctly perceiving an idea of God then I must also perceive the idea of his existence. Or, in Humean terminology, if I have an idea of God before my mind then I also have an idea of his existence; I cannot think one without the other.

For those, though, who do not accept Hume's claims concerning conceivability, Hume provides other considerations that tell against the *a priori* argument.

6.2 The Necessary Existence of the Universe

If, contra Hume, the necessary existence of God is allowed, then, Cleanthes says, '[i]t must be some unknown, inconceivable qualities, which can make his non-existence appear impossible, or his attributes unalterable' (1779, 9.190). If this is so, then for all we know other entities apart from God may have these qualities. Matter itself might necessarily exist, as Cleanthes suggests:

> why may not the material universe be the necessary existent Being, according to this pretended explication of necessity? We dare not affirm that we know all the qualities of matter; and for aught we can determine, it may contain some qualities, which, were they

> known, would make its non-existence appear as great a contradiction as that twice two is five…. No reason can be assigned, why these qualities may not belong to matter. As they are altogether unknown and inconceivable, they can never be proved incompatible with it. (ibid.)

This suggestion appeals to Philo.

> Is it not probable, I ask, that the whole œconomy of the universe is conducted by a like necessity, though no human algebra can furnish a key which solves the difficulty? And instead of admiring the order of natural beings, may it not happen, that, could we penetrate into the intimate nature of bodies, we should clearly see why it was absolutely impossible, that they could ever admit of any other disposition? (ibid., 9.191)

The structure of Hume's argument is this: if there are several equally good hypotheses concerning the origin of the universe, then we should not dogmatically be committed to just one of them; we must be non-committal, at least until we have found further grounds to believe in one particular hypothesis. Something must have those unknown properties that ground necessary existence, but there is no more reason to think that this is God than the material universe. Philo thus asserts: 'So dangerous is it to introduce this idea of necessity into the present question! And so naturally does it afford an inference directly opposite to the religious hypothesis!' (ibid.). This kind of argument is one that Hume employs elsewhere. Thus we will see in the next chapter that he suggests several alternative hypotheses concerning the nature of the alleged designer of the universe, with the aim of undermining our commitment to the hypothesis concerning the existence of a providential, Christian God.

This argument threatens the *a priori* argument in two ways. First, the possible existence of alternative bearers of necessary existence should undermine belief in the necessary existence of God. Perhaps, though, one could accept the necessary existence of both God and the universe. This, however, is not a route that the traditional theist could take. If the existence of the universe is necessary, then God has no hand in bringing it about; it would have existed whether or not God exists. If things must have been this way, then God's providence does not play the guiding role required of it by Christianity.

As was noted in Sect. 3.2, Paul Russell (2008) persuasively argues that there are various 'irreligious' themes running through the *Treatise*, whereas it is usually thought that religion only makes an appearance later in Hume's works, principally in the *Enquiry concerning Human Understanding* and the *Dialogues concerning Natural religion*. Russell argues that Hume's discussion of causation in the *Treatise*, and his subsequent treatments of this issue in later works, undermines—and is intended to undermine—certain *a priori* arguments for the existence of God.

Hume argues against the causal maxim, the claim that '*whatever begins to exist, must have a cause of existence*' (1739, 1.3.3.1/78; Hume's emphasis). If this is a necessary truth, and thus a relation of ideas, then it must be contradictory to deny it. But, Hume argues, one can plausibly deny it:

> as all distinct ideas are separable from each other, and as the ideas of cause and effect are evidently distinct, 'twill be easy for us to conceive any object to be non-existent this moment, and existent the next, without conjoining to it the distinct idea of a cause or productive principle. The separation, therefore, of the idea of a cause from that of a beginning

> of existence, is plainly possible for the imagination; and consequently the actual separation of these objects is so far possible, that it implies no contradiction nor absurdity; and is therefore incapable of being refuted by any reasoning from mere ideas; without which 'tis impossible to demonstrate the necessity of a cause. (ibid., 1.3.3.3/79–80)

One of Hume's objectives here, so Russell argues, is to undercut the first step in the *a priori* argument for the existence of God, that is, 'whatever exists must have a cause or reason of its existence' (1779, 9.188).[2]

Russell notes a certain historical irony in Clarke's use of the causal maxim. The origin of this maxim lies in the ancient thesis *ex nihilo, nihil fit* [something cannot come from nothing]. Lucretius, however, used this to argue for the impossibility of created matter: there can never have been a beginning of existence because something would have then had to have come from nothing; matter is therefore eternal (2003, 5–8). Clarke, though, takes it to entail the opposite conclusion: the universe must have had a first cause because it could not have arisen out of nothing.

As well as arguing against the causal maxim—the claim that all beginnings of existence have a cause—Hume also rejects the claim that particular effects are necessarily connected with particular causes, that, for example, the sun necessarily causes the sand to be warm or that jogging necessarily causes one to be tired. It is only experience that leads us to believe that certain events will follow others. *A priori* 'any thing may produce any thing' (1739, 1.3.15.1/173). We cannot therefore *demonstrate* the existence of anything. Thus, *a priori*, we cannot decide between various cosmological hypotheses: the universe may have been created by a providential God, it may be eternal, or it may have been caused by something else—*anything* else; perhaps a giant spider![3] The only way we can come to have knowledge of the existence of anything is through experience, and this is therefore also the case with respect to the existence of God.

6.3 Causes, Parts and Wholes

So far, then, we have looked at two objections to the *a priori* argument. Hume rejects the notion of necessary existence and, even if there is such existence, he claims that there is no reason to think that God, as opposed to nature itself, exhibits it. Cleanthes then suggests a third objection. He earlier claimed that there may be an infinite or eternal succession of causes comprising nature. But, the theist challenged, this infinite chain must itself have a cause, and this cause must be God. Cleanthes, however, rejects the claim that the infinite chain requires a cause.

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[2] A pamphlet was published in protest against Hume's candidacy for the Chair at Glasgow University in which 'The author [Hume] is charged with opinions leading to downright atheism, chiefly by denying the principle, that whatever begins to exist must have a cause of existence' (Hume 1745, 21–2). Hume's *A Letter from a Gentleman to his Friend in Edinburgh* is a reply to this pamphlet (see Sects. 1.1 and 3.2).

[3] Hume's use of the spider analogy is considered further in Sect. 7.4.

> Did I show you the particular causes of each individual in a collection of twenty particles of matter, I should think it very unreasonable, should you afterwards ask me, what was the cause of the whole twenty. This is sufficiently explained in explaining the cause of the parts. (1779, 9.190–1)

There are 20 or so assorted pencils in the mug in front of Emma and there is a story describing why each of them is there. One of them was bought last weekend at the museum shop and another was found on holiday last year and kept because of the humorous inscription it bears. There is not, though, a further story concerning the placing of this particular group of 20 over and above their individual stories. And this, Hume claims, is also the case with respect to the universe. If we have a causal story to explain the particular position and state of each individual particle in the universe, one does not require a *further* story to explain why this multitude of particles is the way it is—that has already been explained by the set of individual stories.

Further:

> In tracing an eternal succession of objects, it seems absurd to inquire for a general cause or first Author. How can any thing, that exists from eternity, have a cause, since that relation implies a priority in time and a beginning of existence? (ibid., 9.190)

Demea and Cleanthes differ as to where they think explanation comes to an end: Demea claims that an infinite series of causes itself requires a cause; Cleanthes, however, argues that this is not so. Such a cause would have to come before the eternal series, but this is impossible since there is no time before eternity.

That, however, is a point embraced by the theist: there must be an atemporal cause—a cause outside of space and time—and God fits this bill. Theists could also perhaps claim that God eternally causes the existence of the eternal chain; they would then be rejecting the claim that causes have to come before their effects in time. Hume, of course, would reject such a claim since it lacks experiential support; all claims concerning causality must be based on our experience of causal regularities in the world.

In Part 8 of the *Dialogues*, Philo provides further argument for why an infinite chain does not require a first cause. According to Malebranche (1674, 446–50) matter is inert and all motion requires the hand of God. He is an occasionalist. All causes are occasions on which God intervenes. An infinite chain could not be initiated without God, nor could it be propagated. When billiards is being played it is God that causes a player to hit the white ball in a certain way, and 'it is the Deity himself … who, by a particular volition, moves the second ball' (1772a, 7.21/70). Physical objects or human minds do not have causal powers; only God does: 'according to these philosophers, every thing is full of God' (ibid., 7.22/71). Hume thinks this theory is conceived in 'fairy land' (ibid., 7.24/72). Matter, Philo claims, can be the source of its own motion, 'without any known voluntary agent; and to suppose always, in these cases, an unknown voluntary agent, is mere hypothesis; and hypothesis attended with no advantages' (1779, 8.182–3). Again we see that Hume is using the form of argument that is based on alternative possibilities: 'The beginning of motion in matter itself is as conceivable *a priori* as its communication from mind and intelligence' (ibid., 8.183); there is therefore no reason to claim that the causal nexus of nature must be set running or propagated by God.

Philo also offers an argument based on conservation principles. According to theists the motion of matter is initiated at the Creation and at later times when God intervenes in the running of the universe. Conservation principles do not always hold. The motion of particles constituting a particular effect in the material world—the first motion of earth and water after the Creation, for example—is altogether new; such motion does not exist before the Creation since God is not seen to have such empirical properties. *A priori*, however, it is possible that:

> motion [may] have been propagated by impulse through all eternity, and the same stock of it … be still upheld in the universe …. As much as is lost by the composition of motion, as much is gained by its resolution. (ibid., 8.183)

The motion of particles before a particular causal event comprising 'the composition of motion'; the resultant motion of particles that is the effect of this event comprising 'its resolution'. That is to consider matters—and matter—*a priori*: reason cannot rule out the possibility that conservation principles always hold and that God does not need to intervene in the motion of matter. Also, it is 'certain, that matter is, and always has been in continual agitation, as far as human experience or tradition reaches' (ibid.). There is not therefore an *a priori* argument in favour of God's intervention, and there is some empirical evidence to think that matter has always been in motion, that the universe is eternal, and that motion has been conserved throughout eternity without the intervention of a deity.

We have here been focusing on arguments concerning space and time, and on how such considerations threaten the *a priori* argument as articulated by Hume. As said, though, Hume's version of the *a priori* argument is a hybrid one; one, however, that was certainly influenced by Clarke's *Demonstration*. And, if we turn to the details of Clarke's argument, then we can find further reasons why Hume rejects the simple and sublime route to God. According to Clarke, matter does not have necessary existence since to conceive of it not existing is not contradictory. It is certain, though, that there is a necessary being. We can conceive of the material world not existing, but we cannot conceive of 'Immensity' or 'Eternity' not existing. Immensity and Eternity therefore necessarily exist, thus entailing that space and time necessarily exist. Further, the existence of such dimensions must depend on the existence of infinite substance. This substance cannot be material—since it is not necessary that such substance exists—but immaterial; this substance is therefore God.

According to Clarke, then, the existence of space and time is independent of the existence of material bodies. 'Absolute' space is stocked with material bodies, but it is conceivable that the whole universe should be a vacuum. Hume rejects this claim. The idea of space is inextricably linked with the idea of material bodies. Space is the relation between bodies. When we conceive of the eradication of bodies we are also conceiving of the collapsing of space; when we speak of the creation of bodies we are also speaking of the creation of space. Thus, if matter is contingent—if it is conceivable that material bodies do not exist, and thus their existence is not necessary—then the existence of space is also contingent. We do not therefore require a

necessarily-existing infinite substance to support the existence of space; Humean space just requires the existence of material objects. Space and time themselves, then, do not entail the existence of God, and we have seen in the rest of this chapter that the causal relations of material bodies in space and time do not provide us with any *a priori* reason to believe that their origin depends on divine intervention. The next chapter turns to the question of whether there are any empirical reasons to think that this is so.

Chapter 7
The Design Argument and Empirical Evidence of God's Existence

7.1 The Nature of the Argument

Religious believers have often held that the spatial and temporal order that we observe in the universe, especially as manifested in the means-end adaptation exhibited by biological organisms, makes it reasonable to infer that the universe has been created or shaped by a divine mind. Moreover, in eighteenth-century Britain the prestige attached to this line of argument was such that it was often seen as a complete answer in itself to the cavils of atheists and religious sceptics. In Hume's case, his radical epistemological scepticism means that he would deny that the inference from order to a divine designer can successfully evade Pyrrhonean objections. But he is very concerned to investigate how this inference compares with other examples of causal reasoning.

Causal reasoning plays a pervasive role in shaping our beliefs even when it is directly in opposition to unanswerable sceptical arguments, but some instances of causal reasoning strike us, even from an everyday perspective, as flawed and deeply unsatisfactory. Thus we need to determine where the inference from order to an intelligent designer fits into the everyday taxonomy of causal reasoning. Is it as compelling as the experience-based inference to the conclusion that unsupported stones close to the surface of the Earth fall towards the ground? Does it have the cogency belonging to more sophisticated scientific inferences of the kind that underpin the Copernican theory? Or does it emerge, when analysed correctly, as an example of a pattern of inference that is acknowledged in other contexts to yield a preponderance of erroneous conclusions?

Hume addresses this key issue in Section 11 of the *Enquiry concerning Human Understanding* and throughout much of the *Dialogues*. If we look to these discussions for decisive confirmation of Hume's final adjudication on the merits of the design argument, we are faced with numerous interpretative difficulties. As we have noted previously (see Sect. 3.2), Hume does not speak in his own voice at any point in the *Dialogues* with the possible exception of one footnote (1779, 12.219n1). Moreover, we discover that Philo, the character whose views seem to have the most

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in common with Hume's philosophical commitments as evidenced in other works, appears to repudiate at the start of Part 12 his previous intricate criticisms of the design argument in favour of an enthusiastic endorsement of its probative force (ibid., 12.214).

The same tactic of invoking the dialogue form as a distancing device is also brought into play in the discussion of the design argument in the *Enquiry*. In this latter case, Hume nominally appears as one of the protagonists in the conversation, and in this guise he initially speaks as someone defending the design argument. It is impossible, however, to take literally Hume's protestations at the start of this section that the ensuing dialogue is a record of discussions with an anonymous friend that Hume has copied from his memory as accurately as he can 'in order to submit them to the judgment of the reader' (1772a, 11.1/132). And when we are told that this supposed friend 'loves sceptical paradoxes' (ibid.) and is addressed by the Hume character as having taken care to 'insinuate yourself into my favour by embracing those principles to which, you know, I have always expressed a particular attachment' (ibid., 11.24/142), only a spectacularly naïve reader could fail to suspect that the friend in question represents some important aspect of Hume's own thinking on this topic.

Hume's writings accordingly present us with a mixture of bare affirmations endorsing the design argument in both the *Treatise* and the *Natural History of Religion* and seemingly powerful criticisms of the same argument set in the context of two artfully constructed dialogues in which no particular character unambiguously represents Hume's own views.[1] Ultimately only an integrated and holistic interpretation that takes into account all the varied sources of evidence that potentially bear on the issue of Hume's overarching assessment of the religious world-view can guide us to a satisfactory determination of the position he is genuinely attempting to defend even in regard of the specific issue of the credibility of the design argument. Thus the culminating adjudication in the present work on what conclusions Hume believes are rendered acceptable in terms of everyday standards of evidence and reasoning by the design argument will be found not in this chapter but in Chap. 13, 'Was Hume an Atheist?' For the moment our aim will simply be to undertake a critical examination of the arguments that emerge in the course of Hume's discussion of the appeal to observable order and means-end adaptation as a means of establishing God's existence. And this project can be conducted without our needing to decide which arguments are endorsed by Hume himself or becoming involved in questions about whether Hume is prudently masking his strongest objections to this appeal.

In the *Enquiry* Hume contents himself with a relatively impressionistic sketch of the design argument. He represents his alleged sceptical friend as criticizing some

[1] In the course of his unsuccessful attempts to persuade Adam Smith to supervise the post-mortem publication of the *Dialogues*, Hume specifically drew attention to their shrewd construction (1932, II, 334): 'On revising them (which I have not done these 15 years) I find that nothing can be more cautiously and more artfully written. You had certainly forgotten them. Will you permit me to leave you the Property of the Copy, in case they should not be published in 5 years after my Decease?'

philosophers amongst the ancient Greeks for hubristically attempting to use the design argument as a means of establishing religion on a basis of reason rather than tradition and popular piety.

> They paint, in the most magnificent colours, the order, beauty and wise arrangement of the universe; and then ask, if such a glorious display of intelligence could proceed from the fortuitous concourse of atoms, or if chance could produce what the greatest genius can never sufficiently admire. (1772a, 11.10/135)

The lack of precision in this formulation of the design argument is partly a result of the fact that Hume's chief interest in this section of the *Enquiry* lies not in challenging the inference from an orderly universe to intelligence but rather in exploring the limitations on what can justly be inferred about the aims and powers of any divine mind. Significant progress can be made in this project simply in virtue of identifying the design argument as an experiential argument 'drawn from effects to causes' (ibid., 11.11/136). However, the looseness of Hume's presentation is also testimony to the familiarity of his contemporary readership with this particular line of thought: Hume's readers would have been instantly capable of bringing to mind other and more detailed expositions of the design argument.

The *Dialogues*, in contrast, contain several formulations of the design argument as Hume attempts to arrive at a version that is genuinely an argument from experience rather than an argument based on some minimal observational input and a mass of unacknowledged *a priori* assumptions. Hume repeatedly defends throughout his philosophical works the principle that we can arrive at just conclusions about causes and effects only on the basis of what we have actually observed to happen. In the concluding section of the *Enquiry*, for example, he sets out his allegiance to this principle in the following terms:

> If we reason *a priori*, any thing may appear able to produce any thing. The falling of a pebble may, for aught we know, extinguish the sun; or the wish of a man controul the planets in their orbits. It is only experience, which teaches us the nature and bounds of cause and effect, and enables us to infer the existence of one object from that of another. (ibid., 12.29/164)

And Hume defends the principle in both the *Enquiry* and the *Treatise* by arguing that no negation of a claim about a matter of fact or existence is ever self-contradictory whereas demonstrative reasoning, when it can legitimately be invoked, relies precisely upon establishing that the negation of its conclusion is indeed self-contradictory and hence inconceivable (see ibid., 4.9–11/29–30; 12.27–8/163–4; 1739, 1.3.6.1–2/186–7). The hope, therefore, of an advocate of the design argument who shares Hume's allegiance to this principle must be that the argument can be purified of all *a priori* accretions so that it becomes an argument rooted exclusively in experience.

The version of the argument put forward by Cleanthes starts by comparing the universe to an immense machine composed of many lesser machines.

> Look round the world: Contemplate the whole and every part of it: You will find it to be nothing but one great machine, subdivided into an infinite number of lesser machines, which again admit of subdivisions, to a degree beyond what human senses and faculties can trace and explain. (1779, 2.143)

Cleanthes then draws attention to what he views as the precise way in which these machines and their components are adjusted to each other so that they function harmoniously together.[2] According to Cleanthes, the fact that the universe is disposed in this manner provides the basis for a compelling *a posteriori* argument for the existence of a deity displaying substantial similarity to the minds possessed by human beings.

> The curious adapting of means to ends, throughout all nature, resembles exactly, though it much exceeds, the productions of human contrivance; of human design, thought, wisdom, and intelligence. Since therefore the effects resemble each other, we are led to infer, by all the rules of analogy, that the causes also resemble; and that the Author of nature is somewhat similar to the mind of man; though possessed of much larger faculties, proportioned to the grandeur of the work, which he has executed. (ibid., 2.143)

This reasoning is then subjected to a process of refinement by Philo with the aim of producing a version of the design argument that eschews all *a priori* assumptions but can still be endorsed by Cleanthes as a fair representation of his underlying line of thought.[3] Philo begins his exposition of the argument by rehearsing familiar Humean criticisms of inferences about matters of fact and existence that purport to dispense with the guidance of experience. A person who is unassisted by experience would make no progress at all:

> For as nothing, which he clearly conceives, could be esteemed impossible or implying a contradiction, every chimera of his fancy would be upon an equal footing; nor could he assign any just reason, why he adheres to one idea or system, and rejects the others, which are equally possible. (ibid., 2.145)

Nor would his situation be improved by a general survey of the observable world if this overview were restricted to a particular instant in time. Only experience of how events unfold over a period of time can guide him to appropriate conclusions about causes and effects.

> Again; after he opens his eyes, and contemplates the world, as it really is, it would be impossible for him, at first, to assign the cause of any one event; much less, of the whole of things or of the universe. He might set his fancy a rambling; and she might bring him in an

[2] It might be suggested that the interaction of a gazelle machine and a cheetah machine as the latter machine rips apart the innards of the former even as it desperately struggles to remain alive is not really an example of a harmonious process. Similarly, the solar system seems to have an ample supply of asteroids and other solid debris that can be relied upon, at some point in time, to strike the surface of the Earth with catastrophic consequences. This too might lead some people to question whether the fine-tuning of the universe in our immediate vicinity is quite as perfect as we might wish. Cleanthes, however, is apparently operating at a level of reverent generality that encourages him to disregard such recalcitrant phenomena.

[3] Although Cleanthes is represented as genuinely committed to arguing for God's existence purely on the basis of experience, Philo's own stance is more ambiguous. Philo repeatedly invokes empiricist constraints on acceptable reasoning and applies them more rigorously than Cleanthes manages to do. Nevertheless, when Demea objects to Philo's apparent acquiescence to Cleanthes' insistence on appealing to experience, Philo claims to be responding to Cleanthes on an *ad hominem* basis: 'You seem not to apprehend, replied Philo, that I argue with Cleanthes in his own way; and by showing him the dangerous consequences of his tenets, hope at last to reduce him to our opinion' (1779, 2.145).

> infinite variety of reports and representations. These would all be possible; but being all equally possible, he would never, of himself, give a satisfactory account for his preferring one of them to the rest. (ibid., 2.145–6)

The conclusion that Philo draws from these reflections on the limitations of *a priori* reasoning is that the phenomena appealed to by Cleanthes as the starting-point for the design argument are not intrinsically signs of design or a cause possessing intelligence and foresight.

> It follows (and is, indeed, tacitly allowed by Cleanthes himself) that order, arrangement, or the adjustment of final causes is not, of itself, any proof of design; but only so far as it has been experienced to proceed from that principle. (ibid., 2.146)

Until we receive some input from experience, we have no basis for preferring the hypothesis that the order and means-end adaptation displayed by the universe has its origins in the choices of some hidden intelligent agent to the hypothesis that matter contains within itself some hidden power that causes it to fall into 'the most exquisite arrangement' (ibid.) of interacting components. Both hypotheses are, according to Philo, equally conceivable. Consequently the proponent of the design argument needs to identify some experiential evidence in favour of the supposition that the intelligent agent hypothesis is more likely than its equally comprehensible rival to be true.

Allegedly, however, this crucial evidence is forthcoming if we take note of how some relatively familiar events unfold in the world around us.

> Throw several pieces of steel together, without shape or form; they will never arrange themselves so as to compose a watch: Stone, and mortar, and wood, without an architect, never erect a house. But the ideas in a human mind, we see, by an unknown, inexplicable œconomy, arrange themselves so as to form the plan of a watch or house. (ibid.)

Observations of this commonplace kind supposedly license us to conclude that there is indeed an inherent principle of order in mental phenomena but not in matter. And equipped with this conclusion, we can invoke the principle that similar effects imply similar causes to argue that as the 'adjustment of means to ends is alike in the universe, as in a machine of human contrivance' (ibid.), the causes of this adjustment in the two cases must resemble each other in significant ways.

7.2 Some Initial Criticisms of the Design Argument

One line of attack that Philo immediately deploys against the design argument as reconstructed above is that it is not an instance of the strongest kind of inference that can be based on experience. Philo maintains that when we are arguing from causes to effects or from effects to causes, our inferences are at their most secure when we have extensive experience of what follows from exactly similar causes or precedes exactly similar effects.

> That a stone will fall, that fire will burn, that the earth has solidity, we have observed a thousand and a thousand times; and when any new instance of this nature is presented, we draw without hesitation the accustomed inference. The exact similarity of the cases gives us a perfect assurance of a similar effect; and a stronger evidence is never desired nor sought after. (ibid., 2.144)

The design argument, in contrast, seeks to found its conclusions about the existence of a divine mind on similarities that are far from being exact similarities: neither the universe considered as a totality nor the biological organisms found here on Earth can plausibly be viewed as exactly similar to man-made machines. Philo accordingly argues that even when we are applying the standards of evidence and good reasoning that prevail in common life and the sciences, inferences based on inexact similarities are regarded with great suspicion.

> But observe, I entreat you, with what extreme caution all just reasoners proceed in the transferring of experiments to similar cases. Unless the cases be exactly similar, they repose no perfect confidence in applying their past observation to any particular phenomenon. Every alteration of circumstances occasions a doubt concerning the event; and it requires new experiments to prove certainly, that the new circumstances are of no moment or importance. (ibid., 2.147)

This criticism of the design argument does raise an important issue. However, it might be said in response that no causal inferences ever enjoy the luxury of being founded on repeated observations of exactly similar instances. Even if an event or object X is qualitatively indistinguishable from an event or object Y, it seemingly remains the case that X and Y will have different spatial or temporal locations. In fact, if they do not differ in this latter respect, this would normally be taken to establish that we are confronted by just one thing, albeit identified via two different routes, rather than two exactly similar things. Thus even if the design argument is not based on exact similarities, this is also true of the arguments that Philo picks out as examples of the strongest possible experience-based inferences.

The fact that all credible causal inferences are, from a strict Humean perspective, actually analogical inferences[4] is easily overlooked because we tend to simplify the first of Hume's conjoined attempts at specifying the impression-derived content of our non-relative idea of a cause (1739, 1.3.14.31/170; 1772a, 7.29/76–7) so that it becomes the claim that Xs are the causes of Ys if, and only if, all Xs are followed by Ys. However, as Robert Fogelin emphasizes (1985, 167–9), Hume actually claims in the *Treatise* that if a given X is contiguous with and followed by a Y and all things resembling that X are contiguous with and followed by things resembling that Y, then that X is the cause of that Y. Moreover, this key reference to things resembling the supposed cause and effect is retained in the *Enquiry.* So causal inference for Hume always involves, even in the most favourable circumstances, making judgements of similarity and resemblance. We infer that something resembling Y will occur on this occasion because we have observed that things resembling Y have frequently followed things resembling X in the past. And the version of the design argument formulated by Cleanthes and Philo asks us to infer that something resembling

[4] Hume's most explicit affirmation of this point is to be found in Section 9 of the *Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*: 'All our reasonings concerning matter of fact are founded on a species of ANALOGY, which leads us to expect from any cause the same events, which we have observed to result from similar causes. Where the causes are entirely similar, the analogy is perfect, and the inference, drawn from it, is regarded as certain and conclusive…. But where the objects have not so exact a similarity, the analogy is less perfect, and the inference is less conclusive; though still it has some force, in proportion to the degree of similarity and resemblance' (1772a, 9.1/104).

a human mind has brought about biological instances of means-end adaptation and the orderly nature of the universe because we have observed similar phenomena, in the form of machines that function in an orderly manner and have their components adjusted to serve specific ends, frequently following the intervention of things similar to a paradigmatic human mind.

Presumably, then, we should interpret Philo's underlying objection here as the contention that the resemblances invoked by the design argument are simply too insubstantial to ground an inference to an intelligent supernatural designer. Even if we set aside matters of spatio-temporal location, it would be wise for Philo to concede that we are, for example, most unlikely ever to encounter two stones that are qualitatively identical. However, he does seem to have a compelling case for saying that most stones resemble each other much more closely than machines of human construction resemble the universe or most biological organisms. And it might be thought that it is also legitimate to maintain that as soon as we have recourse to instances of loose similarity, our causal inferences lose their credibility until such time as we can reinstate their force by making direct observations of the behaviour of objects or events that strongly resemble these loosely similar instances.

Cleanthes' initial response to the charge that the resemblances invoked by the design argument are too weak to ground its ambitious conclusion places the emphasis firmly on the phenomenon of means-end adaptation:

> But is the whole adjustment of means to ends in a house and in the universe so slight a resemblance? The œconomy of final causes? The order, proportion, and arrangement of every part? Steps of a stair are plainly contrived that human legs may use them in mounting; and this inference is certain and infallible. Human legs are also contrived for walking and mounting; and this inference, I allow, is not altogether so certain, because of the dissimilarity which you remark; but does it, therefore, deserve the name only of presumption or conjecture? (1779, 2.144–5)

The modern reader is likely to find this an inadequate response because the theory of evolution through natural selection provides a plausible account of how biological organisms and their component parts come to be well-adapted to their environment that wholly eschews all appeals to contrivance and deliberate design. However, no detailed theory of this type, supported by the confirmatory evidence possessed by us today, was available to eighteenth-century thinkers. So it is no surprise that Hume, despite some rudimentary evolutionary speculations of his own (see ibid., 8.183–5), presents Cleanthes as identifying means-end adaptation as the key similarity between man-made machines and the effects that he is seeking to explain in terms of the agency of a divine mind.

Indeed it might be suggested that Cleanthes has nowhere else to go in order to find suitably persuasive similarities. The only other immediately obvious option would seem to lie in an appeal to the way in which the universe and its various elements operate in regular and uniform ways throughout all the regions we are capable of observing. Now it can be conceded that the machines we build do introduce new regularities into the world. An ordinary table lamp, for example, gives rise to a regular pattern of events. In the vast majority of cases, when it is plugged into a mains electricity supply and it is switched on, it emits light detectable by

human eyes. And when it is switched off, that event is usually followed by such light ceasing to be emitted. It is difficult to see, however, how such examples of regularities arising from human ingenuity could plausibly be presented as resembling phenomena like the constant velocity of light in a vacuum or the inverse-square law of gravitational attraction sufficiently closely for us to be entitled to infer that these regularities too are generated by something that strongly resembles a human mind. In order for that inference to be a legitimate one, there would surely need to be specific resemblances between the regularities we put into the world through our construction of machines and the basic physical regularities customarily identified as laws of nature. The mere fact that they can all be classified as regularities is not enough.

It seems, accordingly, that any version of the design argument that relies upon identifying substantial similarities between the universe or some of its components and machines arising from human design is likely to be pushed towards invoking means-end adaptation as the common factor that allows us to see these phenomena as strongly resembling each other. Could it be the case, then, that the universe itself displays suitable means-end adaptation when viewed as something separate from the biological organisms it contains? Or is an appeal to means-end adaptation at the biological level the only realistic option for an eighteenth-century proponent of the design argument?

When we look at biological organisms, we are struck by the fact that their survival depends upon an intricate level of interaction between their constituent parts. If a dolphin's heart stops beating, then the dolphin dies almost immediately. But a beating heart is of no use without a circulatory system to distribute oxygenated blood throughout the dolphin's body. And that circulatory system in turn needs to be linked to the dolphin's lungs, and the blood moving around in that system needs to have an ample supply of cells containing a conjugated protein, haemoglobin, that combines reversibly with oxygen. Moreover, this complicated system for distributing oxygen around the dolphin's body would, in turn, be pointless unless the dolphin had an intricate digestive system capable of generating glucose for the multifarious metabolic processes that cannot take place without both glucose and oxygen. Thus the survival of a dolphin depends upon an immensely complicated network of interlocking and precisely adjusted internal systems, and the fact that such a network is in place to support the continued existence of dolphins does constitute a striking example of means-end adaptation.

In the case, however, of such non-biological phenomena as stars, planets, and galaxies, their continued existence over time seems much less puzzling. A star, for example, does not have a great deal of internal complexity, and the macro-processes taking place within it do not, given the physical laws that hold sway in the actual world as opposed to other possible worlds, require any fine adjustments or subtle co-ordination with each other in order to sustain them. Given a sufficient number of hydrogen atoms in a particular region of space and a sufficiently long period of time, a star will be created no matter how those atoms were originally arranged and it will continue burning in almost all known circumstances as long as its supply of hydrogen atoms remains large enough. In terms, then, of the internal goal of continued

survival, stars fail to display any characteristics that would plausibly allow us to see them as manifesting genuine means-end adaptation. And the same seems to be true of galaxies and planets.

It might be objected at this point that continued existence is not the only end or goal that an object can reveal when its internal constitution and the relation of its parts to one another are scrutinized. A sword, for example, is an object that has very few parts, and those parts do not interact with each other in a complicated way. Nevertheless, even a cursory inspection of a sword would alert most of us to the fact that it is an artefact that has been created with the goal that it should serve as an effective way of killing people. Even if we have no acquaintance with the process of forging a sword and we have never seen a sword wielded by someone trying to kill another person, such physical characteristics as the sharpness of the blade, the sword's weight and its distribution, the sturdiness of its construction, and the way the hilt fits a human hand appear to be ample evidence that a sword is an implement designed to serve as a weapon.

Is it possible, then, to locate some function, unrelated to the internal goal of remaining in existence, that is so superbly performed by the universe, when considered as a totality, that we can legitimately conclude that it was created or shaped by some intelligent agent similar to a human mind in order to serve that function? If such an inference is to be an appropriate one by everyday standards, we need to identify a range of tasks that a powerful and intelligent designer bearing some substantial similarity to a human mind might plausibly wish a physical universe to perform. And we must then make out a plausible case for concluding that the universe executes at least one of these tasks in a highly efficient manner.

The most promising candidate for the function that the universe might be intended to perform is that of bringing into existence and sustaining intelligent life. This would seem to be a worthy goal for a powerful and intelligent designer, and it is perhaps the only goal that makes any sense if we suppose that this designer possesses the self-sufficient perfection of the God envisaged by Christianity and Islam. Unfortunately, when the universe is assessed as an instrument intended to achieve this particular goal, it conveys the impression of being singularly ill-suited for this purpose.

According to our best scientific hypotheses, the observable universe is heading inexorably towards a state of maximum entropy that will bring about the cessation of all significant macrophysical processes, including the cessation of all biological life. As for the universe's current relationship to biological life, it seems astonishingly inimical to such phenomena. As far as we can tell, only one planet in our solar system manages to host life of any significant level of complexity, and even here the amount of time required for such life to develop has been huge. And in terms of intelligent life, it is a salient fact that even if we ascribe a degree of intelligence to such animals as ants and gnats, the Earth existed for thousands of millions of years before anything comparable to the neurophysiological sophistication of modern insects evolved. Worse still, if the benchmark for an interesting level of intelligence is set at the far from extravagantly high standard represented by our own species, *Homo sapiens*, we are envisaging a situation in which such intelligence has, at best,

existed on Earth for a few million years out of roughly five billion years. There have also been several mass extinctions in the course of the Earth's history, and the universe taken as a whole features numerous life-extinguishing phenomena such as asteroids, large meteors, super-novae, and gamma-ray bursters. Moreover, the distance between stars and the relative paucity of stars with planets of the right size and orbits to support life seems sufficient of itself to raise serious doubts about the universe's suitability to be viewed as an efficient means of producing life, intelligent or otherwise, as an end product.

Indeed, if we were looking for a good biological analogy to the relationship between the universe and biological life, the appropriate one would seem to be that of host and parasite. If the host did not have a very specific set of physical properties, then the parasite would not be able to exist. Nevertheless the host's properties are not to be viewed as coming into existence as a means of providing a hospitable environment for the parasite.

It appears, therefore, that means-end adaptation at the biological level is indeed the most promising source of substantial similarities between natural phenomena and the machines created by human beings. So those eighteenth-century advocates of the design argument who focused their attention, prior to the destructive impact of the theory of evolution through natural selection, on biological examples were manifesting a sound appreciation of how best to maximize the argument's plausibility. Nevertheless, they still faced some substantial problems in locating an adequate level of similarity between biological organisms and man-made machines. These two types of phenomena may resemble each other in virtue of manifesting striking levels of means-end adaptation, but there are also significant dissimilarities that need to be taken into account.

As Kemp Smith points out, biological organisms are not just organized physical systems, they are self-organizing physical systems (Hume 1779, 102). The machines we create, in contrast, characteristically rely upon us to fit together components that show no sign of any propensity towards assembling themselves. Similarly, our machines are rarely self-repairing, and they do not spontaneously generate new copies of themselves without our direct intervention. It might, of course, be argued that these observations merely constitute evidence of the greater power and wisdom of the supernatural agent responsible for the existence of biological organisms. Human beings lack the power and intelligence to create machines that are self-organizing, but that limitation does not affect God. However, this seems to be a question-begging response. It admits the existence of major dissimilarities between biological organisms and man-made machines, but then assumes, without further argument, that the best explanation for these differences lies in supposing that these organisms arise from a process of design carried out by an agent who is much more intelligent and powerful than human beings. Critics of the design argument are surely entitled to maintain that this assumption urgently requires some form of defence. Given the acknowledged points of difference between biological organisms and machines, why should we not treat them as pointing towards the conclusion that biological systems arise from a process that is somewhat analogous to human thought but dispenses with forethought and planning? After all, the principle invoked by Cleanthes

and other defenders of the design argument is that like effects prove like causes. And once it has been acknowledged that the effects, in this case biological organisms and man-made machines, have major dissimilarities as well as some striking similarities, it seems rash to suppose that these dissimilarities can be legitimately explained only by postulating a level of insight and intelligence that vastly exceeds anything that has previously been encountered by us.

7.3 Voices from the Clouds and Living Libraries

Cleanthes responds to Philo's reservations about the degree of resemblance between the universe and biological organisms on the one hand and man-made machines on the other by insisting that this similarity is so obvious that it does not need to be established by any detailed investigation or process of reasoning.

> It is by no means necessary, that theists should prove the similarity of the works of nature to those of art; because this similarity is self-evident and undeniable? The same matter, a like form: What more is requisite to show an analogy between their causes…. Your objections, I must freely tell you, are no better than the abstruse cavils of those philosophers, who denied motion; and ought to be refuted in the same manner, by illustrations, examples, and instances, rather than by serious argument and philosophy. (ibid., 3.152)

Cleanthes accordingly sets out two thought experiments, the voice from the clouds and the vegetable library, that are supposed to persuade Philo to acknowledge that we would all infer intelligent origins for these phenomena even in the absence of a supporting generalization based on direct observations of the past origins of exactly similar phenomena. Moreover, Philo is also supposed to be driven to concede that we would, in practice, find these inferences completely compelling despite the possibility of objections being raised concerning other possible origins and the dissimilarities between these phenomena and human speech or writing.

Cleanthes' first thought experiment invites Philo to consider what conclusion he would draw 'if an articulate voice were heard in the clouds, much louder and more melodious than any which human art could ever reach' (ibid.). If it is supposed that this voice speaks at the same instant to everyone in the world in their own language and provides profound and morally improving instruction, then Cleanthes purports to be confident that humankind's lack of acquaintance with previous examples of heavenly voices and the circumstances in which they arise would not prevent Philo from inferring that this voice is the product of intelligent agency.

It would, of course, be more contentious, even in this hypothetical situation, to conclude that the voice issuing from the clouds is God's voice. We might be inclined ourselves to suspect that if this phenomenon were ever to occur in real life, it would be the product of alien intervention or some unforeseen technological breakthrough. However, even these relatively cautious conclusions would concede to Cleanthes his main point that we would be forced to explain the voice in terms of intelligent agency. Perhaps the most sceptical hypothesis that might be plausible would be that some natural phenomenon is over-stimulating the brains of all the human beings on

the planet and generating the kind of inner voices heard by people suffering from paranoid schizophrenia. But even in this limiting case the voices that are being heard still seem to be the products of intelligent agency, albeit the same intelligent agents that are perceiving or misperceiving those voices.

The truly problematic aspect of Cleanthes' example would appear to be its appeal to a phenomenon that is exceptionally well-correlated in our experience with intelligent agency. We have, it might be suggested, no experience whatsoever of articulate, meaningful speech emerging from any source that is not itself intelligent or at least constructed by intelligent agents. Thus the link between meaningful sounds and intelligent sources is a tight and well-confirmed one. In contrast, the link between means-end adaptation or physical regularities and intelligent agency is a far looser one. Interpretable sounds that instantly convey meaning to human listeners are always, when this meaning possesses any substantial level of complexity, the direct products of intelligent agents or of machines, like DVD players and mobile telephones, that are known to be of a kind produced by intelligent agents. Thus the heavenly voice would indeed be excellent evidence of intelligent agency. Unfortunately for Cleanthes such heavenly voices do not exist, and hence they yield no support whatsoever for the supposition that a divine intelligence exists. All that we actually observe in the universe are examples of means-end adaptation that are only seldom linked in any evident way with intelligent agency, and physical regularities that seem similarly disconnected from such agency. Moreover, in the case of physical regularities created by observable intelligent agents, these regularities exist only because of other physical regularities that we and other finite agents of our acquaintance are wholly unable to control.

Cleanthes' second thought experiment, a postulated world in which books full of intelligible discourse arise from a process of propagation similar to that which provides crops of vegetables in the world that we inhabit, is perhaps intended to serve as a response to the above objection. His first thought experiment invites us to consider a possible world PW_1 exactly like ours except for the injection of a few sounds that are readily interpreted by human beings as having informative semantic content. In this possible world, then, that particular property remains tightly correlated with a known proximate or remote cause that involves intelligent agency. When we turn to Cleanthes' second thought experiment, however, we seem to be invited to consider a possible world PW_2 in which written marks of an intelligible or interpretable kind frequently arise in a manner that leaves us unable to discern any proximate or even remote causes that involve intelligent agency. According to Cleanthes, we would still infer that this propagation of vegetable books was ultimately brought about by intelligent agency even though the immediate cause of a vegetable *Iliad* would be blind and unintelligent reproduction from an earlier *Iliad*. In similar fashion, then, we should not allow ourselves to be distracted by the fact that we see complex biological organisms like dolphins arising from the blind and unintelligent process of sexual reproduction initiated by the mating of earlier male and female dolphins. The complexity and marks of contrivance found in the vegetable *Iliad* license the conclusion that intelligence is ultimately involved; so by parity of reasoning the even greater complexity and sophisticated means-end adaptation found in dolphins must give

even stronger support to the conclusion that intelligence is responsible for the existence of dolphins.

The first problem with this latter thought experiment is that our inferential habits are formed by correlations that have been observed in the actual world. It is not surprising, therefore, that we infer that these vegetable books in Cleanthes' possible world PW_2 have their origins in intelligent agency: we are simply transferring inductive habits developed in this world to another possible world where they are far less appropriate. And the fact that our inferences when contemplating PW_2 are shaped and potentially distorted by this form of psychological conditioning means that our willingness to make the inference to intelligent agency does little, if anything, to show that this inference is legitimate.

The second problem is that even if it would be appropriate for an inquirer located in PW_2 to regard these vegetable books as ultimately products of intelligent design or agency, the link in that world between complex systems of interpretable symbols and intelligent agency would continue to be much firmer than the link between physical regularities and means-end adaptation in our world and observable intelligent agency. So Cleanthes' challenge to Philo that he must assert either that 'a rational volume is no proof of a rational cause, or admit of a similar cause to all the works of nature' (ibid., 3.154) seems misdirected. In the actual world, it is appropriate to treat a rational volume as proof of a rational cause. In PW_2, however, that appropriateness is more questionable; and in so far as it does potentially constitute a compelling line of argument, the existence of that highly specific form of complexity and order does not provide us with a close parallel to the forms of complexity and order that exist in our world without being created by limited and physically embodied intelligent agents like us.

The third issue relates to the utility of the order manifested in the vegetable volumes. Without certain internal kinds of order, vegetables are unable to reproduce or continue existing. This point does not suffice of itself to explain why these forms of order exist. But if one supposes a blind vivifying principle (see ibid., 11.211) that ceaselessly twists material substance into new patterns of organization, we can explain how physical systems that manifest a pattern that sustains itself by taking sustenance from the environment and also possesses the power of replicating itself in the form of offspring would come to be such prominent elements of the world around us (see ibid., 8.185). Such an explanation would account for the existence of tuna and dolphins: however, it would not account for the existence of intelligible markings on the leaves of the vegetable books envisaged by Cleanthes. These markings confer no advantages in terms of survivability on those books; so it is more tempting in these circumstances to postulate an explanation in terms of intelligent design.

Fourthly, Cleanthes' preferred explanation of how these books come to exist seems, on closer examination, to be no explanation at all. If the order and value to human beings of the markings on these vegetable books genuinely stands in need of explanation, what progress is made by postulating the unexplained existence of an even more orderly, powerful, and helpful system of thoughts and capacities that happens to constitute an intentional agent with a desire to produce intelligible

vegetable books? If we already knew of the existence of an agent with those capacities, then we could substantially reduce our explanatory burden by concluding that the books are directly or indirectly created by such an agent. But in the situation described by Cleanthes the only basis we have for postulating the existence of this agent is the supposition that the vegetable books need explaining and are not self-explaining. Mental order, however, is not intrinsically more explicable and understandable than physical order: indeed it seems, as far as our observations extend, to be invariably rooted in extremely complex forms of physical order. So if the existence of vegetable books is not something that we are entitled to accept as self-explanatory or simply a brute fact, then the existence of Cleanthes' intelligent designer of vegetable books is even more mysterious. Conversely, if we are confident that there must be some, albeit currently unknown, explanation that would make the existence of an intelligent book designer acceptable as self-explaining or a brute fact, what possible reason could we have, apart from an *a priori* prejudice (see ibid., 7.179), for supposing that it is not equally applicable to the vegetable books themselves or some physical and unintelligent remote cause of those books?

7.4 Disanalogies Between Human Minds and Divine Intelligence

The key experimental principle relied upon by Cleanthes throughout the *Dialogues* is that like effects prove like causes. Philo, however, is keen to point out that this principle has the following consequences:

> Now it is certain, that the liker the effects are, which are seen, and the liker the causes, which are inferred, the stronger is the argument. Every departure on either side diminishes the probability, and renders the experiment less conclusive. (ibid., 5.165)

From this perspective, we can attack the design argument in its analogical form by undermining the analogy between the observable phenomena we are trying to explain and the products of human design. But we can equally employ the tactic of showing how dissimilar the postulated explanatory intelligence is to the actual causes of these products.

Consider the following variant on the standard design argument. In all the cases we have observed of order coming from intelligent design, that intelligence has been physically embodied. Therefore if dolphins and other biological organisms are sufficiently similar to machines to make it reasonable to infer that they have an origin in intelligent design, then we must infer that dolphins and these other organisms are designed by something physically embodied. If we attempt to infer that they are designed by something that is not physically embodied on the basis that we can supposedly see that nothing physically embodied is available to serve as such a designer, what remains of the credibility of the inference? Is not disembodied intelligence, whatever that might be, so dissimilar to embodied intelligence that postulating its agency here breaches the *similar effects—similar causes* principle?

The attempt to retain the force of an analogical argument while modifying the similarities postulated between the alleged causes because of external considerations is always a procedure that should be viewed with suspicion. And the supposition that we are entitled to infer the existence of non-embodied intelligence merely because various natural phenomena bear some resemblance to the products of embodied human intelligence seems particularly tendentious.

Suppose a hated tyrant suddenly and mysteriously dies in a seemingly impregnable room that could not be accessed by anyone who was not invisible. Deaths of that kind, namely the sudden deaths of deeply unpopular tyrants, are often the result of the actions of embodied and visible assassins. So it is initially tempting to argue that it is likely that an embodied assassin also brought about this death. How, though, should we respond to the point that no visible assassin could have entered the room without being detected? It would be absurd in this situation to conclude that an invisible human assassin probably killed the tyrant. The dissimilarity between the human beings with which we are acquainted and the kind of thing represented by an invisible human being completely vitiates such an application of analogical reasoning. And it does this even though an invisible human being is not a logical impossibility. We need instead to look in other directions, possibly towards an unusual disease or a congenital weakness of some vital organ, for the cause of that tyrant's death.

Of course the analogical argument would retain more force if the effect, the hated tyrant's death, had a very close degree of similarity with other deaths known to have been caused by human assassins. But if there are significant differences here and also major dissimilarities between the alleged causes, then the argument seems probatively useless. And it is important to bear in mind the inadequacy of the reply that an invisible human assassin is just like an ordinary assassin with the small difference that he or she can become invisible. If we reflect on how such invisibility could be achieved by flesh and bone, we would be forced to concede that an invisible human being would either defy a significant number of physical laws or would need the assistance of technology that far surpasses anything now likely to be available to a human being.

Equally, then, the suggestion that disembodied intelligence is just like or very similar to embodied human intelligence with the small difference that it has no physical aspect or attributes is likely to strike most of us as a wholly inadequate response to the objection that the only intelligent agents with which we are acquainted are all embodied agents. It does have to be conceded that if one views human mental phenomena through the prism of substance dualism, then the difference between embodied human intelligence and disembodied intelligence is relatively trivial. Instead of being like the difference between an invisible human being and a human being who reflects electro-magnetic radiation in the visible part of the spectrum, it becomes more like the difference between a naked person and someone who is wearing clothes. But if our human intelligence is actually nothing over and above a set of physical processes akin to the workings of a computer chip or the monitoring of chemical levels by the digestive system, then the supposition that something exists in this world, rather than in some other logically

possible world, that is very similar to human intelligence but wholly non-physical seems a very problematic one. And this supposition would not gain much credibility even if one were to embrace property dualism rather than physicalism. If it is nomologically impossible for human mental processes to exist as anything other than physical processes with some non-physical properties, it still seems to be true that hypothetical mental processes with no physical component whatsoever would be radically dissimilar to the forms of intelligence we observe in ourselves and some other animals.

It appears, therefore, that even if the universe or biological organisms can legitimately be seen as closely resembling man-made machines, the principle that like effects imply like causes will successfully deliver the conclusion that they are the products of some intelligent supernatural agent only if we are entitled to assume that human minds are essentially non-physical substances. And given the readily observed fact that inducing physical changes in the brain is a highly effective means of bringing about changes in a person's mental state, what experiential grounds are there for supposing that it is more likely than not that human minds are nomologically capable of existing in this world in situations where they have no physical properties? It seems considerably more plausible, in fact, to infer that this relationship indicates that functioning human brains and human minds are one and the same thing.

It is noteworthy, moreover, that Hume shows little inclination to embrace substance dualism in respect of the human mind. In the *Treatise* he argues that 'the question concerning the substance of the soul is absolutely unintelligible' (1739, 1.4.5.33/250). If we try to determine whether our thoughts and passions belong to a material substance or an immaterial substance, Hume maintains that our idea of a substance is simply not sufficiently clear for us to be able to arrive at any defensible conclusions. And a similar position seems to be espoused by Hume in 'Of the Immortality of the Soul'. In that essay, the idea of substance is presented as a relative idea with almost no positive content:

> But just metaphysics teach us, that the notion of substance is wholly confused and imperfect, and that we have no other idea of any substance than as an aggregate of particular qualities, inhering in an unknown something. Matter, therefore, and spirit are at bottom equally unknown; and we cannot determine what qualities may inhere in the one or in the other. (1777a, 591)

At the same time that he is being studiously neutral on the metaphysical question of the substance underlying our thoughts, Hume seems to place considerable emphasis on the causal role of the physical brain. Hume claims in both the *Treatise* and the *Enquiry* that each idea that comes before a person's mind partially determines, via principles of psychological association, what idea or ideas will follow it (1739, 1.1.4.1/10–11; 1772a, 3.1/23). These principles of association play a crucial role in Hume's account of belief and causal inference: without recourse to these principles he would be unable to offer any explanation of how we arrive at beliefs about matters of fact lying beyond the reach of our memories and the present operation of our senses. From Hume's perspective, awareness of these connecting principles is of great value within the science of human nature even if it is not possible

to discover why they hold sway. However, he does eventually offer what he presents as a plausible physiological account of the origins of these principles.

> When I receiv'd the relations of *resemblance*, *contiguity* and *causation*, as principles of union among ideas, without examining into their causes, 'twas more in prosecution of my first maxim, that we must in the end rest contented with experience, than for want of something specious and plausible, which I might have display'd on that subject. 'Twou'd have been easy to have made an imaginary dissection of the brain, and have shown, why upon our conception of any idea, the animal spirits run into all the contiguous traces, and rouze up the other ideas, that are related to it. (1739, 1.2.5.20/60)

Hume's reference to an imaginary dissection of the brain might lead some readers to suspect that he is less than fully committed to this physiological explanation. As Robert Anderson has pointed out, however, Hume immediately abandons his air of wry detachment in favour of putting this account of the inner workings of the brain to some serious use (1966, 122). Hume asserts that although he has hitherto refrained from appealing to physiological considerations when explaining the relations of ideas, 'I am afraid I must here have recourse to it, in order to account for the mistakes that arise from these relations' (1739, 1.2.5.20/60). It seems, therefore, that Hume's underlying view is that the activity of the brain is generally, or perhaps always, a plausible candidate when we are looking for a deeper explanation of human mental activity, but he also holds that there are methodological considerations that frequently tell in favour of remaining content with informative generalizations at the level of mental phenomena of which we are introspectively aware.

It is also conspicuous that Philo makes some very strong claims in the *Dialogues* about the connection between thought and the brain. In the course of his criticisms of Cleanthes' efforts to represent thought as the principle most likely to explain the orderly nature of the universe, Philo pointedly asks (1779, 2.148): 'What peculiar privilege has this little agitation of the [b]rain which we call thought, that we must thus make it the model of the whole universe?' This question surely reveals that Philo regards human thought as the causal product of the human brain. Later in the *Dialogues* the same assumption surfaces in the course of one of Philo's more fanciful examples. Cleanthes holds that experience tells us that thought is a principle that confers order on aspects of the world without needing anything external to confer order on its own operations. Philo, in contrast, insists that a proper review of experience indicates that many physical processes also have a good claim to be regarded as conferring order on their immediate environment while being spontaneously self-ordering. And in an allusion to the intricate webs spun by spiders without the aid of a conscious process of design, Philo argues that Cleanthes' partiality towards thought as an ultimate principle of order is difficult to defend: 'Why an orderly system may not be spun from the belly as well as from the brain, it will be difficult for him to give a satisfactory reason' (ibid., 7.180). Significantly, this challenge reveals that Philo is taking it as unquestionable that thought is rooted in the brain rather than in some wholly immaterial system. Cleanthes speaks of thought, and Philo automatically translates or, as Cleanthes would no doubt wish to insist, mistranslates that into talk about the brain.

Another striking example of Philo's emphasis on the role of the brain in human thought occurs during his discussion of the avoidable evils that appear to befall sentient creatures. Philo suggests that a 'Being, therefore, who knows the secret springs of the universe' (ibid., 11.206) could manipulate the numerous events that strike us as random and coincidental so that they always conferred benefits. In particular, the character and intellect of various people who turned out to be loathsome tyrants could readily have been altered so that they furthered the well-being of their fellow citizens instead of pillaging and murdering them: 'Some small touches, given to Caligula's brain in his infancy, might have converted him into a Trajan' (ibid., 11.207).[5] Philo does not deign to talk here of changes to Caligula's immaterial soul: a few minor alterations to Caligula's brain are all that Philo regards as causally necessary to transform his moral dispositions from those of a monster of ego and depravity to a just and far-sighted statesman.

It is, of course, dangerous to suppose that Philo is acting at all points in the *Dialogues* as a spokesman for views that Hume is really intent on defending. What is significant, however, about the foregoing assertions by Philo is that they are not challenged by any of the other participants in the discussion. Indeed, the other participants fail to object to Philo's assumption that the brain exercises a decisive causal role in human thought even when that assumption reduces their own positions to absurdity. Cleanthes is supposed to be an advocate of the view that 'there is an original principle of order in mind, not in matter' (ibid., 2.146). Yet he is portrayed as complacently acquiescing in Philo's provocative decision to recast the question of whether there is such an original principle in mind rather than matter as a question about whether the ordering activities of the brain are more explicable than the ordering activities of a spider's belly (ibid., 7.180–1). This acquiescence makes no sense in terms of Cleanthes' ostensible position within the *Dialogues*: it can be explained only by supposing that Philo is serving here as a device for insinuating into the text Hume's own perspective on the relationship between thought and the brain.

It appears, therefore, that even if we were to suppose that substance dualism is the best available account of the human mind, this supposition is not one that Hume himself has any tendency to share. His preference is clearly to set aside questions about underlying substances on the grounds that our metaphysical notion of a substance is so ill-defined that we cannot give these questions any legitimate answers. Instead Hume maintains that we should concentrate on questions about causal relationships between things we can observe (see 1777a, 591); and he holds that when we do this, it becomes obvious that the brain, an organized physical system, plays a causally crucial role in human thought.

Ultimately, then, Hume's attitude towards the explanation of human thought has much in common with present-day physicalism. Hume holds that the only claims that we can legitimately make about the process of thinking are either internal claims about the relationship of thoughts to each other or claims about the dependence of thinking on such physical objects as the brain. If we rashly postulate that this dependence is at some level a causal relationship between the brain and an

[5] Trajan (53–117 CE) was considered to be a wise and virtuous emperor.

immaterial substance in which our thoughts inhere, then Hume would say that this supposition lacks genuine content: it merely constitutes a gesture in the direction of some mysterious underpinning of our thoughts that lies wholly beyond our cognisance even if we have, by accident, succeeded in referring to it. A modern physicalist might be more dogmatic in saying that there is definitely nothing involved in thought other than a set of physical interactions, but any positive claim about the mind and thought that Hume would be prepared to endorse would be one that a physicalist could, in principle, endorse too.

This shared perspective delivers, as we have already indicated, a major blow to the design argument. Given the starting point of the design argument, the principle that like effects imply like causes can yield support for the contention that a divine mind exists only if it is supposed that this divine mind is similar to a human mind. But there is a good case, and one that is accepted by Hume, for the conclusion that human minds depend for their existence on the causal interaction of the pieces of matter that make up the human brain. So if the divine mind is supposed to be a mind that does not depend on some physical system analogous to the human brain, then just how similar can that alleged mind be to our minds? Even if it is possible to give some content to the supposition that there are relevant resemblances here, it remains the case that the disanalogies are so striking and substantial that we can no longer have any legitimate confidence that the postulated divine mind is sufficiently similar to a human mind for its hypothetical existence to derive any support from similarities between natural phenomena and the works wrought by human beings.

7.5 Non-analogical Forms of the Design Argument

In the time that has elapsed since Hume wrote the *Dialogues*, there has been an increasing tendency for the design argument to be expounded by religious apologists in a way that downplays any detailed analogy between natural phenomena and the products of human intelligence. The argument is recast instead as an argument to best explanation (see, for example, Schlesinger 1977, 182–201; Swinburne 2004, 153–191). The plausibility of the theory of evolution through natural selection has thoroughly undermined attempts to use means-end adaptation in biological organisms as evidence that some supernatural designer exists. And, as we have seen above, criticisms of the kind deployed by Philo seem to establish that the universe, viewed as a totality, is not sufficiently similar to man-made machines to ground a credible argument from analogy. These forms of argument have been replaced by attempts to maintain that postulating the existence of God or some very powerful supernatural mind is the best way of explaining the universe's orderly nature and the regularities of succession that it manifests.

The attractions of this new approach are obvious. It seemingly by-passes the accumulating evidence for the truth of evolutionary theory, as it can be maintained that evolutionary thinking explains how complex biological organisms would emerge without intelligent shaping given the underlying physical laws

operating in the universe but fails to explain why those laws hold sway rather than laws that would prevent evolution from even commencing. It also obviates the need to show that the orderly nature of the universe makes it similar enough to man-made machines for the *similar effects—similar causes* principle to obtain some purchase. As soon as it is conceded that the universe displays a substantial degree of regularity, these new versions of the design argument challenge us to explain the existence of such regularity.

It might be suspected, therefore, that Hume's criticisms of the design argument are now verging on obsolescence. Most of the objections deployed by Philo in the *Dialogues* clearly have the analogical version of the argument as their primary target. How plausible, then, is the supposition that these objections possess any residual force against the design argument when this is interpreted as an argument to best explanation? And are there any other components in the overall argumentative case constructed by Philo and Hume's alleged sceptical friend that bear directly on the issue of whether regularity actually requires explanation?

We can make a start on answering these questions by reviewing what is required if an argument to best explanation is to qualify as cogent by everyday, non-philosophical standards? Suppose, for example, that we are using such an argument to infer from the existence of a phenomenon X to the conclusion that some phenomenon Y also exists. What needs to be true of X and Y if an argument from best explanation is to succeed?

One key requirement is that we must be entitled to hold that the existence of a phenomenon like Y makes the existence of a phenomenon like X more probable than would be the case if no phenomenon like Y were to exist. But we also need information about the antecedent probability of phenomena like Y. The existence of a powerful criminal organization dedicated to using all available means to ensure the extinction of the polar bear would certainly tend to make the extinction of the polar bear more probable. But if the polar bear were unfortunately to become extinct, that event would not establish that such an organization probably does exist. Unless the antecedent probability that this criminal enterprise exists is sufficiently high, we would still lack adequate grounds for concluding that the world contains so bizarre a conspiracy.

Even the above information is not all that is required in order to construct a cogent argument to best explanation. The argument also needs to incorporate reliable information about the probability of a phenomenon like X in the absence of a phenomenon like Y and the extent to which that probability is increased if a phenomenon like Y does exist. Thus an argument to best explanation demands a great deal of prior information about probabilities before it can achieve any traction. And the principal problem with the design argument when recast as an argument of this kind is that the necessary probability assignments are simply not available.

Probability judgements are sometimes construed as claims about the frequency with which a phenomenon of a particular type occurs in specified circumstances. As far as we are aware, however, only one universe exists and there are no other actual universes to be taken into consideration. If, therefore, we ask how probable it is that a universe like this one should have the physical laws and regularities that it does

have, the answer would seem to be that all the universes that have ever existed or will ever exist display these laws and regularities and hence the probability of this being the case is 1. This seems a deeply unsatisfying answer; so it might be suggested that we need to consider not actual universes but logically possible universes. If the logically possible universes featuring physical laws and regularities like those found in this universe constitute only a small proportion of the totality of logically possible universes, then this supposedly makes it true that the actual universe displays a highly improbable set of laws and regularities.

This proposal, however, assumes that it makes sense to talk of the total number of logically possible universes possessing a particular feature. And Robin Le Poidevin (1996, 50–1) has presented a strong case for supposing that such an assumption is mistaken. Obviously there is at least one possible universe that manifests the laws and regularities manifested by the actual universe. Actuality implies potentiality. Hence the actual universe is an example of a logically possible universe with the laws and regularities we observe around us. But how many more logically possible universes are there that manifest those laws and regularities? It seems that we can construct as many as we like, without any upper limit at all. After all, a universe just like the actual universe but containing one extra hydrogen atom is surely logically possible, and so too is a universe containing two extra hydrogen atoms or perhaps one extra helium atom. Moreover, if we grow more ambitious we can start constructing logically possible universes that obey the same laws as the actual universe but which contain extra stars or even galaxies rather than just extra atoms. It is impossible, therefore, to give any content to the supposition that the actual universe manifests improbable physical laws and regularities by appealing to ratios amongst the totality of logically possible universes: such ratios simply do not exist.

The most plausible alternative to a frequency interpretation of statements about probability is the propensity interpretation. This regards probabilities as residing in dispositions belonging to objects and situations that favour particular outcomes to different degrees. If an unskilled person throws a knife at a distant target, the probability that it will hit the target, point first, is low because the causal forces at work in that situation have a strong tendency or disposition to produce an outcome in which the knife either misses the target completely or hits the target hilt first or along the edge of the blade. On the propensity interpretation, then, probabilities derive from dispositions and tendencies inherent in a set of pre-existing causal processes.

As Le Poidevin points out, the implication of the propensity interpretation is that the raw probability of a universe existing that displays all the physical laws and core regularities manifested by the actual universe is not something that can be specified independently of some background causal processes (ibid., 53). Given certain antecedent forces, some outcomes become probable or improbable. But if nothing exists as a causal context, then nothing can be improbable or improbable unless it is logically impossible or necessary. Thus if one assumes certain starting conditions and basic physical laws for the universe, it becomes meaningful to assess some subsequent outcomes as improbable, such as the instantaneous, non-evolutionary emergence of complex, living organisms. However, it makes no sense to assign a specific probability

between 1 and 0 to those antecedent conditions themselves if they genuinely have no precursors. In that situation, these antecedent conditions are not the outcome of any process that has a tendency to favour some outcomes rather than others; so there is no such thing as the probability that this universe would have those laws and starting conditions rather than other laws and starting conditions.

Hume's decision to concentrate on supplying Philo with criticisms 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. The non-analogical versions that we have been examining cannot support the probability assignments they need through observations of the way that the universe actually operates because no facts about how it actually operates are relevant to the truth or falsity of those probability assignments. And the attempt to rely instead on thought experiments in which we calculate the ratio of logically possible universes obeying the basic physical laws of this actual universe to logically possible universes that do not obey those laws founders on the point that the totality of possible universes is not a countable totality. These versions of the design argument have ceased to be arguments from experience. They have metamorphosed instead into arguments relying upon an unsupported prejudice in favour of the superior probability of mental order over physical order. And that prejudice is one that Hume rightly rejects. In the words that Hume assigns to Philo:

> For aught we can know *a priori*, matter may contain the source or spring of order originally, within itself, as well as mind does; and there is no more difficulty in conceiving, that the several elements, from an internal unknown cause, may fall into the most exquisite arrangement, than to conceive that their ideas, in the great, universal mind, from a like internal, unknown cause, fall into that arrangement. (1779, 2.146)

Chapter 8
The Problem of Evil

In the preceding two chapters we have reviewed Hume's discussion of the principal arguments used within natural theology to support the God hypothesis. It became apparent that Hume's rejection of the traditional *a priori* arguments is completely uncompromising: he believes that they are utterly worthless. His final assessment of the design argument, however, proved less easy to determine. In the course of the *Dialogues* and the *Enquiry concerning Human Understanding* Hume articulates some powerful criticisms of the design argument. And it is tempting to suppose that Hume's own assessment of the argument is that the objections to it are so compelling that it fails to confer any positive credibility on the God hypothesis or even the less ambitious Mindedness Hypothesis. Nevertheless, Hume carefully refrains from explicitly delivering such a verdict on the design argument. So it remains necessary to exercise caution in treating Hume's writings as amounting to a total repudiation of this line of reasoning.

It is often supposed, however, that we can be entirely confident that Hume holds that the design argument is incapable of supporting the conclusion that the universe has been shaped or created by a God or supernatural intelligence that possesses the attributes of benevolence and concern for our welfare. Hume's commitment to this particular limitation on the capabilities of the design argument is allegedly made clear by his treatment of the problem of evil.

Hume discusses the problem of evil in Parts 10 and 11 of the *Dialogues* and it is also one of the topics considered in Section 11 of the *Enquiry.* This is an old debate, going back at least as far as Epicurus (341–270 BCE), and many today and through the ages see the problem as fatal to religious belief and as constituting a conclusive argument against the existence of the Christian God. Moreover, the problem is one that actually affects people's own beliefs (unlike many a philosophical, abstract argument); here is the philosopher Louise Antony's story:

> The argument from design … seemed, despite its problems, the last hope. But then came the day that literally changed my life—the day when I first heard the 'argument from evil'. (2007, 49)

A. Bailey and D. O'Brien, *Hume's Critique of Religion: 'Sick Men's Dreams'*,
The New Synthese Historical Library 72, DOI 10.1007/978-94-007-6615-0_8,

8.1 The Logical Argument from Evil

Hume distinguishes two problems of evil, the logical problem and the inferential problem. The logical problem is that the existence of evil appears to be incompatible with the design plan of a benevolent creator. A Christian God is omniscient, omnipotent and good, yet an omniscient God could foresee the evils that will be caused by nature and man, and an omnipotent God should, if he is good, eliminate them from the world. Or, as Philo states the Epicurean version of this argument:

> Epicurus's old questions are yet unanswered. Is he willing to prevent evil, but not able? then is he impotent. Is he able, but not willing? then is he malevolent. Is he both able and willing? whence then is evil? (1779, 10.198)

The existence of evil is therefore a proof against the existence of a Christian God; not just a proof in Hume's probabilistic sense,[1] but in the sense of a logical, *a priori* demonstration.

Before assessing this argument, let us look at 'the reality of that evil and disorder, with which the world so much abounds' (1772a, 11.17/138). Moral evils are those that arise from the choices of morally responsible agents; they range from the behaviour of the playground bully to the barbarous acts perpetrated by murderers and tyrants throughout history. Natural evils include disease, famine, earthquakes and other disasters. Such evils result in millions having a life that is 'nasty, poor, brutish, and short' (Hobbes 1651, 96). As Demea puts it:

> The whole earth, believe me, Philo, is cursed and polluted. A perpetual war is kindled amongst all living creatures. Necessity, hunger, want, stimulate the strong and courageous: Fear, anxiety, terror, agitate the weak and infirm. (1779, 10.194)

Philo is in agreement:

> But inspect a little more narrowly these living existences, the only beings worth regarding. How hostile and destructive to each other! How insufficient all of them for their own happiness! How contemptible or odious to the spectator! The whole [Creation] presents nothing but the idea of a blind nature, impregnated by a great vivifying principle, and pouring forth from her lap, without discernment or parental care, her maimed and abortive children. (ibid., 11.211)[2]

Hume is thus concerned with evil in a wide sense, with all instances of suffering and pain.

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[1] See 1772a, 10.4/111–2.

[2] Cf. Schopenhauer: 'instead of this [a harmonious world] we see only momentary gratification, fleeting pleasure conditioned by wants, much and long suffering, constant struggle … everything a hunter and everything hunted, pressure, want, need and anxiety, shrieking and howling; and this goes on … until once again the crust of the planet breaks' (1966, 2.354). Schopenhauer was influenced by Hume and proposed to his publisher a translation of Hume's writings on religion. In the preface he wrote: 'A future age will understand why I am trying, by means of a new translation, to draw my own age's attention to the present work of the excellent David Hume'. The publisher turned down the project. (Safranski 1991, 275)

As Philo notes, the whole animal kingdom suffers.

> The stronger prey upon the weaker, and keep them in perpetual terror and anxiety. The weaker too, in their turn, often prey upon the stronger, and vex and molest them without relaxation. Consider that innumerable race of insects, which either are bred on the body of each animal, or flying about infix their stings in him. These insects have others still less than themselves, which torment them. And thus on each hand, before and behind, above and below, every animal is surrounded with enemies, which incessantly seek his misery and destruction. (ibid., 10.194–5)[3]

The discovery of evolution by natural selection has also greatly expanded our knowledge of the extent of suffering throughout the ages. Before Darwin it was thought that the species on Earth were stable and that nature was 'careful of the type [species]'.[4] But this is not so: geological time has been punctuated by massive extinctions—apocalyptic episodes of death and suffering: 'One great Slaughter-House the warring World' (E. Darwin 1803, 159).[5] And, if one is a certain kind of progressive Christian, one who accepts Darwinian evolution, then this has all been deliberately set up so as that, according to the usual metaphor, as the geological clock strikes 12, man—God's ultimate creation—finally appears on the scene.

Humankind may be less prey to the sufferings of predation, but our entry and exit from this world are often bookmarked by extreme pain, our mother's and our own: 'the first entrance into life gives anguish to the new-born infant and to its wretched parent …. And it is at last finished in agony and horror' (Hume 1779, 10.194).[6] And there are various painful annoyances and crippling diseases along the way: 'Weakness, impotence, distress, attend each stage of that life.' (ibid.)

As well as bodily suffering that we share with animals—injuries to our 'animal-machinery' (ibid., 10.199)—there are also peculiarly human ills such as depression and mental illness. Writers spend much time reflecting on these sources of misery[7];

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[3] See also J. S. Mill: 'If there are any marks at all of special design in creation, one of the things most evidently designed is that a large proportion of all animals should pass their existence in tormenting and devouring other animals. They have been lavishly fitted out with the instruments necessary for that purpose …. If a tenth part of the pains which have been expended in finding benevolent adaptations in all nature had been employed in collecting evidence to blacken the character of the Creator, what scope for comment would not have been found in the entire existence of the lower animals, divided with scarcely an exception into devourers and devoured, and prey to a thousand ills from which they are denied the faculties necessary for protecting themselves!' (1958, 39–40); and Darwin, in a letter to the botanist, Asa Gray: 'I cannot persuade myself that a beneficent and omnipotent God would have designedly created the Ichneumonidae with the express intention of their feeding within the living bodies of caterpillars, or that a cat should play with mice.' (1993, 224)

[4] 'Are God and Nature then at strife,/That Nature lends such evil dreams?/So careful of the type she seems,/So careless of the single life;' (Tennyson 1849, 314).

[5] This quotation is taken from a poem written by Charles Darwin's grandfather, Erasmus.

[6] According to the Christian religion, the pain of childbirth is something that is deliberately inflicted on women by God as revenge for Eve's original sin in the Garden of Eden. Such sin will be further discussed in Chap. 11.

[7] Demea goes as far as to say that 'except authors of particular sciences, such as chemistry or botany, who have no occasion to treat of human life, there scarce is one of those innumerable writers,

as Philo says: 'in all letters, *sacred* and *profane*, the topic of human misery has been insisted on with the most pathetic eloquence' (ibid., 10.193).[8] Here is Henry James exhibiting such eloquence:

> Every man who has reached even his intellectual teens begins to suspect that life is no farce; that it is not genteel comedy even; that it flowers and fructifies on the contrary out of profoundest tragic depths of the essential dearth in which its subject's roots are plunged. The natural inheritance of everyone who is capable of spiritual life is an unsubdued forest where the wolf howls and the obscene bird of night chatters. (1863, 75)

And here, C. S. Lewis, the Christian writer:

> [Man's] history is largely a record of crime, war, disease, and terror, with just sufficient happiness interposed to give them, while it lasts, an agonising apprehension of losing it, and, when it is lost, the poignant misery of remembering. (1940, 12)

Consequently 'neither man nor any other animal are happy' (1779, 10.198).

All such evil depends, for Hume, on four background conditions or 'circumstances' (ibid., 11.205–11) that, as we will see, could and should have been eliminated by a benevolent God. The first circumstance that introduces evil is 'that contrivance or œconomy of the animal creation, by which pains, as well as pleasures, are employed to excite all creatures to action, and make them vigilant in the great work of self-preservation' (ibid., 11.205). God could arrange the world so that our actions are driven by a reduction in pleasure and not pain. Carelessness in the kitchen could be marked by a decrease in pleasure associated with cooking, rather than a sharp pain as you burn your hand on the stove.

Second, 'the conducting of the world by general laws' (ibid., 11.206) results in unnecessary suffering. That our crops are watered depends on certain lawlike meteorological phenomena, but these also result in life-taking hurricanes and typhoons. Things could so easily be different given the intervention of a supreme deity: the general laws of nature could on occasion be tampered with in order to avoid evil consequences: 'One wave, a little higher than the rest, by burying CÆSAR and his fortune in the bottom of the ocean, might have restored liberty to a considerable part of mankind' (ibid., 11.207). God could make adjustments to the world through 'particular providences', eliminating evils wherever and whenever they might be foreseen to occur: the conductance of the electric wire could be lessened so that you do not receive a shock and the ice become less slippy so that you do not fall.

Third, 'the great frugality with which all powers and faculties are distributed to every particular being' (ibid.) entails that we all only have just enough intelligence, strength and perseverance to scrape out a life, and such scarcity of personal resources leads to a battle for survival against other equally limited creatures. As Voltaire puts it in his poem on the Lisbon earthquake of 1755:

> This frail construction of quick nerves and bones
> Cannot sustain the shock of elements

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from whom the sense of human misery has not, in some passage or other, extorted a complaint and confession of it' (1779, 10.194).

[8] 'Pathetic' is used here with its traditional meaning of arousing pity.

> This temporary blend of blood and dust
> Was put together only to dissolve. (2003, 81)[9]

Fourth, 'the inaccurate workmanship of all the springs and principles of the great machine of nature' (1779, 11.209) is at odds with the existence of a Christian God. Much of nature does seem peculiarly well arranged and it is hard at times not to feel the pull of the argument from design, but there is also much that could be improved, much that is shoddy: 'if you were designing a human body, you could surely improve on the knee' (Kitcher 2007, 57). Hume's claim, then, is that the onus is on the believer to explain why God did not eliminate these (seemingly contingent) circumstances from the world.

The theist's first line of defence might be to attempt to deny Philo's premise concerning the amount of evil in the world. Cleanthes challenges Philo:

> Your representations are exaggerated: Your melancholy views mostly fictitious: Your inferences contrary to fact and experience. Health is more common than sickness: Pleasure than pain: Happiness than misery. And for one vexation which we meet with, we attain, upon computation, a hundred enjoyments. (1779, 10.200)[10]

And for most of us—and most of those, one would imagine, who have read scholarly treatments of the problem of evil—life does not seem to be quite so miserable as Hume suggests, and by his own account Hume lived a mostly contented life (see Hume 1777b). However, whether this is so is by the by: the catalogue of evil which Hume compiles is unnecessary for the logical argument from evil. All that is required is one instance of evil, one instance of suffering that a benevolent God should have eliminated from the world. This could be a single drowned sailor[11] or the fact that Larry stubbed his toe on the bed this morning.

8.2 Theodicy

Centuries of theological discussion have tried to show how suffering is compatible with the benevolent God of Christianity. Theodicies offer explanations of why God allows the world to contain evil and various strategies are adopted.[12] Hume criticizes

[9] The Lisbon Earthquake was a devastating disaster that killed 200,000 people. It did much to precipitate Enlightenment thought on the problem of evil, not least because the disaster occurred on a church holiday.

[10] In an 'early fragment on evil' Hume discusses the relative frequency and intensity of the pleasures and pains to which we are prey, concluding that it is not clear which generally predominates: 'Pains and Pleasures seem to be scatter'd indifferently thro Life, as Heat and Cold, Moist and Dry are disperst thro the Universe; if the one prevails a little above the other, this is what will naturally happen in any Mixture of Principles, where an exact Equality is not expressly intended. On every Occasion, Nature seems to employ either' (M.A. Stewart 1994, 168).

[11] Cicero cites this as an example used by Diagoras to argue against the existence of a providential god (1951, 375–7).

[12] Contemporary discussions of the problem of evil distinguish between theodicies and defences. Theodicies try to explain the occurrence of evil in the world; defences merely attempt to show that evil and the existence of God are not logically incompatible.

some of these, but then, as we will see, switches tactics. The slipperiness and creativity of theodicians and Christian apologists is avoided by turning from the logical problem to the inferential problem of evil.

The inferential problem will be discussed below, but first we will look at responses to the logical problem, starting with the claim that 'the obstinate and intractable qualities of matter … or the observance of general laws' (1772a, 11.17/138–39) could prevent God from acting benevolently. Natural evils are caused by the physical laws of nature, and moral evils are similarly dependent on the laws of nature since 'the conjunction between motives and voluntary actions is as regular and uniform, as that between the cause and effect in any part of nature' (ibid., 8.16/88).[13] Evil is therefore unavoidable if God does not have control over these laws.

There is much that is problematic with Hume's sweeping and speculative claims above concerning the causes or circumstances of evil. With respect to the first circumstance, for example, 'would a sudden great decrease in pleasure be as urgent an incentive to regain what pleases as a sudden sharp pain is to avoid what hurts?' (Sessions 2002, 170). Could decreases in pleasure provide the localised warnings we require? It is, after all, a burning sensation in *the hand* that causes you to draw your hand away from the stove. The 'intractable' nature of our bodies may entail that pains are necessary for us to negotiate our environment in the way that we do.

The Christian God, however, is omnipotent and, as we will see in the discussion of miracles in Chap. 9, he allegedly has the power to suspend the laws of nature. A Christian, therefore, cannot avoid the problem of evil by appealing to such laws or to the intractable qualities of matter. God would not even be required to perform miracles in order to eliminate much of the evil and suffering from the world. In certain African populations there is a gene for resistance to malaria. However, the occurrence of this gene is very rare and thus it is highly unlikely that bearers of it will become sexual partners; very few children are therefore produced with the requisite two genes for malaria resistance (see Kitcher 2007, 107–8). To go a long way to eliminating malaria in Africa God does not have to violate a law of nature; he would just have to somehow make it so that carriers of this gene are attracted to each other.

8.3 The Best of All Possible Worlds

It has been argued, most famously by Leibniz (1710), that the world is better for containing evil. One reason for this is that certain human virtues can only be manifest if there is worldly suffering. If there were no pain then we could not feel sympathy or compassion for our fellows; if there were no fear there would be no courage. John Hick also argues that love is only possible where there is suffering, where, that is, there is 'a joint facing of the task of creating a home together and the bearing of one's burdens through all the length of a lifetime' (1966, 325). Such virtues are intrinsically good and, if we are assessing whether a certain world is better than

[13] More will be said about this in Sect. 8.5 below.

another, their presence 'cancels out' the evils to which they are a response. A world containing pain and compassion is better than a world that contains neither.

When Rowan Williams, the Archbishop of Canterbury, was recently asked where God was during the massacre of Schoolchildren at Beslan, Russia, in 2004, he answered by asking us to imagine an older child putting his arms around a younger one in order to protect him, and suggesting: 'You might find God there' (Stanford 2005, 141).[14]

Thus,

> Every physical ill, say they, makes an essential part of this benevolent system, and could not possibly be removed, even by the Deity himself, considered as a wise agent, without giving entrance to greater ill, or excluding greater good, which will result from it …. Those ills, under which they laboured, were, in reality, goods to the universe; and that to an enlarged view, which could comprehend the whole system of nature, every event became an object of joy and exultation. (1772a, 8.34/101)

Hume's take on this theodicy is that certain evils are considered 'in reality, goods' when seen in their 'full cosmic context' (Hick 1966, 15). Alexander Pope expresses such 'optimism' in his *Essay on Man* (1734, 515):

> All nature is but Art, unknown to thee;
> All Chance, Direction, which thou canst not see;
> All Discord, Harmony not understood;
> All partial Evil, universal Good.

And here is Augustine making such a claim:

> That which we abhor in any part of it [the universe] gives us the greatest pleasure when we consider the universe as a whole…. The very reason why some things are inferior is that though the parts may be imperfect the whole is perfect…. The colour black in a picture may very well be beautiful if you take the picture as a whole.[15] (390 CE, 264)

A variant of this theodicy accepts that pain is evil, but it is nevertheless necessary for the existence of greater goods. It is not then the pain *itself* that makes the world a better place.

There are various problems with such claims. First, even if one accepts the driving thought that evil brings with it concomitant goods, surely such quantities of evil are

[14] Nelson Algren, in his novel *Walk on the Wild Side*, gestures towards the inadequacy of such a response: '"Wait for the priest," said somebody else in such a tone that Dove assumed that the priest, when he came, would explain, in low, simple tones, how a child so small could love a doll so much that she had not feared even a freight train's wheels' (1956, 44).

[15] Cf. Voltaire (1759, 61): '"I find that everything in our world is amiss, that nobody knows his place or his responsibility, or what he's doing or what he should do, and that, except for supper parties, which are quite jolly and where people seem to get on reasonably well, the rest of the time is spent in pointless quarrelling: Jansenists with Molinists, lawyers with churchmen, men of letters with men of letters, courtiers with courtiers, financiers with the general public, wives with husbands, relatives with relatives. It's one battle after another." Candide answered him: "I've seen worse ones. But a wise man, who has since had the misfortune to be hanged, told me that that's all fine. Those are just the shadows in a beautiful painting." "Your hanged man was having people on," said Martin. "What you call shadows are horrible stains." "It's human beings who make the stains," said Candide. "They can't help it."'

not required. Compassion would exist for those with annoyingly itchy mosquito bites; God need not have also included the ibola virus in his Creation.

> In the light of our experience and knowledge of the variety and scale of human and animal suffering in our world, the idea that none of this suffering could have been prevented by an omnipotent being without thereby losing a greater good or permitting an evil at least as bad seems an extraordinary absurd idea, quite beyond our belief. (Rowe 1979, 131)

Second, with respect to Rowan Williams' claims concerning Beslan, why should one suppose that one finds God's agency in his suggested location rather than in the actions of the terrorist who presses the detonator that explodes the bombs that have been strapped around the bodies of the children being held hostage? And, if human beings bear the blame for the terrorist atrocities, should it not be the case that they, rather than God, at least get the credit for the good and supportive actions that sometimes arise in such extreme situations?

Third, there would seem to be cases of suffering that do not contribute at all to the world's stock of compassion or sympathy; there is, one might say, 'pointless suffering' (ibid., 129–31) (as opposed to suffering the point of which is to elicit and make possible greater goods). No one saw Larry stub his toe this morning after slipping on the polished floor; would it not have been better, therefore, for God to have made the floor a little less slippy? There would then have been less suffering in the world and no corresponding loss in compassion and sympathy. People also die in agony and alone, with no one there to act kindly or with sympathy or compassion. The suffering of animals in geological eras before any moral agents evolved on the planet also seems to be an abundant source of such pointless evil. Such suffering could be eliminated by an omnipotent God without reducing the amount of virtuous human behaviour in the world.

Fourth, there is something shockingly insensitive about the greater good response to the problem of evil: such an 'enlarged view' is no consolation to those who are suffering.

> You would surely more irritate, than appease a man, lying under the racking pains of the gout, by preaching up to him the rectitude of those general laws, which produced the malignant humours in his body (1772a, 8.34/101).

This thought is all the more pressing if larger scale horrors are considered. Can we really say that our virtuous response to the Holocaust cancels out its evil, and that it is better for the world to include such evil (and its concomitant good) than not? However large one's view, the Holocaust could not become 'an object of joy and exultation' (ibid.), 'embellishing the course of the ages, as it were an exquisite poem set off with antitheses' (St. Augustine 413 CE, 274). It is, to say the least, morally insensitive to tell the victims *that*. And in this regard it is no better to adopt the version of this theodicy in which it is accepted that pain is in itself evil (and not 'in reality, good').[16] Such semantic quibbling is not going to appease the sufferer: on

[16] Hick thinks it very important that the greater goods response should be seen in this light. Almost a page is spent making it clear that the holocaust was evil (1966, 361–2). Hume would claim that only a religious apologist would need to spell this out. Of course it is—only one's bizarre religious views might suggest otherwise.

such a picture God allows evils to befall us and he is thus responsible for the suffering and injustice.

Another theodicy that can also be seen as morally insensitive is that in which there is another arena in which compensatory goods can cancel out evils, and that is in the next world—Heaven. Monsignor Bruce Kent says 'I don't believe that, once created, we vanish from history. If that were the case there could be no balance of justice and no resolution to the problem of innocent suffering' (Stanford 2005, 37).[17]

Or, less seriously:

> 'We're going to another world,' Candide would say. 'I expect it must be there that all is well. For you have to admit that, one could grumble rather at what goes on in our own one, both physically and morally.' (Voltaire 1759, 22)

This world is a mere porch to a great palace (1772a, 11.21). The goods in the palace make up for the uncomfortable wait we have in the porch and, further, the wait in itself brings goods such as patience and endurance. As Demea puts it:

> This world is but a point in comparison of the universe: This life but a moment in comparison of eternity. The present evil phenomena, therefore, are rectified in other regions, and in some future period of existence. And the eyes of men, being then opened to larger views of things, see the whole connection of general laws, and trace, with adoration, the benevolence and rectitude of the Deity, through all the mazes and intricacies of his providence. (1779, 10.199)

It is not, however, easy to see the 'benevolence and rectitude of the Deity' in some of his works, and attempting to see these attributes may shield one from the proper human response to the evils of the world.

Perhaps, though, such evil only indicates that progress is still to be made—progress, though, that is part of God's design plan: God may have created the world so that it progresses towards perfection in the future.

> If you saw, for instance, a half-finished building, surrounded with heaps of brick and stone and mortar, and all the instruments of masonry; could you not *infer* from the effect, that it was a work of design and contrivance? And could you not return again, from this inferred cause, to infer new additions to the effect, and conclude, that the building would soon be finished, and receive all the further improvements, which art could bestow upon it? …. Consider the world and the present life only as an imperfect building, from which you can infer a superior intelligence; and arguing from that superior intelligence, which can leave nothing imperfect; why may you not infer a more finished scheme or plan, which will receive its completion in some distant point of space or time? (1772a, 11.24/143)

On discovering an unfinished building we would be led to infer the existence of both a designer and a builder. An unfinished world should lead us to the same conclusion.

There is, however, a disanalogy between these two scenarios: between a half-finished building and a half-finished world there is an 'infinite difference of the subjects' (1772a, 11.25/143). We have experience of the work of architects and

[17] Kent is of course begging the question here: perhaps there is no balance of justice and resolution to the problem of innocent suffering.

builders; we know that their constructions take time, that they are sometimes left unfinished, and that they are sometimes shoddy. An unfinished house can therefore be taken as good empirical evidence that people have been involved in its construction. The knowledge we have of our own working practices allows such an inference to be made. We do not, however, have knowledge of the working practices of God; such an inference would therefore involve going beyond the empirical evidence. 'It must evidently appear contrary to all rules of analogy to reason, from the intentions and projects of men, to those of a Being so different, and so much superior' (ibid., 11.27/146).

8.4 Divine Morality

Philo mentions the possibility that the creator of the universe is not good but evil—that 'the first causes of the universe … have perfect malice' (1779, 11.212). The argument from design is sound; there is good reason to believe in an intelligent designer and creator; one, though, who is malevolent, spiteful, vengeful and all the other attributes that are suggested by the state of the world and on occasion naturally attributable to the God of both the Old and New Testaments.

> The popular religions are really, in the conception of their more vulgar votaries, a species of dæmonism; and the higher the deity is exalted in power and knowledge, the lower of course is he depressed in goodness and benevolence…. The heart secretly detests such measures of cruel and implacable vengeance; but the judgment dares not but pronounce them perfect and adorable. And the additional misery of this inward struggle aggravates all the other terrors, by which these unhappy victims to superstition are for ever haunted. (1777c, 178)

If an 'evil' creator is too much, then perhaps a 'chillingly indifferent' one seems to fit the world as we find it (Kitcher 2007, 126). Or, as Herman Tennessen puts it, should Job not infer—given that to which he has been undeservedly subjected—that God is, if not evil, 'a ruler of grotesque primitivity, a cosmic cave dweller, a braggart and a rumble-dumble, almost congenial in his complete ignorance about spiritual refinement' (1973, 108). God himself claims, in the words of the Old Testament: 'I form the light, and create darkness: I make peace, and create evil: I the Lord do all these things' (Isaiah, 45:7). This is the view of various sects from the Zoroastrians (sixth century BCE), through various heretical or Gnostic Christian groups such as the Manicheans (second century CE), of which St. Augustine was a member until his conversion to Christianity, to the Albigenses of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.

Demea, however, rejects such a view, endorsing instead the claim that God is 'altogether incomprehensible and unknown to us' (1779, 2.141)—'Our line is too short to fathom such immense abysses' (1772a, 7.24/72)—and that God operates according to divine rather than 'human or animal felicity' (1779, 10.199).

> Finite, weak, and blind creatures, we ought to humble ourselves in his august presence, and, conscious of our frailties, adore in silence his infinite perfections, which eye hath not seen, ear hath not heard, neither hath it entered into the heart of man to conceive them. (ibid., 2.141)

> We ought never to imagine, that we comprehend the attributes of this divine Being, or to suppose, that his perfections have any analogy or likeness to the perfections of a human creature. Wisdom, thought, design, knowledge; these we justly ascribe to him; because these words are honourable 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. (ibid., 2.142)

There is support for such a conception of God in the Scriptures: 'Great is the Lord, and greatly to be praised: and his greatness is unsearchable' (Psalm 145:3); 'how unsearchable are his judgments, and his ways past finding out' (Romans 11:33); and 'such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is high. I cannot attain unto it' (Psalm 139:6).[18] Scripture, however, does not provide an unambiguous picture since in other places it would seem that Christian thought depends on God being good in the sense that would be applicable to human beings. Human goodness is attributed to God's actions in the Bible, particularly so with respect to the teaching and actions of Christ.

In Chap. 11 we will see that Hume argues that morality essentially depends on certain contingent psychological features of human beings. Human morality depends on our feeling moral sentiments towards the actions of others. Crudely: an action is good if it leads to feelings of approbation in others and bad if it leads to feelings of blame. God, though:

> is not the natural object of any Passion or Affection. He is no object either of the Senses or Imagination, very little of the Understanding, without which it is impossible to excite any Affection…. Please to observe, that I not only exclude the turbulent Passions, but the calm Affections. Neither of them can operate without the Assistance of the Senses, Imagination, or at least a more compleat Knowledge of the Object than we have of the Deity. (1954, 13)

We are caused to feel passions and sentiments in virtue of associations between our ideas and experiences. The idea we have of a person's beauty causes us to feel love towards them, and the idea we have of their intelligence perhaps causes us to feel intellectual insecurity. But if, as Demea argues, we do not have a clear idea of the nature of God, our sentimental responses to him cannot be engaged. God's actions cannot therefore be morally assessed. 'An abstract, invisible object, like that which *natural* religion alone presents to us, cannot long actuate the mind, or be of any moment in life' (1777a, 167).

Further, we do not have any evidence that God feels such moral sentiments and thus no evidence that he could be concerned with morality as understood by man.

> All the *sentiments* of the human mind, gratitude, resentment, love, friendship, approbation, blame, pity, emulation, envy, have a plain reference to the state and situation of man, and are calculated for preserving the existence, and promoting the activity of such a being in such circumstances…. And as the ideas of internal sentiment, added to those of the external senses, compose the whole furniture of human understanding, we may conclude, that none of the *materials* of thought are in any respect similar in the human and in the divine intelligence. (1779, 3.156)

[18] All quotations from the Bible are taken from the King James version.

And in a letter to Hutcheson, Hume says:

> If Morality were determined by Reason, that is the same to all rational Beings: But nothing but Experience can assure us, that the Sentiments are the same. What Experience have we with regard to superior Beings? How can we ascribe to them any Sentiments at all? They have implanted those Sentiments in us for the Conduct of Life like our bodily Sensations, which they possess not themselves. (1932, I, 40)[19]

It is not clear, though, whether such a negative characterisation of God is cogent: if God is not good in the human sense, then how is he good? (Through allowing his Creation to suffer so?!)[20] We have nothing positive to say about the divine concept of goodness. How, then, is this different from the divine concept of evil or of indifference? We can imagine and attempt to live up to an idealised kind of human goodness—that which earthly saints manifest (those who are religious and those who are not)—but we have no idea of what constitutes divine goodness. Any suggested endorsement by Hume of Demea's claim that God must operate according to divine rather than human morality grounded in moral sentiments is ironic. Hume thinks that the notion of divine morality is contentless. If one has no conception of divine goodness, then one cannot say anything about the moral properties of the deity in which one believes, or the moral grounds for worshipping him. It is therefore the case that, as Cleanthes claims, 'if we abandon all human analogy… I am afraid we abandon all religion' (1779, 11.203).

8.5 The Free Will Response

The most fully developed theodicy focuses on free will. Actions can only be considered evil if they are performed freely. Human freedom, however, is intrinsically good and, as with the virtues in the best of all possible worlds reply, its existence compensates for any evils that are a product of its exercise. A world containing freedom and freely chosen evil acts is better than a world that contains neither. One can agree that pain and suffering are in themselves evil, but argue that God should not eliminate moral evil because this is an exercise in freedom. Free agents themselves, however, can eliminate such evil from the world; by, that is, refraining from evil acts. The elimination of moral evil is something that is in our power, but not in

[19] See Holden (2010) for extended discussion of the claim that we cannot feel moral sentiments towards God ('The Argument from Sentimentalism', ibid., 49–114) and that God cannot be seen as himself feeling moral sentiments ('The Argument from Motivation', ibid., 115–43). These arguments lead to the conclusion 'that Hume positively rejects the existence of a god with moral attributes: that he is (what we might call) a *moral atheist*' (ibid., 2).

[20] Flew considers this question: 'Someone tells us that God loves us as a father loves his children. We are reassured. But then we see a child dying of inoperable cancer of the throat. His earthly father is driven frantic in his efforts to help, but his heavenly father reveals no obvious sign of concern. Some qualification is made—"God's love is not a merely human love" or it is "an inscrutable love", perhaps … we are reassured again. But then perhaps we ask: What is this assurance of God's (appropriately qualified) love worth? What is this apparent guarantee really a guarantee against?' (Flew et al. 1971, 15).

God's. Saint Augustine adopted this as the official theodicy of the Catholic Church: '[God] judged it better to bring good out of evil, than not to permit any evil to exist' (420 CE, 246).

This approach only seems to counter moral evil, but some have argued that natural evils are caused by the free actions of fallen angels, non-human spirits or demons. All evil is therefore moral evil, the result of freely chosen acts. Such demonic intervention plays an integral role in Augustine's philosophy: 'the only cause of evil is the falling away from the unchangeable good of a being made good but changeable, first in the case of an angel, and afterwards in the case of man' (420 CE, 245); and such an explanation of natural evil has also been recently adopted by Alvin Plantinga (1974, 192). Hume, one suspects, would claim that such accounts stray into 'fairy land' since there is no empirical support for them.[21] The theodician, though, is responding to the logical problem of evil and thus all that is required is that such interventions are logically possible; the existence of natural evil would not then logically contradict the existence of a benevolent God.

One problem with the free will response is that it is not clear why angels would fall—why, if they have been created by God, would they be flawed in this way? Why could God not have made the world so that free agents always choose the path of righteousness? This suggestion is the subject of a recently revived Medieval debate concerning 'middle knowledge'; that is, God's knowledge of what free creatures would do in the different environments that they might inhabit. It is also a line that Hume could be seen to consider in some jotted notes: 'God could have prevented all abuses of liberty without taking away liberty. Therefore liberty no solution of difficulties' (2007, 108). Perhaps God cannot cause creatures to always do what is right because this would contravene their freedom—that upon which this kind of theodicy is based—but being omniscient he could arrange the world so that his creatures always make the right choices. One can know enough about one's friends to be sure what they will freely choose to eat from the menu in a restaurant. Terry will freely choose the steak and ice cream, and Scott the fish and sticky toffee pudding. And God could know enough about the dispositions of his creatures and about what they will do in various environments to be sure that they will act for good. Since it is possible that there could be a world in which free creatures never pursue evil actions, it must therefore be possible that God could create such a world.

Mere humans can be excused for the evil that can sometimes be a consequence of their well-meaning actions: a doctor may not foresee the side effects of his prescribed drug and it may not be in his power to prevent them. God, however, is all knowing and all powerful and so he must be held responsible for the evil actions of his Creation. Certain theodicians do not shy away from this claim; it is embraced.

> We must not … deify evil and dethrone God. Even in its most virulent forms evil is still not ultimate. It cannot be unforeseen by the Creator or beyond His control. We must not suppose

[21] 'That he should so easily fill a gap in his theodicy by appealing to a mythological idea, on the ground that it is logically possible, emphasizes again the remoteness of Plantinga's concern from all questions of plausibility and probability' (Hick 1966, 369).

> that God intended evil as a small domestic animal, and was then taken back to find it growing into a great ravening beast! …. We have in the end, then, both to recognise the essentially demonic nature of evil, and to maintain the sole ultimate sovereignty and omni-responsibility of God. (Hick 1966, 289)

For some, though, such a response does not properly account for the extent of our freedom. In creating us free, it is up *to us* what we do—even God cannot know for sure how we will act: 'Thus is the power of an omnipotent God limited by the freedom he confers on his creatures' (Plantinga 1974, 106).[22] If God predicts that Peter will act in a certain way, then Peter could just go and do something else instead. 'The thoughts and actions of free beings are in principle unknowable until they occur' (Hick 1966, 343).

> If a person *S* is free with respect to a given action, then he is free to perform that action and free to refrain; no causal laws and antecedent conditions determine either that he will perform the action, or that he will not. It is within his power, at the time in question, to perform the action, and within his power to refrain. (Plantinga 1974, 165–6)

However well God sets up the world so as not to tempt us towards evil, there is always the chance that his creatures will not oblige. As Plantinga puts it, free creatures have 'transworld depravity' (1977, 48): even the best of God's creatures have the potential—in other worlds, or in counterfactual situations—to act for evil. Thus the God of Christianity cannot guarantee that evil is excluded from the world. And in this world it has unfortunately been the case that substantial episodes of depravity have and continue to be manifest.

Hume, though, does not accept such a conception of freedom, and his own account allows him to claim that 'God could have prevented all the abuses of liberty without taking away liberty'. Hume's compatibilist conception of freedom is spelt out in Section 8 of the first *Enquiry* where he argues that human action is both necessitated (or determined) and free. He claims that the actions of people are as regular as the mechanistic behaviour of the physical world.

> The same motives always produce the same actions: The same events follow from the same causes. Ambition, avarice, self-love, vanity, friendship, generosity, public spirit: these passions, mixed in various degrees, and distributed through society, have been, from the beginning of the world, and still are, the source of all the actions and enterprizes, which have ever been observed among mankind. (1772a, 8.7/83)
>
> So great is the force of laws, and of particular forms of government, and so little dependence have they on the humours and tempers of men, that consequences almost as general and certain may sometimes be deduced from them, as any which the mathematical sciences afford us. ('That Politics may be Reduced to a Science', 1777a, 16)
>
> The conjunction between motives and voluntary actions is as regular and uniform, as that between the cause and effect in any part of nature … [and] this regular conjunction has been universally acknowledged among mankind, and has never been the subject of dispute, either in philosophy or in common life. (1772a, 8.16/88)

We are not always sure how people will act, but this is also the case with respect to events in the physical world. Our expectations are based on probabilities derived

[22] See also Adams (1977, 110): 'If President Kennedy had not been shot, would he have bombed North Vietnam? God only knows. Or does He? Does even He know what Kennedy would have done?'

from experience, and the confidence we have in a certain event occurring is proportional to the regularity of its usual occurrence. Herbert's central heating usually comes on when the temperature drops below that set on the thermostat, but not always. The fact that this occurrence is not uniformly regular is not because the behaviour of this boiler is outside of the influence of causality and necessity; it is, rather, because we are ignorant of the causal relations that hold in those cases in which the regularity breaks down. Similarly, a certain teenage boy is usually grumpy when he has not had much sleep, but not always. Again, according to Hume this does not indicate that teenage boys are outside of the influence of causal necessity; there are, rather, different causal factors at play when they do not act in the way that they usually do. Various predictions can be made concerning the weather because we take it that it is 'governed by steady principles' (ibid., 8.15/88). We are, however, sometimes surprised by the turn the weather takes, and this is because there are causal factors of which we are not aware; there is a 'secret opposition of contrary causes' (ibid., 8.13/87). Similarly, Herbert's boiler may not come on because his cat has slept too close to the thermostat, warming it up, and the teenage boy's unexpected enthusiasm for the day may override his fatigue.

> The most irregular and unexpected resolutions of men may frequently be accounted for by those, who know every particular circumstance of their character and situation. A person of an obliging disposition gives a peevish answer: But he has the toothake, or has not dined. (ibid., 8.15/88)

In every case it turns out that 'upon an exact scrutiny, a contrariety of effects always betrays a contrariety of causes' (ibid., 8.13/87), and thus 'the irregular events, which outwardly discover themselves, can be no proof, that the laws of nature are not observed with the greatest regularity' (ibid., 8.14/87). We could predict *all* human action if we were 'perfectly acquainted with every circumstance of our situation and temper, and the most secret springs of our complexion and disposition' (ibid., 8.22n18/94n).

According to Hume, we have learnt from experience that all human action is causally necessitated. Our actions, though, can still be 'free'; Hume is a compatibilist. If we think carefully about the nature of liberty, then we will see that it is compatible with causal determinism.

Liberty is:

> *a power of acting or not acting, according to the determinations of the will*; that is, if we choose to remain at rest, we may; if we choose to move, we also may. Now this hypothetical liberty is universally allowed to belong to every one, who is not a prisoner and in chains. Here then is no subject of dispute. (ibid., 8.23/95; Hume's emphasis)

Liberty is contrasted with constraint rather than with necessity. Christopher is not at liberty—he is not free—if he is physically constrained: if, for example, he is chained to his office chair or locked in his garden shed. He is free, however, if he is not physically restrained from acting how he chooses to do. Free actions may thus be caused by our desires and motives, and they may be totally predictable. Barbara is caused to go to the spring flower show at the weekend by her desire to buy some plants for her garden, and we can predict that she is going to go there because she

has regularly done so in the past. Further, Barbara's motives, desires and will could all ultimately be determined by the laws of nature; nevertheless, she is still free because she does what she chooses to do (even though she may have no control over her choices; she may be caused to choose one course of action rather than another).

Importantly, then, such a form of compatibilism has consequences for the free will response to the problem of evil. We could be free, according to such an account, even if God could predict how we will act. Thus, an omniscient God could think through all the possible global scenarios that he could create, and set the one running that will have the best outcome—and one would think that this scenario would not result in a world containing ibola and Nazism. The God of Christianity is therefore inconsistent with the compatibilist notion of freedom, the only defensible notion of freedom according to Hume.

There are, though, problems associated with this suggestion. First, the claim is that if God can predict our actions, then he can place us in a different environment in order to alter the course of history for the better—he could do this and we could still be free. It could be the case, though, that humans have trans-world depravity. Perhaps, given the laws of human nature that Hume accepts, there is nowhere we could be put where we would always do good: 'It's human beings who make the stains … they can't help it' (Voltaire 1759, 61). Whether they can help it or not is an empirical matter. If there is a way that humans could live together with less suffering, then God could have foreseen this and should have set things running this way. If there is not, then this must be—for the theist—the best of all possible worlds. And this possibility cannot be ruled out in advance of the discovery of the laws of human nature. The free will response can therefore be maintained: even compatibilist free will may, for all we know, have the ineliminable potential to manifest evil, whatever initial conditions God writes into his Creation.

Hume also considers another problem inherent in the compatibilist explanation of human action. At the end of Section 8 of the *Enquiry* Hume seems to be perplexed over how to resolve a dilemma concerning the cause of moral evil. Evil acts are the consequence of long sequences of caused events. Daisy tortures the rabbit because she wants to cause it pain; this desire is caused by her fear of rabbits, which in turn is caused by her being bitten by one as a child, and so on. For theists, this chain of causes ultimately leads back to God.

> The ultimate Author of all our volitions is the Creator of the world, who first bestowed motion on this immense machine, and placed all beings in that particular position, whence every subsequent event, by an inevitable necessity, must result. (1772a, 8.32/99–100)

There is therefore a dilemma for the theist.

> Human actions … either can have no moral turpitude at all, as proceeding from so good a cause; or if they have any turpitude, they must involve our Creator in the same guilt (ibid., 8.32/100).

If causal determinism is true, either God is ultimately the source of moral evil—which cannot be the case given that God is good—or acts that we happen to call 'evil' are not in fact evil because they have their origin in the actions of a benevolent God. But that too cannot be right since it is implausible that our sense of morality is

that wrong. It is 'impious' to ascribe evil acts to God and it is 'absurd' to claim that none of our actions are evil since God is ultimately their author.

Libertarians could attempt to resolve this dilemma by arguing that human action is not causally determined and thus its origin need not be traceable back to God; it spontaneously arises, uncaused, from the will of individuals. Hume, however, has rejected such a conception of freedom or liberty. He does not, though, provide an answer to this dilemma; at least not explicitly. He ends his discussion of liberty and necessity seemingly puzzled over how it could be resolved.

> These are mysteries, which mere natural and unassisted reason is very unfit to handle; and whatever system she embraces, she must find herself involved in inextricable difficulties, and even contradictions, at every step which she takes with regard to such subjects…. Happy, if she be thence sensible of her temerity, when she pries into these sublime mysteries; and leaving a scene so full of obscurities and perplexities, return, with suitable modesty, to her true and proper province, the examination of common life; where she will find difficulties enow to employ her enquiries, without launching into so boundless an ocean of doubt, uncertainty, and contradiction! (ibid., 8.36/103)

The various commentators who claim that Hume is being ironic here are surely correct.[23] These are only sublime mysteries if one believes in the Christian God. Hume does not have such belief, as we will discuss at more length in Chap. 13. The final passage in Section 8 does not express Hume's sincere opinion that mere human wisdom is incapable of grasping a theodicy that would explain how evil is compatible with the existence of God. It is, rather, a shot at religion: things would be less mysterious if we saw fit to relinquish our belief in God. Without such belief there is no philosophical problem of evil. Evil is just a consequence of the precarious nature of our physical constitution in relation to the environment we inhabit, and of our sometimes vicious and selfish actions towards our fellows.

Nevertheless, Hume has not been successful in his attempt to show that worldly suffering is logically incompatible with the existence of a Christian God. As we have seen, theodicies are slippery and in the end Hume accepts that 'there may, for aught we know, be good reasons, why providence interposes not in this manner' (1779, 11.207), and he is 'sceptic enough to allow, that the bad appearances … may be compatible with such attributes [as the theist ascribes to God]' (ibid., 11.211). There could always be some unknown good connected with Auschwitz or Larry's stubbed toe. Hume therefore abandons trying to demonstrate the logical inconsistency of the existence of evil and God.

8.6 The Inferential Problem of Evil

Hume thus switches tactics: instead of attempting to refute theodicy, he argues that the phenomena we observe around us give us good, though not logically decisive, grounds for rejecting the hypothesis that there is an overwhelmingly benevolent

[23] See, for example, Flew 1961, 160–2.

deity of great power shaping the universe.[24] If we approach the world with an open mind, then the mix of good and evil we find there does not provide us with reason to believe in the existence of a Christian God, and that all evils have compensating goods. Analogously we may not be able to demonstrate—that is, logically prove—that the world was not created by Herbert's cat, but we also do not have good (empirical) reason to believe that this is true. We should only believe in the kind of creator necessary to produce the kind of world that we experience, and the world we currently inhabit does not call for the existence of a supremely good God.

> However consistent the world may be, allowing certain suppositions and conjectures, with the idea of such a Deity, it can never afford us an inference concerning his existence. The consistence is not absolutely denied, only the inference. (ibid., 11.205)
>
> You afterwards become so enamoured of this offspring of your brain, that you imagine it impossible, but he must produce something greater and more perfect than the present scene of things, which is so full of ill and disorder. You forget, that this superlative intelligence and benevolence are entirely imaginary, or, at least, without any foundation in reason…. Let your gods, therefore, O philosophers, be suited to the present appearances of nature (1772a, 11.15/137–38).
>
> It must, I think, be allowed, that, if a very limited intelligence, whom we shall suppose utterly unacquainted with the universe, were assured, that it were the production of a very good, wise, and powerful Being, however finite, he would, from his conjectures, form *beforehand* a different notion of it from what we find it to be by experience; nor would he ever imagine, merely from these attributes of the cause, of which he is informed, that the effect could be so full of vice and misery and disorder, as it appears in this life. (1779, 11.203–4)

If there is good reason to think that a Christian deity exists, then attempts could be made to explain away the evil and misfortune that we find in the world; theodicies could attempt to show how evil is compatible with the existence and design plan of such a God. '[Theodicy] cannot profess to create faith, but only to preserve an already existing faith from being overcome by this dark mystery' (Hick 1966, 244). And there are various antecedent reasons one may have for being a theist. One may have *a priori* reasons, and:

> if the goodness of the Deity (I mean a goodness like the human) could be established on any tolerable reasons *a priori*, these [evil] phenomena, however untoward, would not be sufficient to subvert that principle; but might easily, in some unknown manner, be reconcilable to it. (1779, 11.211)

Or one may have beliefs derived from natural religion (via the argument from design) or from revealed religion (via testimony concerning miracles). Crucially, though, we have already seen in the previous chapter, and will see in the next chapter, that Hume rejects all such reasons. Thus, since there is no reason to believe in God in the first place, evil does not have to be explained away.

With Voltaire it is hard not to take theodicy as rather comical (darkly comical of course).[25] *Maybe* the compassion felt by aid workers and the industry shown by

[24] Holden (2010, 153) argues that Hume merely '*temporarily suspend*[s]' the logical objection while he makes an independent point concerning inference. Hume, it is claimed, 'finds the logical objection perfectly irrefutable'.

[25] Hume had read *Candide*: in a letter he informs Adam Smith that 'Voltaire has lately publishd a small work calld *Candide*, *ou L'optimisme*. It is full of Sprightliness & Impiety, & is indeed a

pharmaceutical companies makes up for the misery caused by, for example, ibola, malaria and AIDS. But is *all* the suffering really necessary in order to produce these concomitant human goods. 'Many plans upon which the universe might be formed. Strange that none should be better than the present' (Hume 2007, 107). As said, the comedy is dark—'all is [not] well'—so dark that it may be seen to blunt the awareness of evil for those who adopt such theodicies and weaken their motivation for combating it. Such claims go hand in hand with Hume's contention that religions are in general morally bankrupt, a view that we will go on to discuss in Chap. 11.

Satyre upon Providence, under Pretext of criticizing the Leibnitian System' (1954, 53). Hume and Voltaire were also in occasional correspondence; Voltaire, writing to Hume from Paris, laments that 'the abetters of superstition clip our wings and hinder us from soaring' (1968, 11499R). And Hume is flattered that 'In this Countrey [France], they call me his [Voltaire's] Pupil' (1932, I, 226).

Chapter 9
Miracles

Miracles play a key role in Christianity. The resurrection of Christ is miraculous as is his incarnation, as are various acts he allegedly performed over the course of his life, such as turning water into wine, raising Lazarus from the dead and feeding 5,000 with a few loaves and fishes. Belief in modern day miracles may be optional for many Christians, but belief in at least some of the Biblical miracles is not. Further, the occurrence of miracles is seen by some as an argument for the existence of God and for the truth of Christianity and other religions. People believe in God because miraculous happenings can only have a divine explanation. Religious texts such as the Bible and the Koran describe how God reveals himself to mankind, and one way he does this is through performing miracles.

Hume defines a miracle as '*a transgression of a law of nature by a particular volition of the Deity, or by the interposition of some invisible agent*' (1772a, 10.12n/115n; Hume's emphasis). For Hume, laws of nature describe regularities in our experience; they are generalizations to which we have no counterexamples. It is a law of nature that 'all men must die; that lead cannot, of itself, remain suspended in the air; that fire consumes wood, and is extinguished by water' (ibid., 10.12/114). Concomitantly 'a miracle is a violation of the laws of nature' (ibid.). John Mackie puts it thus:

> The laws of nature … describe the ways in which the world … works when left to itself, when not interfered with. A miracle occurs when the world is not left to itself, when something distinct from the natural order as a whole intrudes into it (1982, 19–20).

Miracles are at odds with our usual run of experience and this is something upon which believers and doubters agree: 'There must … be a uniform experience against every miraculous event, otherwise the event would not merit that appellation' (1772a, 10.12/115). Such events point towards the intervention of a deity because they are not explainable in terms of the laws of nature.

Hume distinguishes the merely marvellous from the miraculous. Marvelous events are not counter to the laws of nature; they are just incredibly lucky or fortuitous in some way. It would, for example, be incredibly lucky to land on a giant fluffy cushion—one, perhaps, constructed as an art exhibit—if one's parachute

A. Bailey and D. O'Brien, *Hume's Critique of Religion: 'Sick Men's Dreams'*,
The New Synthese Historical Library 72, DOI 10.1007/978-94-007-6615-0_9,

failed to open while skydiving, but this would not be counter to a law of nature; it is just an event that is highly unlikely. We sometimes talk of such events as 'miraculous', but they are not miraculous in Hume's sense.

Hume is careful to claim that miracles are not events that are merely outside of the experience of a particular person. An 'INDIAN Prince' may not believe that water freezes because that is not 'conformable' with his experience, but it is not 'contrary' to experience in the sense of being contrary to an established law of nature. The Prince does not have any experience of what happens at such low temperatures and there is therefore nothing in his experience with which to compare such an occurrence (ibid., 10.10/113–4).

There are some events that cannot as yet be explained in terms of the laws of nature. These may or may not be miracles. It could be that we have not yet uncovered the relevant laws. Hume, though, is not concerned merely with epistemological problems concerning our current knowledge of the laws of nature. The notion of a miracle is independent of our current knowledge. A miracle is a violation of a law of nature, whether or not that law happens to now figure in our description of reality.

9.1 Hume's Argument Against Belief in Miracles

Hume argues that we should not believe that miracles have occurred; they do not, therefore, provide us with any reason to think that God exists. His argument appears in Section 10 of the *Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*, although, as was noted in Sect. 1.2, it was originally intended for publication in the *Treatise*. The following, rather mischievous, letter to Reverend George Campbell also makes this clear.

> It may perhaps amuse you to learn the first hint, which suggested to me that argument [against miracles] which you have so strenuously attacked [in *Dissertation on Miracles*, 1762]. I was walking in the cloisters of the Jesuits' College of La Flèche, a town in which I passed two years of my youth, and engaged in a conversation with a Jesuit of some parts and learning, who was relating to me, and urging some nonsensical miracle performed in their convent, when I was tempted to dispute against him; and as my head was full of the topics of my *Treatise of Human Nature*, which I was at that time composing, this argument immediately occurred to me, and I thought it very much gravelled my companion; but at last he observed to me, that it was impossible for that argument to have any solidity, because it operated equally against the Gospel as the Catholic miracles;—which observation I thought proper to admit as a sufficient answer. I believe you will allow, that the freedom at least of this reasoning makes it somewhat extraordinary to have been the produce of a convent of Jesuits, tho perhaps you may think the sophistry of it savours plainly of the place of its birth. (1932, I, 361)

Hume focuses on written and spoken testimony concerning alleged miraculous occurrences. First, we shall say more about Hume's views on testimony in general, and then look at his argument with respect to miracles. Traditionally, philosophers have seen the acquisition of knowledge as a solitary activity: an

individual thinker acquires knowledge for himself or herself either through empirical reasoning grounded in perception or through *a priori* reasoning. According to such an individualistic approach, even though you may come to acquire beliefs from others, these do not constitute knowledge unless you can check that they are true for yourself. Such beliefs are second hand *and* second rate.

Hume, however, was one of the first philosophers to take the epistemic credentials of testimony seriously:

> There is no species of reasoning more common, more useful, and even necessary to human life, than that which is derived from the testimony of men, and the reports of eye-witnesses and spectators. (1772a, 10.5/111)
>
> After we have acquired a confidence in human testimony, books and conversation enlarge much more the sphere of one man's experience and thought than those of another. (ibid., 9.5n20/107n)

For Hume, the acquisition of testimonial beliefs involves a form of causal, inductive reasoning and thus, as we will discuss further in Sect. 9.4 of this chapter, it is based on the kind of reasoning that it is wise to pursue.[1] In common life we take it that experienced regularities give us reason to think that those regularities will continue to occur: too much coffee has always disturbed Geoff's sleep before and it is likely to do so again tonight. Similar reasoning can also be applied to testimonial reports: if in the past Bernadette has always been right about whether there is a jumble sale being held in the Church Hall at the weekend, then it is likely that she is also right when she next says that one is being held. Hume argues, though, that in the case of miraculous phenomena, the reported events are so unlikely that their occurrence should always be explained away rather than accepted. Hume first determines the standards that we usually use to assess whether a particular testimonial report should be believed, and then goes on to consider how these should be applied in the special case of miracles.

First, then, there are two sources of evidence that should be weighed against each other in order to determine whether we should believe the truth of a particular report. We should consider the intrinsic likelihood of the reported event, and also the chance that the speaker is either mistaken in some way or lying. In the past Andrew has been right in his assertions concerning the identity of stellar bodies in the night sky. He now tells you that a particular star is Cygnus X-1. Andrew has been an astrophysicist for as long as you can remember and has nothing to gain by lying to you. It would also be damaging to his pride to get this wrong and so the odds are in his favour. You should therefore believe what he says. There are other times, however, when it is not wise to accept someone's testimony.[2]

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[1] The contemporary debate concerning the epistemology of testimony revolves around the Humean, empirical account of the justification of testimonial belief. See Lackey and Sosa 2006.

[2] Hume, following such reasoning, sided correctly with those who thought the Ossian poems published by James Macpherson in 1760 were forgeries and not translations of ancient Gaelic texts. Boswell describes a conversation with Hume in which 'he disbelieved [the origin of the poems] not so much for want of testimony, as from the nature of the thing, according to his apprehension. He said if 50 bare-arsed Highlanders should say that *Fingal* was an ancient poem, he would not believe them. He said it was not to be believed that a people who were continually concerned to keep

> We entertain a suspicion concerning any matter of fact, when the witnesses contradict each other; when they are but few, or of a doubtful character; when they have an interest in what they affirm; when they deliver their testimony with hesitation, or on the contrary, with too violent asseverations. (ibid., 10.7/112–113)

We should also assess evidence in this way when considering testimony concerning miracles. We should weigh the evidence in favour of a particular law of nature continuing to hold against the testimonial evidence that a miracle has occurred. However, since a law of nature describes a universal regularity in our experience, there is a 'uniform experience against every miraculous event' (ibid., 10.12/115). We thus have a 'proof' that a miracle will not occur. 'A firm and unalterable experience has established these laws, the proof against a miracle, from the very nature of the fact, is as entire as any argument from experience can possibly be imagined' (ibid., 10.12/114).[3]

In order to counteract such evidence one must have very persuasive testimony.

> No testimony is sufficient to establish a miracle, unless the testimony be of such a kind, that its falsehood would be more miraculous, than the fact, which it endeavours to establish …. When any one tells me, that he saw a dead man restored to life, I immediately consider with myself, whether it be more probable, that this person should either deceive or be deceived, or that the fact, which he relates, should really have happened. I weigh the one miracle against the other; and according to the superiority, which I discover, I pronounce my decision, and always reject the greater miracle. If the falsehood of his testimony would be more miraculous, than the event which he relates; then, and not till then, can he pretend to command my belief or opinion. (ibid., 10.13/115–116)

If in the past Mary has always correctly identified water and wine, and if she has always been honest, then we have a proof that she will continue to be reliable. We also have a proof, derived from experience, that water does not naturally turn into wine. If Mary was to report such a transmutation, we would have to weigh 'proof against proof' (ibid., 10.11/114). We can do this because one proof may be derived from more 'experiments' than another. We may have experience of a larger number of stable glasses of water—those that have not changed into wine—than we have

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themselves from starving or from being hanged should preserve in their memories a poem in six books' (Boswell 2001, 193–4). See also Graham 2004, 260, 340–1, and Hume 1965; 1932, I, 328–31.

[3] George Campbell (1762, 30–2) and Richard Price (1768, 413–6), contemporaries of Hume, suggest that Hume's account is in tension with the fact that we readily accept testimony concerning events that are highly improbable, events that, by Hume's lights, we should doubt occurred. I received a text message last night telling me that Zlatan Ibrahimovic scored a bicycle kick for Sweden against England from 30 yards. The chance of anyone doing this at all, never mind in an international match, is extremely small, much smaller, it would seem, than the chance that a friend was joking or mistaken. Millican argues that Hume is sloppy in the presentation of his argument and that what he probably had in mind was this 'Revised Humean Maxim': 'No testimony is sufficient to render a miracle *M* more probable than not, unless the testimony is of such a kind, that the occurrence of a false *M* report of that kind (*given that M does not in fact occur*) would be even less probable than *M itself*' (2011, 186). If, for example, Ibrahimovic had not scored, it is not likely that such a text would have been sent, less likely, plausibly, than the event itself occurring. Not so, though, in the case of miracles. Given the psychological factors discussed in Sect. 9.2 below, it is not so unlikely that false testimony concerning miracles be given.

heard true reports made by Mary. The proof against a miraculous occurrence is more persuasive than that in favour. In order to justifiably believe that a miracle has occurred we would require a more persuasive proof in favour of a miracle. And it is important to note that this remains a possibility. Hume has merely described the high standards that testimony concerning miracles has to meet; he has not precluded such standards being met.

It may seem, though, that there is some tension here between Hume's attitude to testimony concerning miracles and his scepticism concerning empirical reasoning. He has argued that we should weigh the likelihood of a law of nature continuing to hold against the likelihood that a certain miracle report is correct. However, in the *Treatise* (1.3.6/86–94) and the *Enquiry concerning Human Understanding* (4/25–39) Hume argues that inductive inference is not valid and that we are not epistemically justified in believing that the world will continue to be regular in the way that it has been up till now. The beliefs we have concerning the likely reliability of witness testimony are based on inductive inference and so we are not justified in believing that a reporter will continue to be reliable just because he has been in the past. We have, therefore, no reason to think that the laws of nature will continue to behave in the same way or that Mary will continue to tell the truth. We cannot take one course of events to be more likely than another and thus Hume cannot coherently use probabilities in his argument against miracles. This is the basis of C. D. Broad's objection to Hume.

> I cannot see how Hume can distinguish between our variously caused beliefs about matters of fact, and call some of them justifiable and others unjustifiable …. The [religious] enthusiast's belief in miracles and Hume's belief in natural laws (and consequent disbelief in miracles) stand on precisely the same logical footing. In both cases we can see the psychological cause of the belief, but in neither can Hume give us any logical ground for it. We see, then, that Hume is really inconsistent in preferring a belief in the laws of nature based on constant experience to a belief in miracles based on a love of the wonderful …. On his own theories he has no right to talk about what we ought to believe as to matters of fact. For what we ought to believe means what we are logically justified in believing, and Hume has said that he can find no logical justification for belief about matters of fact. (1916–1917, 91–92)

Hume's position can however be seen as coherent if we consider his naturalistic approach. Hume argues that even though our belief in a regular world cannot be supported by philosophical argument, we nevertheless expect things to go on in the same way and this is because certain expectations have been inculcated in us by our ongoing regular experience. Hume's philosophical conclusions are sceptical, but he also offers a naturalistic explanation of our empirical beliefs. We should see his account of testimony in light of this. There is no philosophical justification for belief in the testimony of a usually reliable reporter; we are, though, naturally inclined to have such belief. We are sensitive to the relative frequencies of aspects of our experience and base our beliefs about the unobserved on such frequencies. Further, we have everyday standards of good reasoning that our beliefs can be measured against. Thus we should believe the reliable reporter and we should not believe those who have been regularly mistaken in the past. If Andrew has always been right about stellar bodies, then we will expect him to be right in the future. We expect him to

continue to be reliable just as we expect the sun to rise tomorrow. Due to instinct, custom, or habit his past record leads us to believe that he can be trusted.

> The reason, why we place any credit in witnesses and historians, is not derived from any *connexion*, which we perceive *a priori*, between testimony and reality, but because we are accustomed to find a conformity between them. (1772a, 10.8/113)

Such reasoning from experience may not be philosophically justified but it is good cognitive practice since 'experience be our only guide in reasoning concerning matters of fact' (ibid., 10.3/110). In common life 'a wise man … proportions his belief to the evidence' (ibid., 10.4/110)—and philosophical argument cannot undermine the grounds of such wisdom. Hume has argued, then, that it is wise to be sceptical with respect to miracle reports. The epistemic standards that such testimony must meet are very high, yet the testimonial evidence for miracles is poor.[4]

It should be made clear, though, that Hume does not claim that miracles are impossible, and he is explicit about this: 'there may possibly be miracles, or violations of the usual course of nature, of such a kind as to admit of proof from human testimony' (ibid., 10.36/127). The first part of Hume's argument is sometimes called the *a priori* part, but this could be rather misleading. Hume's argument is not an *a priori* one based on the meanings of, or the relations of ideas between, 'miracle' and 'law of nature'. Miracles are not conceptually impossible, that is, they are not ruled out by definition. Some philosophers have interpreted Hume as making such an *a priori* claim. Since a law of nature is exceptionless—by definition—there cannot be miraculous occurrences that provide exceptions to such laws. This is an odd interpretation of Hume given his naturalistic approach and his claim that matters of fact cannot be established *a priori*. Any such interpretation can be seen as ungrounded if we note that the laws of nature are not defined as generalisations that will never be contravened, but rather, as those which have invariably held in our experience. Hume's argument is an empirical one based on probabilities derived from experience.

Misunderstanding could also arise here due to Hume's use of the word 'proof' which might suggest a deductive, infallible conclusion. 'The proof against a miracle … is full and certain when taken alone, because it implies no doubt' (1932, I, 350). 'Proof', though, should be taken in its probabilistic sense. We have a proof that the sun will rise tomorrow if all experience points to it doing so. We may *say*

[4] Millican (2012) argues that Hume's inductive scepticism is directed at a Lockean perceptual model of reason in which we must attempt to perceive or apprehend objective, probabilistic connexions between experiences. Inductive inference, though, cannot be justified in this way. In place of such justification, Hume offers a naturalistic explanation of how human beings can—and actually do—reason inductively and this, given the impossibility of any rational or perceptual foundations for such reasoning, provides us with all the support we require for inductive inferences: 'in the search for ultimate foundations, we hit rock bottom with something that has a *cause* but no *foundation.* And that is the tendency, rooted in our animal nature, to infer from past to future, from experienced to not-yet-experienced…. [This] position is very far from sceptical…. Hume sees very good reason to accept our faculty of inductive inference as it is (at least when suitably disciplined by general rules etc.), and no good reason to reject it. We have, indeed, no alternative, nor any compelling reason for desiring one' (ibid., 90).

that we are 'certain' that the sun will rise but, as Hume has shown, we have not ruled out the possibility that it will not. Hume has argued that we have a 'proof' against miracles in this probabilistic sense since all the experiential evidence suggests that the laws of nature are not contravened by divine intervention.

In places, though, Hume also seems to claim explicitly that certain miracles are 'impossible'.

> There surely never was a greater number of miracles ascribed to one person, than those, which were lately said to have been wrought in FRANCE upon the tomb of Abbé PARIS, the famous JANSENIST…. Many of the miracles were immediately proved upon the spot, before judges of unquestioned integrity, attested by witnesses of credit and distinction, in a learned age, and on the most eminent theatre that is now in the world…. What have we to oppose to such a cloud of witnesses, but the *absolute impossibility* or miraculous nature of the events, which they relate? And this surely, in the eyes of all reasonable people, will alone be regarded as a sufficient refutation. (1772a, 10.27/124–5; our emphasis)

Again, however, all he means here is that we have a probabilistic proof against their occurrence. This, it should be noted, is a common way of speaking: it is 'absolutely impossible' for there to be a year in which every single train in the UK arrives on time. This is not logically or even empirically impossible; just highly unlikely. With respect to miracles, then, the claim is not that we have *a priori* insight into whether a certain reporter is reliable; we can only know this through experience, through having observed that a person has been reliable in the past. This standard-setting is only *a priori* in the sense that this method of comparing probabilities can be articulated independently of our looking at the details of a particular report. Hume's intention is simply to give a formal presentation of the standards we all actually apply most of the time, standards that, especially in the context of religious miracles, we sometimes let slip.

Hume not only accepts that miracles are logically possible, he also claims that they are empirically possible and describes the kind of evidence that would lead even the wise man to believe in the occurrence of one.

> Suppose, all authors, in all languages, agree, that, from the first of JANUARY 1600, there was a total darkness over the whole earth for eight days: Suppose that the tradition of this extraordinary event is still strong and lively among the people: That all travellers, who return from foreign countries, bring us accounts of the same tradition, without the least variation or contradiction (ibid., 10.36/127–8).

Such an event would appear to be miraculous since a law of nature is contravened, the law of nature that the sun always rises. There could be widespread, consistent and seemingly reliable reports concerning this global event and the many witnesses may be competent, honest, reliable and have no motivation to lie. If this were so, 'it is evident, that our present philosophers, instead of doubting the fact, ought to receive it as certain' (ibid., 10.36/128). Hume's claim, though, is that the evidence for biblical miracles is not as good as that concerning the 8 days of darkness.[5]

[5] There is also another option here. Accepting testimony concerning the 8 days of darkness does not entail that we must believe a miracle has taken place. Instead, we could look for an explanation of

Hume distinguishes the 8 days of darkness case from a suggested miracle involving the resurrection of Queen Elizabeth I. With respect to the former, Hume introduces another consideration into our probabilistic assessment of testimonial evidence.

> The decay, corruption, and dissolution of nature, is an event rendered probable by so many analogies, that any phœnomenon, which seems to have a tendency towards that catastrophe, comes within the reach of human testimony, if that testimony be very extensive and uniform. (ibid., 10.36/128)

There are other examples of decay and corruption in the natural world that increase the probability that the usual cycle of night and day could break down. There are, though, no such analogous examples in support of resurrection; in our experience the mortality of man and every living creature has been universal. This example is daring since it refers to resurrection—and one cannot but think of the alleged resurrection of Christ. Hume is subtly (or perhaps not so subtly) suggesting that we should not believe that Christ rose from the dead.

Let us, though, consider an objection to Hume's approach. In the context of a naturalistic world-view Hume's argument is sound. It is more probable that a speaker's testimony is false than that a law of nature is violated. This, however, is assuming that the naturalistic world-view is correct. But this cannot be assumed in the context of the debate over miracles. According to a theistic world-view God and not natural processes can be responsible for such improbable events. As we saw with the Indian Prince, Hume admits that our probabilistic thinking can go wrong when we apply it out of context. Our climate is alien to the Prince and thus his experience of water does not provide him with enough evidence to draw conclusions concerning ice and snow. Analogously, then, God's influence and miraculous engagement with the world is alien to our everyday causal interaction with it; it is not 'conformable' with our experience. Hume is assuming that our causal reasoning should apply to cases of miracles, but this is not so, for the same reason that the Prince's causal reasoning does not apply to different climes. As Lewis says: 'No study of probabilities inside a given frame can ever tell us how probable it is that the frame itself can be violated' (2002, 164).

Such a response to Hume would be powerful if there were independent reason to believe in God. We would then have a reason to think that there may be such divine contexts in which probabilistic reasoning is impotent; in the case of the Indian Prince, for example, we have experiential evidence that there are contexts alien to the Prince. As we have seen, though, in Chaps. 6 and 7 Hume has rejected any such reasons.

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the phenomena that would enable us to see the laws of nature as being maintained. There may have been darkness over the Earth for 8 days—the sun may not have risen—but this is because there was a 'secret opposition of contrary causes' (1772a, 8.13/87); perhaps a giant comet had blocked out the sun. Hume could be seen as suggesting this response to such testimony as he claims that we 'ought to search for the causes whence it might be derived' (ibid., 10.36/128); this suggests that the laws of nature had not been violated and that there may be a hidden empirical cause for this seemingly anomalous course of events.

9.2 The Empirical Evidence Against Miracle Reports

In the previous section we considered Hume's argument for the claim that the standards required of miracle testimony are very high. In the second part of Hume's argument he presents empirical evidence in order to show that there has never been a testimonial report concerning a religious miracle that has met the requisite evidential standards required and, further, these standards are never likely to be met.

> We have supposed, that the testimony, upon which a miracle is founded, may possibly amount to an entire proof, and that the falsehood of that testimony would be a real prodigy: But it is easy to show, that we have been a great deal too liberal in our concession, and that there never was a miraculous event established on so full an evidence. (1772a, 10.14/116)

He focuses on the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Old Testament.

> I desire any one to lay his hand upon his heart, and after serious consideration declare, whether he thinks that the falsehood of such a book [the Pentateuch], supported by such a testimony, would be more extraordinary and miraculous than all the miracles it relates (ibid., 10.40/130).

Four arguments are put forward to support the claim that there has never been testimony concerning a miracle that has satisfied the requisite epistemic standards. First:

> there is not to be found, in all history, any miracle attested by a sufficient number of men, of such unquestioned good sense, education, and learning, as to secure us against all delusion in themselves; of such undoubted integrity, as to place them beyond all suspicion of any design to deceive others; of such credit and reputation in the eyes of mankind, as to have a great deal to lose in case of their being detected in any falsehood; and at the same time, attesting facts, performed in such a public manner, and in so celebrated a part of the world, as to render the detection unavoidable (ibid., 10.15/116–17).

History reveals a catalogue of deceit and fabricated holy relics. The long history of religious corruption should put us on our guard since '[n]ew reliques, perpetually sent from that endless mint of superstition, and magnified by lying miracles, invented in convents, operated on the astonished minds of the multitude' (1778, 1.52). Thus Hume's first argument depends on whether his assessment of the historical evidence is correct; whether, for example, he is right in saying that there is not a 'sufficient number' of witnesses of the required impartiality and integrity to enable us to counteract the historical evidence we have of error and deceit. The relevant historical details are given rather cursory treatment in the first *Enquiry*, although specific historical examples of alleged miracles are discussed in his *History of England*.[6] Much of his treatment of them amounts to irony and mockery: 'They soon found themselves obliged to obtain by plunder what they had vainly expected from miracles' (1778, 1.238).

> But Becket had sacrificed his life to the power and privileges of the clergy; and this peculiar merit challenged, and not in vain, a suitable acknowledgement to his memory. Endless were the panegyrics on his virtues; and the miracles, wrought by his reliques, were more

[6] See 1778, 6. 494, 1.38, 2.420, 2.421, 2.492, 1.105, and 2.399.

> numerous, more nonsensical, and more impudently attested, than those which ever filled the legend of any confessor or martyr. (ibid., 1.336)

Humour is never far away.

> Those passions, which so naturally insinuate themselves amidst the warm intimacies maintained by the devotees of different sexes, had taken place between Elizabeth and her confederates; and it was found, that a door to her dormitory, which was said to have been miraculously opened, in order to give her access to the chapel, for the sake of frequent converse with heaven, had been contrived by Bocking and Masters for less refined purposes. (ibid., 3.220)

In places, though, the *History* does more to illustrate his probabilistic argument against miracles. With respect to Joan of Arc, who was thought to have been divinely inspired, Hume claims:

> it is much more probable, that Dunois and the wiser commanders prompted her in all her measures, than that a country girl, without experience or education, could, on a sudden, become expert in a profession, which requires more genius and capacity, than any other active scene of life. (ibid., 2.403–4)

It is important here to keep in mind that the Bible, at least as considered by Christians, is a historical document and should be assessed accordingly. Further, there are specific problems with Biblical testimony over and above Hume's claims concerning miracle reports. These problems increase the probability that the writers of the Gospels are mistaken rather than that, from time to time, laws of nature are being violated. It is now known, for example, that the Bible was written by various people over a few hundred years and the four familiar gospels we read today are just a selection from a wider range of texts and the product of much sifting over the ages. This raises a problem for the testimony of the received Bible. The so-called Gnostic Gospels of Judas, Thomas and Mary, amongst others, have not been incorporated into the canonical Bible, but their account of the life of Jesus of Nazareth differs in certain ways from that of the Bible, sometimes over core theological issues.[7] It can therefore be seen as a historical accident that the gospels of only Matthew, Mark, Luke and John ground the Christian faith. And there is even inconsistency and contradiction in the received Bible.

> The books of the Old Testament do not agree whether the soul survives after death; the books of the New Testament tell different stories about the immanence of the end of the world. (Kenny 2006, 58)

John, for example, does not tell the story of the last supper; in his gospel Jesus was arrested the previous night, on Thursday, and brought to trial on Friday morning. If the Bible cannot be trusted with respect to the movements of Jesus, why should it be trusted with respect to the miracles he performed.[8]

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[7] See R. Miller 1991.

[8] On contradictions in the Bible see Kitcher 2007, 135–9. Kitcher's conclusion is that 'the documents Christians take to be canonical were chosen as the result of political struggles among many nascent Jesus movements, in which efforts to incorporate the ideas of an itinerant teacher within the framework of Judaism lost out to a more cosmopolitan vision favored by the Rome oriented Paul. Within that cosmopolitan conception there were also variations, some of which were elimi-

At the very least the Bible throws up particularly interesting issues of translation and interpretation; hermeneutic problems on which ride crucial doctrinal issues. It is claimed, for example, that 'virgin' is a mistranslation from the Hebrew, and that 'young woman' better describes Mary, mother of Jesus.[9]

Hume's first empirical argument concerns the paucity of the historical evidence in support of miracles. His second argument concerns the psychology of religious belief. People have certain psychological traits that cause them to be gullible when it comes to miracles. Some people, for example, have an intense desire that religious teachings are true and, particularly, that there is the possibility of life after death. Such desires can confound our usual good sense and critical faculties.

Hume also claims that 'if the spirit of religion join itself to the love of wonder, there is an end of common sense; and human testimony, in these circumstances, loses all pretensions to authority' (1772a, 10.17/117).

> When any thing is affirmed utterly absurd and miraculous…. [t]he passion of *surprize* and *wonder*, arising from miracles, being an agreeable emotion, gives a sensible tendency towards the belief of those events, from which it is derived. And this goes so far, that even those who cannot enjoy this pleasure immediately, nor can believe those miraculous events, of which they are informed, yet love to partake of the satisfaction at second-hand or by rebound, and place a pride and delight in exciting the admiration of others. (ibid., 10.16/117)

People can be inclined to believe in surprising and wondrous events even if these events are highly unlikely to have occurred. And the Joan of Arc story is seen as illustrating another way that the imagination can fire belief in miracles.

> She was converted into a shepherdess, an employment much more agreeable to the imagination. To render her still more interesting, near ten years were subtracted from her age; and all the sentiments of love and of chivalry, were thus united to those of enthusiasm, in order to inflame the fond fancy of the people with pre-possessions in her favour. (1778, 2.399)

Further, it is pleasing to discover that the world is not a totally regular and mechanical place, and we find it agreeable to report such noteworthy events: 'But what greater temptation than to appear a missionary, a prophet, an ambassador from heaven?' (1772a, 10.29/125). And, 'with what greediness are the miraculous accounts of travellers received' (ibid., 10.17/117).

> The smallest spark may here kindle into the greatest flame; because the materials are always prepared for it … the gazing populace, receive greedily, without examination, whatever sooths superstition, and promotes wonder. (ibid., 10.30/126)

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nated as heretical. Out of this come a collection of inconsistent documents, many of whose parts are evidently fictitious' (ibid., 139).

[9] Hume notes problems concerning the interpretation of the Bible: 'That sacred writ itself was involved in so much obscurity, gave rise to so many difficulties, contained so many appearing contradictions, that it was the most dangerous weapon, that could be entrusted into the hands of the ignorant and giddy multitude: That the poetical style, in which a great part of it was composed, at the same time that it occasioned uncertainty in the sense, by its multiplied tropes and figures, was sufficient to kindle the zeal of fanaticism, and thereby throw civil society into the most furious combustion: That a thousand sects must arise, which would pretend, each of them, to derive its tenets from the scripture; and would be able, by specious arguments, or even without specious arguments, to seduce silly women and ignorant mechanics, into a belief of the most monstrous principles' (1778, 3.232).

Hume's claim is that the influence of such psychological factors should make us wary of accepting testimony concerning miracles. Even if a usually reliable friend or acquaintance claims to see, for example, a rainbow in the shape of a triangle rather than an arc (something that presumably contravenes natural laws concerning the refraction of light), you should not believe her. There is always more chance that she was lying or mistaken in some way, perhaps hallucinating. The Stoic Cato may have been famed for his honesty, but Hume claims that '*I should not believe such a* [miracle] *story were it told me by* Cato' (ibid., 10.9/113; Hume's emphasis).

Hume is rather one-sided here in his assessment of the psychology of testimony and truth-telling. There are also psychological factors that suggest a contrary conclusion to Hume. The Apostles had a lot to lose in testifying to Christ's divinity, including their lives (some of them did), and this may suggest that they had to be sure that what they had seen was true. More generally it is sometimes the case that people take particular care when reporting unusual and unexpected occurrences; it could be argued, therefore, that reports of miracles are likely to be more reliable than those concerning mundane, everyday events. Further, it may be true that people love wondrous happenings, but they like order too, and do not like being taken in.

Hume's third argument is that miracles are usually:

> observed chiefly to abound among ignorant and barbarous nations; or if a civilized people has ever given admission to any of them, that people will be found to have received them from ignorant and barbarous ancestors (ibid., 10.20/119).

They should therefore not be looked on favourably. The Pentateuch is again picked out for particular criticism.

> [It is] a book, presented to us by a barbarous and ignorant people, written in an age when they were still more barbarous, and in all probability long after the facts which it relates, corroborated by no concurring testimony (ibid., 10.40/130).

Thus, reports of miracles 'grow thinner every page, in proportion as we advance nearer the enlightened ages, we soon learn, that there is nothing mysterious or supernatural in the case' (ibid., 10.20/119).

Lastly, Hume points out that different religions attempt to justify their own particular beliefs with miraculous happenings specific to their own religion. One cannot, however, believe in the occurrence of all such miracles because different religions make contradictory claims about the world and the nature of God. 'In matters of religion, whatever is different is contrary' (ibid., 10.24/121). Christians take miracles to provide evidence for the existence of a Christian God: the one true God, the Holy Trinity. The gods of other religions have a different nature and Christians claim that these gods do not exist. However, followers of non-Christian religions have their own favoured miracles, those that they take to support belief in the specific teachings of their religion, and the testimonial evidence for these miracles can be just as strong as that in support of a Christian God (although, according to Hume, neither have particularly strong evidence to support their views). We cannot believe all such testimony since this would involve attempting to hold contradictory claims about God and the world, and since Christian testimony is no more persuasive than the testimony in support of Hindu or Islamic

miracles, then we have no reason to favour the claims of a particular religion. Testimony concerning miracles can never provide evidential support for a particular religion because it will always be outweighed by testimony supporting the miracles of other religions.

Certain religions, however, do not claim that theirs is the only true God, or that miraculous happenings must indicate the intervention of their particular deity. Early Christians claimed that pagan miracles pointed to the work of devils and not God, and some polytheists accept that there are various gods each supported by their own tradition of miracles. Miracles, in themselves, do not have to be seen as specific to a particular religion; they can nevertheless provide us with reason to think that there is occasional supernatural intervention in the day-to-day course of events. However, even if this is the case, Hume's argument can still be taken to show that miraculous happenings cannot be seen as *Christian* miracles or as *Islamic* miracles, not, that is, unless one has other reasons to think that a particular religion is correct.

Hume therefore claims, first, that the historical evidence for miracles is poor. Second, psychological factors are likely to make us gullible when it comes to stories concerning wondrous events. Third, testimony concerning miracles has its roots in cultures without the requisite enlightened view of the world. And fourth, miracles cannot be taken as providing evidence for a particular religion because there are various religions in the world that hold contradictory views. Hume thus concludes that 'we may establish it as a maxim, that no human testimony can have such force as to prove a miracle, and make it a just foundation for any such system of religion' (ibid., 10.35/127). We should not therefore believe that Jesus turned water into wine or that he rose from the dead. Hume claims to have:

> discovered an argument … which, if just, will, with the wise and learned, be an everlasting check to all kinds of superstitious delusion, and consequently, will be useful as long as the world endures. (ibid., 10.2/110)

It is the case that:

> the knavery and folly of men are such common phœnomena, that I should rather believe the most extraordinary events to arise from their concurrence, than admit of so signal a violation of the laws of nature. (ibid., 10.37/128)

9.3 The Miracle of Faith

We have already discussed how Hume's views can sometimes be hard to decipher since he uses strategies of concealment and dissimulation. The argument from miracles, though, appears to be quite straightforward: one should not believe in miracles and they therefore provide no evidential support for Christianity or for religion in general. Even here, though, some have claimed that Hume's argument can be reconciled with a position that is less hostile towards, and perhaps even supportive of, religion. Some philosophers have argued that Hume is merely

concerned with attacking Catholic 'superstitions' and that he does not object to Protestantism. One reason to think this is derived from Hume's remark at the beginning of his discussion of miracles that he has 'discovered an argument of a like nature' (ibid., 10.2/110) to that provided by Dr. Tillotson, the Protestant Archbishop of Canterbury (1691–1694).

Transubstantiation is the Catholic dogma that at communion the bread and wine literally become the body and blood of Christ. Tillotson notes that there can be no sensory evidence in favour of transubstantiation since the appearance of liquid in the goblet does not change even though it transforms from wine to blood. Catholicism, then, pays no heed to such empirical evidence. This, however, is inconsistent. Catholics endorse various miraculous happenings for which they have sensory evidence. In the context of these occurrences perceptual evidence is trusted and thus it should also be trusted in the case of transubstantiation; but, as seen, this is not the case. The arguments of Hume and Tillotson are therefore similar in that they both refer to testimony concerning miraculous phenomena, transubstantiation being contrary to the laws of nature.

It is important, though, to note the differences between the arguments. Tillotson's focus is on the epistemological importance of sensory experience and his claim is that sensory experience should trump testimonial reports that clash with perceptual evidence. Hume's argument is more sophisticated and it involves the probabilistic weighing up of testimonial and perceptual evidence. Testimony need not be trumped by experience if the testimonial evidence is good enough (as in, for example, the 8 days of darkness case).

It is true that Hume has particular enthusiasm for attacking Catholic superstition and, in particular, for ridiculing the alleged 'real presence' of the body and blood of Christ in the bread and wine of the communion.

> I believe, indeed, that there is no tenet in all paganism, which would give so fair a scope to ridicule as this of the *real presence*: For it is so absurd, that it eludes the force of all argument. (1777c, 167)

He even follows this lambasting with two rather pointed jokes:

> One day, a priest, it is said, gave inadvertently, instead of the sacrament, a counter, which had by accident fallen among the holy wafers. The communicant waited patiently for some time, expecting it would dissolve on the tongue: But finding that it still remained entire, he took it off. *I wish*, cried he to the priest, *you have not committed some mistake: I wish you have not given me God the Father: He is so hard and tough there is no swallowing him.* (ibid.; Hume's emphasis)
>
> The priest … continued his instructions … *How many Gods are there? None at all*, replies Benedict …. *How! None at all!* cries the priest. *To be sure*, said the honest proselyte. *You have told me all along that there is but one God: And yesterday I eat him*. (ibid., 168; Hume's emphasis)[10]

[10] This is an old anti-Catholic joke. Tillotson, in his *Discourse against Transubstantiation* (1684), cites Averroes the Islamic philosopher as saying: 'but so sottish [foolish] a Sect or Law I never found, as is the Sect of the Christians; because with their own teeth they devour their God whom they worship'. The entry for 'Eucharist' in Diderot and d'Alembert's *Encyclopédie* (1751–1772) includes the reference 'see: Cannibalism'.

But it is also clear that the argument concerning miracles has a wider target. After all, it aims to undermine belief in Biblical miracles and miracles performed by Christ. It aims to undermine belief in the resurrection, a cornerstone of Christianity. The reference to Tillotson may suggest Protestant sympathies, and 'by the end of the second paragraph many members of Hume's audience, in varying degrees anti-Catholic, would have been anticipating something of a feast', and, Craig (1997, 35) continues, 'they were indeed about to get one, though not quite the menu they expected.'

Even though the thrust of Hume's discussion is particularly clear, some have taken the closing paragraph of the discussion to reveal that Hume accepts that there may after all be a kind of miracle—the miracle of religious faith—and this can justify religious belief.

> Mere reason is insufficient to convince us of its veracity [that of Christianity]: And whoever is moved by *Faith* to assent to it, is conscious of a continued miracle in his own person, which subverts all the principles of his understanding, and gives him a determination to believe what is most contrary to custom and experience. (1772a, 10.41/131)[11]

Livingston claims that:

> none of this [Hume's argument against miracles] rules out the fideistic alternative, which is that belief in miracles is an act of faith, or a gift of faith, which does subvert or at least suspend the ordinary canons of inductive reason; and so Hume concludes the criticism of miracles … on a fideistic note. (1998, 150)

This, however, would appear to be a passage where Hume's irony is clear to see. Antony Flew describes the end of this section as containing 'three of the most mordantly derisive sentences Hume ever wrote' (1961, 216). Hume is claiming that it is a 'miracle' that people still follow Christianity given the paucity of the evidence for its teachings—not a literal miracle, but a miracle in the colloquial sense of being beyond belief; simply amazing. Various digs at religion are not hard to find throughout this section. The '&c.' in the following footnote from Hume is dismissive and heavy with sarcasm: 'For that miracle was really performed by the touch of an authentic holy prickle of the holy thorn, which composed the holy crown, which, &c.' (1772a, 10.27n25/346n). Elsewhere Hume gleefully lists a comical list of relics, often associated with reported miracles, that were unearthed during Henry's abolition of the monasteries: 'the parings of St. Edmond's toes; some of the coals that roasted St. Laurence; the girdle of the Virgin shown in eleven several places; two or three heads of St. Ursula; the felt of St. Thomas of Lancaster, an infallible cure for the head-ach; [and] part of St. Thomas of Canterbury's shirt, much reverenced by big-bellied women' (1778, 3.252–3). Again, though, Hume's attitude should not be seen as merely anti-Catholic: 'But such fooleries, as they are to be found in all ages and nations, and even took place during the most refined periods of antiquity, form no particular or violent reproach to the catholic religion' (ibid., 3.253).

[11] As Kemp Smith (1947, 47) points out, this was the view of the Reformed Churches in the eighteenth century. Faith is only possible with the aid of miraculously wrought divine Grace.

9.4 Common Life and Hume's Therapeutic Conception of Philosophy

Hume has claimed that people are swayed from probabilistic empirical thinking by several distorting psychological factors. It is such factors that cause us to believe in supernatural occurrences, such factors that promote the mere idea of the occurrence of a miracle to actual belief in such a happening. Hume therefore asks us to imagine what would be believed if these factors were not present; if, say, passion and wonder did not give rise to belief, and if our fellows were not impressed with stories concerning such things. If this were so, then we should explain away such improbable events in the way that Hume describes. And this is what we do in everyday situations. We would not believe a door-to-door salesman who was hawking a machine that turns tap water into wine; similarly one should believe that one is being deceived or one has misunderstood when asked to believe that Jesus performed such a transmutation or that he rose from the dead. Hume does not criticize aberrant attempts at probabilistic reasoning on philosophical or logical grounds; instead he offers us reminders as to how we usually think, and how we should therefore think when we are asked to believe in miracles.

Hume does, however, distinguish between the different kinds of reasoning that can be pursued in common life. There is the vulgar reasoning of the 'peasant' and a more sophisticated form of reasoning.[12]

> A peasant can give no better reason for the stopping of any clock or watch than to say, that commonly it does not go right: But an artizan easily perceives, that the same force in the spring or pendulum has always the same influence on the wheels; but fails of its usual effect, perhaps by reason of a grain of dust, which puts a stop to the whole movement. (1739, 1.3.12.5/132)

Here the artisan has a more sophisticated grasp of induction. Constant conjunctions are sometimes disturbed because there is a 'secret opposition of contrary causes' (1772a, 8.13/87). Here the artisan explains a broken watch in this way.[13] Elsewhere a shrewd observer of everyday life would have a better understanding of why someone acted oddly on a certain occasion, out of line with the usual patterns of human behaviour. Such thinking is sometimes called 'philosophical' in common life; that is, when thinkers take 'slow and deliberate steps' rather than the 'precipitate march of the vulgar' (1779, 2.147). And when this awareness of the regularity of nature and the operation of hidden causes is successfully applied to more abstract and less immediate objects of inquiry, we arrive by degrees at the sophisticated deliberative processes of the professional scientist. However, what

[12] Of course Humean standards are not always lived up to in common life: C. D. Broad claimed to 'have a Scottish friend who believes all the miracles of the New Testament, but cannot be induced to believe, on the repeated evidence of my own eyes, that a small section of the main North British Railway between Dundee and Aberdeen consists of single line' (1916–1917, 81).

[13] See Hume 1739, 1.3.15/173–6, 'Rules by which to judge of causes and effects', for a more detailed discussion of how to 'distinguish the accidental circumstance from the efficacious causes' (ibid., 1.3.13.11/149).

Hume calls 'true philosophy' or 'mitigated scepticism' demands careful reflection on our intellectual faculties and their operations, and the true philosopher is one who has followed Hume's sceptical dialectic: 'it is only when the entire domain of philosophical speech is reduced to silence that the mute authority of primordial participation can be heard' (Livingston 1998, 22). True philosophy involves careful inductive reasoning in the knowledge that traditional philosophical methods lead only to scepticism or, as we will see, various dangers associated with religious belief. Thus:

> most fortunately it happens, that since reason is incapable of dispelling these clouds, nature herself suffices to that purpose, and cures me of this philosophical melancholy and delirium, either by relaxing this bent of mind, or by some avocation, and lively impression of my senses, which obliterate all these chimeras. I dine, I play a game of back-gammon, I converse, and am merry with my friends (1739, 1.4.7.9/269).

Backgammon itself is not a philosophical pursuit, but playing it with an awareness that unconstrained philosophical reasoning potentially threatens to deliver the doxastic disaster of all-encompassing suspension of judgement on all matters of objective fact is a philosophical response to the world.

This three-way classification of thought can be applied to the protagonists in the *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion*. With respect to the argument from design, Cleanthes applies common sense analogical reasoning to the apparent signs of design in nature, but his conclusion is vulgar; his grasp of inductive inference is crude. The sophisticated 'artisan' should not be 'hurried on by the smallest similitude' (1779, 2.147) between nature and man-made machines and should draw a much weaker, 'attenuated' conclusion. This is Philo's position. Rejecting both metaphysical reasoning and theological speculation, all common life analogical reasoning can provide is an attenuated account of there being a cause of the universe that has some similarity to human intelligence. The analogy is so thin as not to amount to a religious view at all. We will look at these claims in more detail in Chap. 13. Philo is not just an 'artisan', nor even a fully-fledged scientist; he is a mitigated sceptic and true philosopher. He has seen that there is tension in his thinking; that the standards used to draw analogical conclusions differ between common life and the religious context, and that there is no reason for such double standards. In order, therefore, to reinstate a consistency of approach across both domains, he is led to apply to putative religious beliefs the standards of doxastic acceptability that hold sway in common life.

There are, then, peasants, artisans and more theoretically-oriented scientists, and true philosophers; or rather, these three types of character represent modes of thinking in which we sometimes engage. Those tempted by philosophy should take note that:

> there are … many honest gentlemen, who being always employ'd in their domestic affairs, or amusing themselves in common recreations, have carry'd their thoughts very little beyond those objects, which are every day expos'd to their senses…. I wish we cou'd communicate to our founders of systems [to philosophers], a share of this gross earthy mixture, as an ingredient, which they commonly stand much in need of, and which wou'd serve to temper those fiery particles, of which they are compos'd. (1739, 1.4.7.14/272)

In his essay, 'Of Essay-Writing', Hume claims that:

> Learning has been … a Loser by being shut up in Colleges and Cells, and secluded from the World and good company…. Even Philosophy went to Wrack by this moaping recluse Method of Study, and became as chimerical in her Conclusions as she was unintelligible in her Stile and Manner of Delivery. And indeed, what cou'd be expected from Men who never consulted Experience in any of their Reasonings, or who never search'd for that Experience, where alone it is to be found, in common Life and Conversation? (1777a, 534–5)[14]

Thus, in response to the sceptical critique of our ability to form epistemically justified beliefs, Hume recommends adopting the common life perspective. This, in the case of inductive and external world scepticism, is not difficult; such thinking is 'natural' and, Hume argues, a similar return to common life is demanded when philosophers' thoughts turn to religion. In the case of miracles Hume reminds us how we would assess extraordinary reports in everyday circumstances and in doing so intends for us to realise that in the religious context we are being led astray.

Hume not only argues that certain religious claims are unjustified, but he also has a distinctive motivation for rejecting such claims and a distinctive methodology for doing so. Religious beliefs are akin to an illness; they are disruptive to our mental life and action, and thus they should be rejected; not just for epistemic reasons (that is, because they are unjustified), but also for reasons concerning mental health and the security of our human nature. Religion, for Hume, is an 'affliction' (1779, 12.225), a 'contagion' (1778, 5.12, 6.491, 1.333),[15] 'a natural frailty' (1777c, 141).[16] Such beliefs are not rejected by providing philosophical argument to refute them; rather, they are rejected (or perhaps 'dissipated' or 'exorcised') by embracing everyday cognitive standards, by confining ourselves 'to common life, and to such subjects as fall under daily practice and experience' (1772a, 12.25/162). If we are successful in this, then the contagion of religion will not infect us. We will first consider how Hume sees religion as a threat to our human nature and then move on to his claims concerning mental illness.

All beliefs are in a certain sense natural for Hume, products of the (Humean) imagination. One might say, though, that some are more natural than others. Certain propensities (those that Yandell 1990, 23–5, calls 'primary propensities') result in 'natural beliefs', such as our propensities to form beliefs concerning inductive regularities and the continuing existence of the external world. These will be discussed further in Chap. 13. These are universal propensities that play a causal role in action. We also have secondary propensities that only lead to belief if triggered by certain experiences or passions. Propensities to religious

[14] Also see Addison: 'I have brought philosophy out of closets and libraries, schools and colleges, to dwell in clubs and assemblies, at tea-tables and in coffee-houses' (Green 1908, xi).

[15] Cf. C. S. Lewis (2002, 268); he talks of naturalism as a contagion.

[16] Siebert (1990, 95) points to various places where Hume likens religion to a disease: 'Religion is "a malady … almost incurable," an "intoxicating poison," an epidemical frenzy," "a disease dangerous and inveterate"; even in France, most civilized of nations, during the religious civil wars "the theological rage, which had long been boiling in men's veins, seems to have attained its last stage of virulence and ferocity" (Hume 1778, 3.366, 5.348, 6.32, 4.57)'.

belief are of this kind. Belief in an intelligent designer can be triggered by seeing the order in nature, and belief in the Holy Spirit can be triggered by one's love of wonder. For Hume, however, it is the primary propensities that constitute our human nature and it is these that should not be allowed to be subverted. If this were to happen, then human nature would be in danger; the operation of religious propensities 'weakens or disorders the internal frame' (1777c, 182). Our various belief-forming propensities are sometimes at odds with each other. Religious credulity promotes belief in miracles, whereas probabilistic, inductive reasoning urges that reports of such events should not be believed. Secondary propensities are therefore in conflict here with those that are primary. The latter, though, constitute our human nature—and they enable us to live and act in the world; they are essential for such action—and therefore these propensities should not be allowed to be weakened by those that are secondary. Widespread undermining of such propensities may eventually lead to one's capacity for inductive thinking, and thus world-directed action, to be destroyed. 'As superstition arises … it seizes … the mind, and is often able to disturb us in the conduct of our lives and actions' (1739, 1.4.7.13/271–2)

> [T]he principles which are permanent, irresistible, and universal; such as the customary transition from causes to effects, and from effects to causes … are the foundation of all our thoughts and actions, so that upon their removal human nature must immediately perish and go to ruin (ibid., 1.4.4.1/225).

Or as Livingston puts it:

> The False Philosopher [the dogmatic intellectual, the excessive sceptic, or the theologian] must eat away at his own substance (participation in common life) until, through philosophical despair, he discovers that it *is* his substance (1998, 36).

There are therefore both epistemic and practical dangers associated with such threats to our natural beliefs. And religious thinking, as well as excessive or Pyrrhonean scepticism, may harbour such threats. Belief in miracles may undermine inductive belief-forming propensities and this, if severe enough, would lead to alienation from the world of custom.[17]

As well as threatening our human nature and disturbing our lives and actions, Hume claims that religion also leads to forms of mental illness. 'Terror is the primary principle of religion' (1779, 12.225–6) and this naturally leads to a melancholic frame of mind, with meditations on Heaven and Hell 'apt to make a considerable breach in the temper, and to produce that gloom and melancholy, so remarkable in all devout people' (ibid., 12.226). There are occasional pleasures, but these are 'fits of excessive, enthusiastic joy' (ibid.), and these for Hume are not the steady pleasures that bring us happiness. They 'exhaust' the spirits and 'always prepare the way for equal fits of superstitious terror and dejection' (ibid.). Religion takes one on a roller-coaster of enthusiasm and depression and such violent mood

[17] Hume's thoughts seem rather overblown here. Religious ways of thinking rarely undermine what Hume sees as our human nature in this way. Christians, for example, still generally see the world in terms of inductive regularities and act accordingly.

swings are opposed to the 'calm and equable' (ibid.) state of mind that we seek.[18] In an early essay, 'Of the Delicacy of Taste and Passion', Hume 'laments' those with 'delicacy of passion', those that are affected strongly by the ups and downs of life: 'men of such lively passions are apt to be transported beyond all bounds of prudence and discretion, and to take false steps in the conduct of life, which are often irretrievable' (1777a, 4). Hume, then, is also opposed to non-religious modes of living that fall prey to overenthusiasm.

We should thus cultivate ways of thinking that keep us engaged in common life, and in a way that involves 'that undisturbed philosophical TRANQUILLITY, superior to pain, sorrow, anxiety, and each assault of adverse fortune…. And the nearer we can approach in practice, to this sublime tranquillity and indifference … the more secure enjoyment shall we attain within ourselves' (1772b, 7.16/256). True Philosophy thus 'takes off the edge from all disorderly passions, and tranquillizes the mind' ('The Sceptic', 1777a, 179n).

In a letter to his physician (1932, I, 12–18; Mossner 1980, 66–80), Hume talks about metaphysical philosophy in general—and not just religion—as being a 'Disease of the Learned'[19] and of himself as having symptoms such as 'coldness and desertion of the spirit', 'Scurvy Spots' on the fingers, 'watryness in the mouth', a 'ravenous Appetite', exhaustion and melancholia. He claims that philosophy had turned him into 'some strange uncouth monster'. It seems, then, that at the age of 18 Hume had some kind of nervous breakdown, brought on by his intense studies in philosophy. His cure for this malaise was immersion in common life, working for a merchant in Bristol. It is the true philosopher that takes such a route; their particular kind of practice tranquilizing the mind from the psychologically disturbing influence of metaphysics.

There may be something worrying about this picture since the true philosopher is painted as someone who does not think 'philosophically' at all—he is someone who simply acquiesces in common life. This, however, is not so. With respect to scepticism the true philosopher retains an ongoing awareness that his beliefs do not qualify as epistemically justified by the rigorous standards at play in philosophical contexts, and in the case of religious belief he is aware that his religious propensities endanger his mental stability and the proper functioning of his most fundamental belief-forming mechanisms. At moments of ultra-intense intellectual reflection, sceptical conundrums may even generate a transient alienation from at least some everyday beliefs. However, this does not pose a serious threat to his cognition and life. Sceptical worries may cause us 'momentary amazement and irresolution and confusion' (1772a, 12.15n32/155n), but 'whatever may be the reader's opinion at this present moment … an hour hence he will be persuaded that there is [for example] both an external and internal world' (1739, 1.4.2.57/218). This continuing

[18] At various places in the *History of England* Hume notes the connection between religion and mental illness. Cromwell, for example, was 'transported to a degree of madness by religious extasies' (1778, 6.5).

[19] A phrase that Hume possibly took from Mandeville's *Treatise of the Hypochondriack and Hysterick Diseases* (1730). See Wright 2009, 8–9.

awareness of both epistemic inadequacies at the philosophical level and the distorting effects of religious propensities assists the true philosopher to avoid the disturbing influences of metaphysics and certain psychological factors likely to lead the common man astray, and he thus becomes more vigilant in identifying influences that disturb his natural belief-forming propensities.

The 'false philosopher' is self-deceived: he thinks he can be an intellectually respectable theist or detach himself from causal reasoning in light of the arguments for inductive scepticism. Such positions, though, necessarily involve tensions between reason and custom. Sceptical arguments are at odds with our natural beliefs, and natural and revealed theology are at odds with common life reasoning. Hume therefore recommends acquiescence in the latter, and the true philosopher is aware of the intellectual path he has taken to return to common life—the Humean dialectic. He has felt philosophical anxiety and, through awareness of the tensions inherent in sustaining religious belief or attempting to put unmitigated scepticism into practice, he has had the epiphany that common life is all. From that moment on, he should seek to avert further anxiety by acquiescing in common life, and be aware of certain danger signs that may be leading him astray, such as violent passions, abstract arguments and philosophical generalisations or principles.

> Philosophical reflection emerges, unexpectedly, out of the primordial habits, customs, and prejudices of common life; imagines itself to be free of these prejudices and to be their law-giver; falls into self-alienation and despair; and through further reflection wins through to a true understanding of itself and to a reconciliation with the prejudices of common life from which it originated. (Livingston 1998, 20)

Livingston's (1998) *Philosophical Melancholy and Delirium* focuses on the therapeutic aspect of true philosophy. He argues that this is consistent with Christianity and that organized religion can itself have a therapeutic role; one's participation in ceremony, for example, not rising above the common life perspective (ibid., 77–8, 116). It is not altogether clear, though, what kind of religious outlook he has in mind here. Perhaps the contemplation of Christ's moral attributes or of representations of his wracked body on the cross may be morally edifying, even to a true philosopher, since such edification need not involve transcending the everyday perspective. Livingston allegedly finds textual support for his suggestion in Hume: 'To be a philosophical sceptic is, in a man of letters, the first and most essential step towards being a sound, believing Christian' (1779, 12.228). This, however, is rather a perverse interpretation of Hume's words: it may be logically consistent with what Hume says in his major works, but, given Hume's clear hostility to Christianity evident in, for example, his *History of England* and his correspondence, such an interpretation cannot be accepted. And further, a 'believing Christian', by the nature of his beliefs—concerning, say, the creator of the Universe—must rise above the common life perspective and this we have argued is precisely what Hume intends to counter with his therapeutic approach. For Hume, religion is not the cure, it is the illness.

Other writers embrace this picture of turning away from philosophy in the old key and embracing the everyday. In the concluding, admittedly enigmatic, line of *Candide* Voltaire suggests we should disengage from theodicy and instead 'we must

cultivate our garden' (1759, 88).[20] And this is a lovely passage from Hecht's recent history of atheism:

> [secular ancient philosophers coped with scepticism] by noticing that we could stop being lost if we were to just stop trying to get out of the forest. Instead, we could pick some blueberries, sit beneath a tree, and start describing how the sun-dappled forest floor shimmers in the breeze. The initial horror of being lost utterly disappears when you come to believe fully that there is no town out there, beyond the forest, to which you are headed. If there is no release, no going home, then this must be home, this shimmering instant replete with blueberries. Hang a sign that says HOME on a tree and you're done; just try to have a good time. (2003, 30)

This 'shimmering instant replete with blueberries' is, for Hume, an evening of conversation and backgammon, away from sceptical concerns and the inhuman superstition and enthusiasm of religious belief.[21] In embracing common life one avoids one's religious beliefs and actions threatening one's human nature, the roller-coaster emotional ride associated with religion, and various other psychological and physical symptoms characteristic of those who are plagued by metaphysical and religious questions.

Hume's attitude to religious miracles is unequivocal: 'all the testimony which ever was really given for any miracle, or ever will be given, is a subject of derision' (1932, I, 349). His argument is not just aimed at Catholicism and it does not just concern the miracles in the Bible. In Protestant churches today there are regular reports of miraculous healings and in recent years a worldwide call was put out to Catholics to look for evidence of a miracle performed by Pope John Paul II, evidence that is required in order that he can be classed as a Saint. Hume would not spend too much time looking for such evidence since[22]:

> every relation must be considered as suspicious, which depends in any degree upon religion …. And no less so, every thing that is to be found in the writers of natural magic or alchimy, or such authors, who seem, all of them, to have an unconquerable appetite for falsehood and fable. (1772a, 10.39/129)

Miracles are central to Christianity; C. S. Lewis, for example, pins a lot on them:

> The accounts of the 'miracles' in first-century Palestine are either lies, or legends, or history. And if all, or the most important, of them are lies or legends then the claim that Christianity has been making for the last two thousand years is simply false. (2002, 127)

'Either he [Jesus] was a raving lunatic of an unusually abominable type, or else He was, and is, precisely what He said. There is no middle ground' (Lewis 1940, 19).

Hume, we have seen, has argued that it is indeed more probable that Scripture contains lies and legends rather than true history.

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[20] Interpretations of Voltaire's conclusion and their relation to Hume are explored in O'Brien (2010).

[21] Although cf. C. S. Lewis (1940, 92): 'The security we crave would teach us to rest our hearts in this world and oppose an obstacle to our return to God: a few moments of happy love, a landscape, a symphony, a merry meeting with our friends, a bathe or a football match, have no such tendency. Our Father refreshes us on the journey with some pleasant inns, but will not encourage us to mistake them for Home.'

[22] Boswell comments that 'Hume owned he had never read the New Testament with attention' (1791, II.113).

Chapter 10
The Natural History of Religion

We have seen that Hume rejects both natural theology and revealed religion. He has attempted to argue that there can be no *a priori* reasons for belief in a deity, that the order in nature does not suggest the intervening hand of a providential, Christian God, and that we should not believe that miracles have occurred. In sum, there are no good reasons to believe in God and there is no evidence in support of the truth of Christianity. In his *Natural History of Religion*, Hume seemingly turns away from the question of whether religious beliefs are justified and considers instead their history, providing a descriptive account of the origin of early religion and its subsequent growth.[1] He is thus answering a question that Daniel Dennett (2007, 70) poses in his own recent natural history: 'There was a time, not so very long ago by evolutionary standards, when there was no religion on this planet, and now there is lots of it. Why?' Hume attempts to provide an answer to this question, but his account is not merely descriptive. We will see that Hume's history is philosophically loaded: he intends to suggest that religious beliefs are likely to be false, and that his naturalistic story—one not involving supernatural, transcendent beings—is sufficient to explain the existence of religion on this planet.

10.1 Polytheism

Hume claims that the earliest documented religions were polytheistic: 'The farther we mount up into antiquity, the more do we find mankind plunged into polytheism' (1777c, 135). The early gods were personifications of the forces of nature and associated with crucial 'events of human life' (ibid., 139) such as birth and war. Hume notes that in Hesiod's time there were 30,000 deities; several devoted to copulation, and 'even a God of *Sneezing*' (ibid., 186n). Further, Hume argues that the very first

[1] Hume was not the first to adopt such an approach. See John Trenchard, *The Natural History of Superstition*, 1709.

A. Bailey and D. O'Brien, *Hume's Critique of Religion: 'Sick Men's Dreams'*,
The New Synthese Historical Library 72, DOI 10.1007/978-94-007-6615-0_10,

religions—those for which we have no written or archaeological evidence—are also likely to be polytheistic in nature.

> It seems certain, that, according to the natural progress of human thought, the ignorant multitude must first entertain some groveling and familiar notion of superior powers, before they stretch their conception to that perfect Being, who bestowed order on the whole frame of nature. We may as reasonably imagine, that men inhabited palaces before huts and cottages, or studied geometry before agriculture; as assert that the Deity appeared to them a pure spirit, omniscient, omnipotent, and omnipresent, before he was apprehended to be a powerful, though limited being, with human passions and appetites, limbs and organs. (ibid., 135–6)

The assumption here is that conceptually complex social practices appear later in history than ones that are not so complex. Polytheism, being less conceptually sophisticated than monotheism, must therefore predate the latter kind of religion.

> The mind rises gradually, from inferior to superior: By abstracting from what is imperfect, it forms an idea of perfection: And slowly distinguishing the nobler parts of its own frame from the grosser, it learns to transfer only the former, much elevated and refined, to its divinity. (ibid., 136)

The earliest religions of which we have evidence are polytheistic, as are certain primitive religions still practised today, and, so Hume's argument goes, it is not likely that these are developments of an ur-monotheism. It would be anthropologically and conceptually surprising if a culture were to move from one God to a form of religion where copulation and sneezing—and all the other events of life—were presided over by a host of individual deities.

Such a claim was radical in Hume's day. It was a common assumption, with respect to various aspects of society, that the greatness of the past had been corrupted by modernity. Newton expresses such a view: 'the first religion was the most rational of all others till the nations corrupted it' (Westfall 1982, 25). Hume is opposed to this popular Enlightenment view and thus also to fundamentalist accounts in which the Bible provides a literal account of man's first contact with God. According to such accounts, Adam and Eve formed religious beliefs via direct communication with their deity, but the form of religion that subsequently developed among mankind was corrupted by idol-worshippers and, ever since, religious reformers, leaders and prophets have tried to regain the early purity.

Hume does not provide much empirical evidence for his claims, and it is far too sweeping to claim, for example, that 'it is a matter of fact incontestable, that about 1,700 years ago all mankind were polytheists' (ibid., 135). The Jews, for example, were monotheists. Hume, though, should not be seen as a shoddy historian; he should, instead, be seen as a different kind of historian, one not primarily interested in the collecting and analyzing of empirical evidence. He is interested in what Dugald Stewart (1793–1828) calls a speculative or conjectural history.

> We are under a necessity of supplying the place of fact by conjecture …. In such inquiries, the detached facts which travels and voyages afford us, may frequently serve as land-marks to our speculations: and sometimes our conclusions *a priori* may tend to confirm the credibility of facts, which, on a superficial view, appeared doubtful or incredible. (Stewart 1793, 293)

A speculative historian makes certain plausible assumptions, ones that are consistent with the empirical evidence, but ones that go beyond such evidence; empirical

evidence may never be available concerning the psychological traits of early man, those which we will see play an important role in Hume's natural history.

> In examining the history of mankind, as well as in examining the phenomena of the material world, when we cannot trace the process by which an event *has been* produced, it is often of importance to be able to show how it *may have been* produced by natural causes. (ibid.)

Interestingly, here, we seem to see Hume supporting his history with an *a priori* argument: social activities with a complex conceptual component are likely to come after those with a less complex structure. Mark Webb (1991) calls this assumption a 'non-empirical component' to Hume's argument. It is not the case, though, that there is no empirical evidence for this claim. We have, for example, evidence that mature thinking is built on—comes after—the less sophisticated thinking of children, and there is evidence available to Hume from the history of science that conceptual complexity increases over time. There may not be empirical evidence concerning early religion but Hume is making a conjecture concerning its origin by applying a generalization for which he does have empirical evidence. Hume's history here is inductive, drawing conclusions about what we have not, and cannot, experience. Hume's method is not *a priori*, and this must be the case since, according to Hume, *a priori* resources cannot be used to draw conclusions concerning the causal relations of either billiard balls, human psychological processes, or the historical events leading to the development of religion.

Hume's history is speculative and thus defeasible. If evidence were to be unearthed which showed that theism and polytheism were both practised by primitive man, or that the fundamentalist story is correct and that monotheism arose first and was later corrupted, then the details of Hume's history would have to be rejected. However, the speculative and defeasible nature of Hume's history does not weaken its force in Hume's overall strategy. What is crucial for this is that readers will become alive to the idea that there might be a *natural* history of religion, one not grounded in the supernatural. Finding problems with Hume's particular history will lead to discussion of the social and psychological facts that are relevant to the development and spread of religion. Hume's account may be crude and simplistic, but it moves the debate concerning religion into the province of anthropologists, sociologists and psychologists and that, so Hume might say, is all well and good, for the metaphysicians and theologians should not be seen as having any special authority with respect to such matters.

10.2 Religion and Fear

Hume next investigates the origin of polytheism and thus, for him, the source of the earliest religions. Crucially the beliefs of such religions are not arrived at via argument or reason; instead, they have their source in the passions, the most important being fear.

> In all nations, which have embraced polytheism, the first ideas of religion arose not from a contemplation of the works of nature, but from a concern with regard to the events of life, and from the incessant hopes and fears, which actuate the human mind. (1777c, 139)

Religion arises because of mankind's 'anxious concern for happiness, the dread of future misery, the terror of death, the thirst of revenge, the appetite for food and other necessaries' (ibid., 140). 'The primary religion of mankind arises chiefly from an anxious fear of future events' (ibid., 176).

> The mind, sunk into diffidence, terror, and melancholy, has recourse to every method of appeasing those secret intelligent powers, on whom our fortune is supposed entirely to depend. (ibid., 143)

Other passions such as hope and gratitude can also play a causal role.

> The deities of the vulgar are so little superior to human creatures, that, where men are affected with strong sentiments of veneration or gratitude for any hero or public benefactor, nothing can be more natural than to conve[r]t him into a god (ibid., 151).

Fear, though, is predominant: 'men are much oftener thrown on their knees by the melancholy than by the agreeable passions' (ibid., 143). The theory that it is fear that leads us to worship the gods is an old one.[2] Hume cites Euripides:

> There is nothing secure in the world; no glory, no prosperity. The gods toss all life into confusion; mix every thing with its reverse; that all of us, from our ignorance and uncertainty, may pay them the more worship and reverence. (424 BCE, 956–60; Hume 1777c, 143n)

And also Diodorus Siculus:

> Fortune has never liberally, without envy … bestowed an unmixed happiness on mankind; but with all her gifts has ever conjoined some disastrous circumstance, in order to chastize men into a reverence for the gods, whom, in a continued course of prosperity, they are apt to neglect and forget. (1935, 321; Hume 1777c, 143–4; Hume's emphasis)

In his essay 'Of Superstition and Enthusiasm' Hume has a more finely drawn account of the role that the passions play in religious belief. The darker emotions, '[w]eakness, fear, melancholy, together with ignorance, are … the true sources of SUPERSTITION' (1777a, 74). Enthusiasm, however, is caused by the brighter passions such as 'public or private success, health, confidence, boldness and elation' (Yandell 1990, 281).

> In such a state of mind, the imagination swells with great, but confused conceptions, to which no sublunary beauties or enjoyments can correspond. Every thing mortal and perishable vanishes as unworthy of attention. And a full range is given to the fancy in the invisible regions or world of spirits, where the soul is at liberty to indulge itself in every imagination, which may best suit its present taste and disposition (1777a, 74).

The passions thus play a complex role in the genesis of religious belief. However, the most important causes of early religion—and, as we will see in the next section, all religion—are anxiety and fear. This claim also appears in the *Dialogues*: Philo asserts that 'terror is the primary principle of religion, it is the passion, which always

[2] Hobbes also makes such claims: 'Fear of things invisible is the natural seed of that which every one in himself calleth religion' (1651, 81). Russell (2008, Chapter 6) claims that the *Treatise*, as an irreligious work, is modelled on the writings of Hobbes.

predominates in it, and admits but of short intervals of pleasure' (1779, 12.225–6). Demea concurs:

> So anxious or so tedious are even the best scenes of life, that futurity is still the object of all our hopes and fears. We incessantly look forward, and endeavour, by prayers, adoration, and sacrifice, to appease those unknown powers, whom we find, by experience, so able to afflict and oppress us. Wretched creatures that we are! What resource for us amidst the innumerable ills of life, did not religion suggest some methods of atonement, and appease those terrors, with which we are incessantly agitated and tormented? (ibid., 10.193)

10.3 Monotheism

The story of the rise of monotheism, and its development from polytheism, shares certain key features with Hume's earlier account of the initial genesis of polytheism. The source of monotheism is not reason or argument; there is, rather, a causal and non-rational line of development from polytheism to monotheism. Fear leads to early societies appeasing their pantheons of gods in various ways. A 'momentum of worship' (Penelhum 2000, 212) then sets in and one of their deities finds particular favour. Perhaps in times of conflict with local tribes the god that is favoured is the local god, one particularly associated with their tribe. The powers and attributes of this god are exaggerated; not to see the local god in this light would be unpatriotic and disloyal to one's people. This deity is seen as not only strong enough to cause earthquakes—he is omnipotent; he is not only wise enough to create animal and human life—he is omniscient.

> The invention and acceptance of ever more flattering ways of speaking of him will become widely associated with being a good citizen or member of the tribe. There is no natural stop to this process until the language runs out of vocabulary: perfect, omniscient, omnipotent, creator of everything that is. (Craig 1997, 66)
>
> His votaries will endeavour by every art, to insinuate themselves into his favour; and supposing him to be pleased, like themselves, with praise and flattery, there is no eulogy or exaggeration, which will be spared in their addresses to him. In proportion as men's fears or distresses become more urgent, they still invent new strains of adulation; and even he who outdoes his predecessor in swelling up the titles of his divinity, is sure to be outdone by his successor in newer and more pompous epithets of praise. Thus they proceed; till at last they arrive at infinity itself (Hume 1777c, 155).

Now, we do not just have a deity that needs appeasing, we have a God worthy of *worship*—one to whom we must submit, one we must hold in reverence.

> Every virtue, every excellence, must be ascribed to the divinity, and no exaggeration will be deemed sufficient to reach those perfections, with which he is endowed. Whatever strains of panegyric can be invented, are immediately embraced, without consulting any arguments of phœnomena: It is esteemed a sufficient confirmation of them, that they give us more magnificent ideas of the divine objects of our worship and adoration. (ibid., 176)

Relics of monotheism's polytheistic past however remain. Fear, for example, continues to play a key role in monotheistic religion (although Christianity includes

a tenet that soothes at least some of this fear: there is an afterlife and thus death need not concern us).[3] Further, both polytheism and Christianity 'suppose their deities, however potent and invisible, to be nothing but a species of human creatures … retaining all human passions and appetites' (ibid., 142). Religious believers anthropomorphize the powers they take to lie behind nature, and this is because:

> There is an universal tendency among mankind to conceive all beings like themselves, and to transfer to every object, those qualities, with which they are familiarly acquainted, and of which they are intimately conscious. We find human faces in the moon, armies in the clouds; and by a natural propensity, if not corrected by experience and reflection, ascribe malice or good-will to every thing, that hurts or pleases us. (ibid., 141)
>
> The people, every where, degrade their deities into a similitude with themselves, and consider them merely as a species of human creatures, somewhat more potent and intelligent. (ibid., 180)[4]

Such a tendency has a therapeutic role. Natural events now become explicable; we are familiar with the kinds of causes involved because they are the same as those which drive our own behaviour, that is, personal causes. Such understanding may not remove fear, but it mitigates it: natural disasters and personal ills are not now inexplicable; they are, so it is thought, controllable if we successfully appease the gods.

At one point, however, Hume appears to suggest that Christianity does not share the contradictions inherent in the anthropomorphization of gods.

> Were there a religion (and we may suspect Mahometanism of this inconsistence) which [sometimes painted the Deity in the most sublime colours, as the creator of heaven and earth; sometimes degraded him nearly to the level with human creatures in his powers and faculties;] while at the same time it ascribed to him suitable infirmities, passions, and partialities, of the moral kind: That religion, after it was extinct, would also be cited as an instance of those contradictions, which arise from the gross, vulgar, natural conceptions of mankind, opposed to their continual propensity towards flattery and exaggeration. Nothing indeed would prove more strongly the divine origin of any religion, than to find (and happily this is the case with Christianity) that it is free from a contradiction, so incident to human nature. (ibid., 157)

This, however, cannot be taken as sincere given the clearly anthropomorphic features of Christianity that Hume notes elsewhere. Gaskin (Hume 1777c, 212–3) points out that the square-bracketed words in the quoted passage originally read: 'sometimes degraded him so far to a level with human creatures as to represent him wrestling with a man, walking in the cool of the evening, showing his back parts, and descending from Heaven to inform himself of what passes on earth'; Lorne Falkenstein (2003, 21n60) claiming that these are suggestive of stories in the Bible and thus the original passage is clearly targeted at Christianity rather than involved in defending it.

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[3] Conjectures have also been put forward concerning the origins of certain Christian dogma. Worship of the Persian sun God Mithras and the Greek God Dionysius involved sacred meals in which the flesh and blood of their gods were consumed; Holy communion and belief in the real presence are possibly then a development of such rites (see Pagels 2003, 19).

[4] See Hume 1932, I, 51, and also Cicero 1951, 87–91, Guthrie (1993) and Boyer (2001) for discussions of anthropomorphism.

We have seen, then, that various features of Christianity are shared with earlier religions. There are, for example, some plausible suggestions for how certain doctrinal claims developed from the earlier, pagan, polytheistic rituals; and in all religions man 'acknowledge[s] a dependence on invisible powers, possessed of sentiment and intelligence' (1777c, 142). Our ignorance of the nature of these causes leads us to see them in terms of personal desires and intentions. Nature becomes 'enchanted'; 'trees, mountains and streams are personified, and the inanimate parts of nature acquire sentiment and passion' (ibid., 141). This belief in an 'invisible, intelligent power' acting as the cause of things is 'diffused over the human race, in all places and in all ages' (ibid., 134). The precise nature of these animate powers varies from tribe to tribe, from continent to continent—spirits here, djinni there—and in places, through fear, these powers attain the status of gods. And through the momentum of worship it is usual that one of these gods gains superiority over the others so as to become the One True God.

The precise details of the story for a particular religion will be complex. It has been argued, for example, that the origin of Christianity lies in a Jewish warrior god gaining superiority over the rest of the pantheon. Also, as a consequence of the geography of the Eastern Mediterranean, Jewish religion came into contact with Hellenistic philosophy and, as a result, was influenced by the latter. Philosophical arguments were co-opted as arguments in support of their religious faith. Hume notes in his essay, 'Of Parties in General', that:

> as philosophy was widely spread over the world, at the time when Christianity arose, the teachers of the new sect were obliged to form a system of speculative opinions; to divide, with some accuracy, their articles of faith; and to explain, comment, confute, and defend with all the subtilty of argument and science. (1777a, 62)

Geographical proximity to Greece thus played a role in the development of Christianity, as did the chance occurrence of what Livingston (1998, 103) calls 'conceptual overlap'. Both Hellenistic philosophy and Christianity involve the idea of a perfect being—religion, thus, 'coincides, by chance, with the principles of reason and true philosophy' (1777c, 155). Such religion and philosophy are well-suited to each other:

> where theism forms the fundamental principle of any popular religion, that tenet is so conformable to sound reason, that philosophy is apt to incorporate itself with such a system of theology. (ibid., 165)

For Hume, though, the key feature of any natural history is that reason is not the cause of religion; the passions are, and fear is the predominant passion involved. The harmonious workings of nature are taken by some to reveal—through reason—the existence of a designer; Hume, however, argues that it is not the order of the universe that leads to belief in God, but rather, the disorder manifest in the 'innumerable ills of life'. This leads to fear and thus to primitive belief.

It should also be noted that the story is complicated because there is sometimes a tendency for monotheistic faiths to burgeon out into religions with multiple deity-like characters: 'men have a natural tendency to rise from idolatry to theism, and to sink again from theism into idolatry' (ibid., 158–9). This can occur if the One God

becomes remote, perhaps through the teaching of a philosophy-infused theology. As we have seen, efforts to solve the problem of evil can lead to the positing of a mysterious God, one whose purposes are inscrutable. Our tendency to anthropomorphize then leads us to look for deity-like figures with more of a human shape—'demi-Gods or middle beings' (ibid., 159). In Christianity these roles are filled by Jesus and Mary: 'The Virgin Mary, ere checked by the reformation, had proceeded, from being merely a good woman, to usurp many attributes of the Almighty' (ibid., 156). Similarly with the Greek gods: these developed from personified gods living in actual geographical locations to the Hellenistic, non-human and non-earth-bound gods. These were distant gods and thus more earthly spirits developed a role in people's religious lives; it is these with whom people could be engaged and these that needed to be appeased when times were hard, just as the older primitive gods had been.

10.4 Other Natural Histories

In various ways Freud's (1927) explanation of religion is similar to that of Hume. The world is full of suffering and man yearns for a benevolent figure for protection, a father figure—a God to recreate the safety of infancy. This God is an 'illusion', but a comforting one. Such belief in a deity is not derived from reason, but from fear and emotional need.

Freud (1919) has a further story concerning the origin of religion; a speculative history. Early man lived in small groups controlled by a dominant male. As his sons reached maturity they were driven away in order that the father maintained exclusive sexual rights over the females. Sometimes, though, sons overpowered their fathers and took his wives for themselves. This caused psychological tension: they resented and hated their father, but they also felt regret and remorse for having murdered him. To ease their guilt they performed rites to commemorate him, and in their guilt his stature was exaggerated into that of a god. Religion is born. In Hume the source of religion is certain universal human dispositions to find hidden causes in nature and to anthropomorphize those causes. In Freud, too, a universal psychological trait lies at the root of religion; for him this is the Oedipal complex.

> By this method of unconscious understanding of all customs, ceremonies, and laws which the original relation to the primal father had left behind, later generations may also have succeeded in taking over this legacy of feelings (ibid., 242).

Both Freud and Hume suggest natural histories in which the emotions are primary. There are also two other broad kinds of natural history. First, there are what Guthrie (2007, 288) calls intellectualist theories in which religion arises through the human need to understand nature. Hume, though, would reject any such account: reason is not the source of religion. Second, there are social-solidarity theories (ibid., 285). These focus on how religion provides for the needs of society, and one should note that there is also a strand of such thinking in Hume. Religion, as well as playing a

role in individual psychology, also plays a social role in quelling our fears to some extent and providing us with some understanding and control over the hidden causes in nature; religion plays a stabilizing, therapeutic, social role.

Contemporary sociologists can be seen as developing such thoughts. They consider the specific social challenges that faced the people of the Middle East at the time of the birth of Christianity and how these factors might have contributed to the growth of that religion and to the particular form of it that became dominant, given that the Early Church was markedly sectarian.

Rodney Stark (1997) describes the rise of Christianity as that of a successful small cult messianic movement, one propagated between friends. It was successful in overcoming the paganism of the Roman Empire because of several sociological, environmental and psychological factors. Subcultures generally arise in cities since it is a sociological fact that the more urban the environment the more unconventional its people. The high population of urban areas also makes it easier for a subculture to attain a critical mass. Roman cities were also dreadful places in which to live with acute social problems: there was extreme crowding, frequent fires and natural disasters such as earthquakes; they were filthy, disease was rife, and large numbers of migrants brought problems of crime, social disorder, and riots.

> Any accurate portrait of Antioch in New Testament times must depict a city filled with misery, danger, fear, despair, and hatred. A city where the average family lived a squalid life in filthy and cramped quarters, where at least half the children died at birth or during infancy, and where most of the children who lived lost at least one parent before reaching maturity. A city filled with hatred and fear rooted in intense ethnic antagonisms and exacerbated by a constant stream of strangers. A city so lacking in stable networks of attachments that petty incidents could prompt mob violence. A city where crime flourished and the streets were dangerous at night. And, perhaps above all, where a resident could expect literally to be homeless from time to time, providing that he or she was among the survivors. (ibid., 160–1)

Stark offers three reasons why these conditions were suited to the growth of Christianity. First, Christian prophecies of the 'End of Days' did not seem too fanciful given the life of a typical Roman urbanite. Second, the God of Christianity could play a uniting role, quelling unrest between different ethnic groups. Third, and most important, Christians offered charity (and nursing services), not just to their friends and family, but to all who needed help. As has been noted by Stark (ibid., 87) and Pagels (2003, 9–10), the following is a powerful message to those living in Roman cities, and one that was alien to paganism.

> For I was an hungred, and ye gave me meat. I was thirsty and ye gave me drink: I was a stranger and you took me in: Naked, and ye clothed me: I was sick, and ye visited me: I was in prison, and ye came unto me … Verily I say unto you. Inasmuch as ye have done *it* unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done *it* unto me. (Matthew 25: 35–40)

Charity and love are Christian virtues that should guide one's life. Tertullian, an early Christian author (c. 160–220 CE), offers some self-assessment of how Christianity stood out in this brutal, ancient world: 'It is our care of the helpless, our practice of loving kindness that brands us in the eyes of many of our opponents.

"Only look," they say, "look how they love one another!"' (Stark 1997, 87). The doctrines of Christianity therefore aided its survival and growth. The claim '"For God so loved the world" would have puzzled an educated pagan' (ibid., 211–2); a providential god would have seemed absurd in the ancient world where mercy and pity were seen as pathological emotions. These, however, are prime virtues for Christians, and the sociological claim is that such 'absurd' notions might start to look attractive when the life of the typical citizen is so impoverished and dangerous. 'Above all else, Christianity brought a new conception of humanity to a world saturated with capricious cruelty and the vicarious love of death.' (ibid., 214)

Such sociological facts suggest one way in which religion might be seen as justified in pragmatic terms, and this is a claim that occasionally appears to be suggested by Hume.

> It must be acknowledged, that the influence of the prelates and the clergy was often of great service to the public. Though the religion of that age [thirteenth century] can merit no better name than that of superstition, it served to unite together a body of men who had great sway over the people, and who kept the community from falling to pieces, by the factions and independent power of the nobles. And what was of great importance; it threw a mighty authority into the hands of men, who by their profession were averse to arms and violence; who tempered by their meditation the general disposition towards military enterprizes; and who still maintained, even amidst the shock of arms, those secret links, without which it is impossible for human society to subsist. (1778, 2.14)

In a 'Digression concerning the ecclesiastical state' in his discussion of the reformation in the *History of England*, Hume claims that 'ecclesiastical establishments, though commonly they arose at first from religious views, prove in the end advantageous to the political interests of society' (ibid., 3. 136).

It is interesting here to consider an analogy with conventions concerning property. Hume does not think that we have natural rights to property, as Locke argues; human beings, rather, have established useful conventions with regard to property and social justice: 'a convention enter'd into by all the members of the society to bestow stability on the possession of those external goods, and leave every one in the peaceable enjoyment of what he may acquire by his fortune and industry' (1739, 3.2.2.9/489). Rules concerning property rights are considered justified if they lead to social stability. Thus, perhaps religious beliefs could be justified in the same way. According to Hume, though, the religious remedy for the sociological problems above is spiked. Religion carries with it the cause of a deeper (moral) sickness, as will be discussed in Chap. 11.

10.5 Self-Deception and Hypocrisy

Hume claims in the *Natural History* that religious beliefs are not derived via reason. In the previous chapter we saw that Hume recommends acquiescing in the usual canons of inductive reasoning and thus rejecting belief in miracles. Religion leads to a 'perversion of reason' (Penelhum 1983, 134) and we should

see through this and return to common life. A further perversity of reason is also noted in the *Natural History*.

> The conviction of the religionists, in all ages, is more affected than real, and scarcely ever approaches, in any degree, to that solid belief and persuasion, which governs us in the common affairs of life. Men dare not avow, even to their own hearts, the doubts which they entertain on such subjects: They make a merit of implicit faith; and disguise to themselves their real infidelity, by the strongest asseverations and most positive bigotry. But nature is too hard for all their endeavours, and suffers not the obscure, glimmering light, afforded in those shadowy regions, to equal the strong impressions, made by common sense and by experience. The usual course of men's conduct belies their words, and shows, that their assent in these matters is some unaccountable operation of the mind between disbelief and conviction, but approaching much nearer to the former than to the latter. (1777c, 172)
>
> Hear the verbal protestations of all men: Nothing so certain as their religious tenets. Examine their lives: You will scarcely think that they repose the smallest confidence in them. (ibid., 184)

They are self-deceived. Or as Dennett puts it:

> If you really believe that your God is watching you and doesn't want you to masturbate, you don't masturbate. (You wouldn't masturbate with your Mother watching you! How on Earth could you masturbate with God watching you? Do you *really* believe God is watching you? Perhaps not.) (2007, 227)

Hume also makes a similar observation in the *Treatise* with respect to beliefs about the afterlife.

> The *Roman Catholics* are certainly the most zealous of any sect in the Christian world; and yet you'll find few among the more sensible people of that communion, who do not blame the *Gunpowder-treason*, and the massacre of St. *Bartholomew*, as cruel and barbarous, tho' projected or executed against those very people, whom without any scruple they condemn to eternal and infinite punishments. All we can say in excuse for this inconsistency is, that they really do not believe what they affirm concerning a future state; nor is there any better proof of it than the very inconsistency. (1739, 1.3.9.14/114–5)

There are different levels of self-deception and sometimes occasions when the contradictions in one's beliefs or between one's beliefs and actions become apparent, and there are cases of religious self-deception that approach hypocrisy and outright fraud. Hume sketches this spectrum of self-deception, focusing, though, on the more fraudulent kinds of cases.

> Many religious exercises are entered into with seeming fervour, where the heart, at the time, feels cold and languid: A habit of dissimulation is by degrees contracted: And fraud and falsehood become the predominant principle. Hence the reason of that vulgar observation, that the highest zeal in religion and the deepest hypocrisy, so far from being inconsistent, are often or commonly united in the same individual character. (1779, 12.222)

And in his essay 'Of National Characters' he says:

> It must, therefore, happen, that clergyman, being drawn from the common mass of mankind, as people are to other employments, by the views of profit, the greater part, though no atheists or free-thinkers, will find it necessary, on particular occasions, to feign more devotion than they are, at times, possessed of, and to maintain the appearance of fervor and seriousness, even when jaded with the exercises of their religion, or when they have their minds engaged in the common preoccupations of life …. And in order to support the veneration

> paid them by the multitude, they must not only keep a remarkable reserve, but must promote the spirit of superstition, by a continued grimace and hypocrisy. This dissimulation often destroys the candor and ingenuity of their temper, and makes an irreparable breach in their character. (1777a, 199–200n)

Religious belief sometimes leads to a perversion of reason and we have seen this is the case with respect to miracles. We should avoid this by acquiescing in the common life perspective. Other times, however, our belief is a sham; our natural inductive propensities have not been unduly influenced by the passions associated with religion even though we are disposed to profess religious belief.[5]

10.6 The Place of the *Natural History* in Hume's Critique of Religion

There is a history of religious belief just as there is, say, a history of scientific belief, and whether Hume's speculations are plausible is something that needs to be decided by sociologists, anthropologists and psychologists. A further crucial question, though, concerns the role that Hume's natural history plays in his overall case against religious belief. The answer to this question is that it plays a key destructive role. Annette Baier suggests that the *Natural History* is 'incomparably the most offensive of his works', 'about as offensive as one can get about the doctrines of Christianity' (2008, 266, 268) (although Baier herself is not offended). The motivation behind his natural history is to show that religious beliefs are probably false. Warburton was quick to identify the destructive role of Hume's natural history. He sees Hume as intending 'to establish Naturalism on the ruins of Religion …. Religion which *all mankind* follow … is nothing but *Superstition* and *Fanaticism*, having its origins in *human nature*; that is, in the imagination and the passions only' (1757, 1, 3). Philip Kitcher, in a recent book on Darwin, notes that:

> specific instances in which historical and sociological explanations [of religion] can be given strongly suggest that the causes of success stem from the attractiveness of stories and alleged historical claims, on the emotions they provoke and the actions they inspire—and that they have nothing to do with the literal truth of those tales and histories. (2007, 144)

The *Natural History* is a genealogy in Nietzsche's sense: a causal account of a form of belief that is intended to destabilize a particular concept or way of thinking. Hume's genealogy destabilizes belief in both polytheistic and monotheistic faiths including Christianity. The causal story that Hume provides concerning the origin of religious beliefs does not depend on those beliefs being true. A history of religious belief could be so dependent: the move from

[5] See Hume 1778, 5.453n: 'Even minced pyes, which custom had made a Christmas dish among the churchmen, was regarded, during that season, as a profane and superstitious viand by the sectaries; though at other times it agreed very well with their stomachs'; and also: ibid., 3.386, 4.45, 5.450, 5.502, and 5.572. Jennifer Herdt (1997, 168–88) has an extended discussion of Hume on self-deception and hypocrisy in religion.

polytheism to monotheism, for example, could depend on mass conversions due to observed miraculous happenings; God-wrought miracles thus playing a role in the development of religion. Hume's natural history is not however like this. God plays no role; the primary causal factors are fear and various natural propensities we have to look for hidden, humanlike agents in nature. Hume's causal story could be seen as neutral with respect to the question of whether God exists; his history could be true whether such a being exists or not. But this neutrality is misleading. First, given Hume's natural history, the existence of widespread religious beliefs does not provide evidence that such beliefs are true.[6] Second, his natural history should be taken in conjunction with his other works on religion, and with these, or so we argue, Hume provides a multi-fronted attack on religious belief and on religion. In Chaps. 6, 7 and 8 we considered his arguments against natural religion, and in Chap. 9 those against revealed religion; in the next chapter we will turn to his attack on Christian morality and in Chap. 13 we will assess the combined force of Hume's case against religion.

The *Natural History*, however, does contain statements seemingly at odds with this interpretation.

> The whole frame of nature bespeaks an intelligent author; and no rational enquirer can, after serious reflection, suspend his belief a moment with regard to the primary principles of genuine Theism and Religion. (1777c, 134)
>
> All things in the universe are evidently of a piece. Every thing is adjusted to every thing. One design prevails throughout the whole. And this uniformity leads the mind to acknowledge one author; because the conception of different authors, without any distinction of attributes or operations, serves only to give perplexity to the imagination, without bestowing any satisfaction on the understanding. (ibid., 138)
>
> Though the stupidity of men, barbarous and uninstructed, be so great, that they may not see a sovereign author in the more obvious works of nature, to which they are so much familiarized; yet it scarcely seems possible, that any one of good understanding should reject that idea, when once it is suggested to him. A purpose, an intention, a design is evident in every thing (ibid., 183).

So what is going on here? In the final chapter of the book more will be said about some of the seemingly contradictory things Hume says about religious belief, but for now we can see such assertions as devices to keep the believer on board. It is perhaps a psychological fact that someone who believes in x is more likely to read, and to accept, an historical account of how he comes to have that belief if the author of that account does not seem to be hostile to x. A canny hostile author will thus put on the appearance of being friendly to x whilst providing an explanation of belief in x that does not advert to the existence of x. Such an account, if plausible, will be met with interest; the believer in x may even accept that the causal origin of his belief does not involve the existence of x; he still, though, believes x to exist, and this is because he takes himself to have reasons in support of his belief. These reasons may

[6] Theologians sometimes adopt the common consent argument: since belief in God is almost universal, this suggests that such belief is innate and likely to be true. A version of this argument appears in *De Veritate*, a work by the deist Herbert of Cherbury (1663), with which Hume would likely have been familiar.

not play a causal role in the acquisition of his belief—he could, perhaps, have come to have his belief through indoctrination—but, nevertheless, these reasons are now available to him and they can thus justify his belief in x. These reasons could play an epistemic role yet not a causal one. But the author has set a trap: he opens his arsenal and provides arguments to the conclusion that there are no good reasons to believe in x. Belief in x is therefore not supported by any epistemic evidence and, if the psychological factors cited in the natural history can be overcome, then belief in x should be rejected. Hume is such a canny author; x, of course, being God.

Craig, however, questions whether the *Natural History* can be seen as contributing to an argument against religion.

> Why, because primitive religious beliefs were the outcome of certain emotions, should we think that those emotions are still the predominant ones even after the beliefs in question have first been sieved through … the philosophies of Plato and Aristotle, the thought of the evangelists, Paul, Plotinus, Augustine, Anselm, Luther and the rest? (1997, 75)

Hume, however, would deny that the beliefs of the vulgar are significantly 'sieved' in this way.

> We may conclude, therefore, upon the whole, that, since the vulgar, in nations, which have embraced the doctrine of theism, still build it upon irrational and superstitious principles, they are never led into that opinion by any process of argument, but by a certain train of thinking, more suitable to their genius and capacity. (1777c, 154)

Craig has a further argument against Hume's strategy. Polytheistic religious beliefs may be acquired through fear and undoubtedly Christian beliefs are sometimes acquired in this way, but for the most part they are not. It is plausible that most religious beliefs are inculcated in people by their formal education and social life. Notably all the biographies in two recent books, *Why I am Still an Anglican* (Chartres 2006) and *Why I am Still a Catholic* (Stanford 2005) answer these respective questions with sociological and psychological reasons. Their reasons do not mention the likely *truth* of their religious beliefs: they believe because of their upbringing, because the Church provides a good routine, they feel 'at home' there, and these are the religions into which they were born. Inherited religious beliefs may cause fear—Sunday school lessons on Hell may frighten children—but the causal relation between fear and belief is distinct from that suggested by Hume. He claims that fear is the cause of belief, rather than that belief causes fear (although he does claim this as well).

Such an objection does not though take account of the transmissional role of testimony. Beliefs are very often acquired from one another on trust. Such beliefs can also be justified; one can acquire knowledge in this way. On a Humean account one's testimonial beliefs are justified if one has evidence that the testifier is a reliable source, as we discussed in the previous chapter on miracles. Thus, we can come to know that a certain pagan sect believed in a god of sneezing by reading this in Hume. Beliefs can therefore be transmitted via chains of testimony: my belief was acquired from Hume, and Hume's was acquired from Hesiod. It is important, then, that the first link in the testimonial chain is justified. If there is no epistemic reason for the first testifier to hold a certain belief, then there is no epistemic warrant to pass

on. A key question therefore concerns the genesis of early religion and Hume has argued that the causal story concerning this does not provide us with good reason to accept the beliefs that have been transmitted to us via long chains of testimony.[7] We do acquire many of our religious beliefs through education and not directly through fear, but, Hume would claim, these beliefs originally have their origin in early man's frightening encounters with the natural world and with each other.

For Hume, religion is a natural phenomenon, explicable in terms of the psychological traits of human beings. This is true of both early polytheistic religions and of later, more sophisticated monotheisms. This claim along with arguments that Hume puts forward in his other works are part of a wider irreligious project: religious beliefs can be explained but not justified. Christianity is just another religious sect arising out of the tribal and philosophical turmoil of the Middle East about 2,000 years ago. Edward Gibbon, the historian, shares Hume's historical understanding of religion and his ironic turn of phrase: 'the theologian may indulge the pleasing task of describing religion as she descended from heaven, arrayed in her native purity. A more melancholy duty is imposed on the historian' (1781, 168).

[7] As Craig notes, however, there has been continuing input into the ongoing practice of religion—notably in the forms of natural religion and revelation—and this could provide the testimonial warrant that is lacking. As discussed, though, Hume has argued elsewhere that such input cannot provide the epistemic support that is required of it.

Chapter 11
Morality

Hume has rejected natural theology and does not think that there is any good evidence to suggest that God has revealed himself through miraculous occurrences. Further, in the absence of any good reasons for belief in the existence of God, Hume provides a natural history that explains the prevalence of religious belief amongst human societies. It is important to note, though, that Hume's attitude to religion is not that of a dispassionate philosopher who has uncovered a paucity of argument in support of certain commitments. Hume is hostile towards religion and this hostility is grounded, to a great extent, in what he sees as the moral failings of religion. This chapter will spell out these failings and discuss Hume's alternative secular moral theory.

11.1 The Historical Evils of Religion

Religion, for Hume, has stained history, and his *History of England* is punctuated with episodes that do not reflect well on organized religion. The causes of the English Civil War, for example, 'were undoubtedly not of a civil, but of a religious nature …. The fanatical spirit, let loose, confounded all regard to ease, safety, interest; and dissolved every moral and civil obligation' (1778, 5. 380). As Nicholas Phillipson (1989, 12) notes, Hume 'made a point of showing how the Church had succeeded in corrupting politics at nearly every important period of British History'. Hume also highlights the Crusades:

> After a siege of five weeks, they took Jerusalem by assault; and, impelled by a mixture of military and religious rage, they put the numerous garrison and inhabitants to the sword without distinction. Neither arms defended the valiant, nor submission the timorous: No age or sex was spared: Infants on the breast were pierced by the same blow with their mothers, who implored for mercy: Even a multitude, to the number of ten thousand persons, who had surrendered themselves prisoners, and were promised quarter, were butchered in cool blood by those ferocious conquerors. The streets of Jerusalem were covered with dead bodies; and the triumphant warriors, after every

A. Bailey and D. O'Brien, *Hume's Critique of Religion: 'Sick Men's Dreams'*,
The New Synthese Historical Library 72, DOI 10.1007/978-94-007-6615-0_11,

> enemy was subdued and slaughtered, immediately turned themselves, with the sentiments of humiliation and contrition, towards the holy sepulchre. They threw aside their arms, still streaming with blood: They advanced with reclined bodies, and naked feet and heads to that sacred monument: They sung anthems to their Saviour, who had there purchased their salvation by his death and agony: And their devotion, enlivened by the presence of the place where he had suffered, so overcame their fury, that they dissolved in tears, and bore the appearance of every soft and tender sentiment. So inconsistent is human nature with itself! And so easily does the most effeminate superstition ally, both with the most heroic courage, and with the fiercest barbarity! (1778, 1.250)

The civil unrest caused by the ongoing turmoil between Protestantism and Catholicism:

> England was soon filled with scenes of horror, which have ever since rendered the catholic religion the object of general detestation, and which prove, that no human depravity can equal revenge and cruelty, covered with the mantle of religion. (ibid., 3.435)
>
> Human nature appears not, on any occasion, so detestable, and at the same time so absurd, as in these religious persecutions, which sink men below infernal spirits in wickedness, and below the beasts in folly. (ibid., 3.437)

And the Inquisition:

> The dreadful tribunal of the inquisition, that utmost instance of human depravity, is a durable monument to instruct us what a pitch iniquity and cruelty may rise to, when covered with the sacred mantle of religion. (ibid., 1.xvii)

Hume's criticism of the Inquisition resulted in the *History of England* being placed on the *Index of Prohibited Books*. Hume follows Lucretius—'such great evils could religion make seem advisable' (2003, 4)—and joins other Enlightenment thinkers in outraged disapproval.

> Do you want good, well-attested barbarities; good, well-authenticated massacres; rivers of blood that really ran; fathers, mothers, husbands, women, children at the breast really butchered and piled up on each other? Persecuting monsters, seek these truths only in your annals: you will find them in the crusades against the Albigensians, in the massacres of Mérindol and Cabrières, in the appalling day of St. Bartholomew, in the Irish massacres, in the valleys of the Waldenses. (Voltaire 1764, 295)

Hume also reminds us of St. Bartholomew's massacre in which 'the streets of Paris flowed with blood' (1778, 4.163).

In themselves, though, such events do not provide a good argument against religion. First, even though religion has bad consequences, it may still be true; disease is unfortunate, yet pathogens exist. Second, the cases that Hume highlights may be cases of perverted religion; true religion would not be so inhumane. However, whereas many critics of the moral influence of religion place the emphasis almost exclusively on the historical record of misdeeds perpetrated by religious believers, especially those explicitly carried out in the name of religion, Hume is acutely conscious of the potential difficulties with this line of argument. Thus we find that Hume tends to favor instead the argument that religion—or at least Christianity—carries with it ever-present dangers, and to see why we must consider Christian morality.

11.2 Christian Morality

Christian morality is a collection of injunctions laid down in the Scriptures along with interpretations adopted by various Church councils and leaders over the centuries. Theists see God as playing both an epistemological and a motivational role with respect to morality. God is our source of moral knowledge and the prospect of a future state ensures that our actions are in accord with such knowledge. Hume notes some of the unappealing aspects of the resultant moral framework.

It cannot be claimed that it is only purveyors of false religion that are cruel; God himself appears to be. His treatment of Job and Abraham displays a particular talent for unnecessary and vindictive cruelty, and he seems to stand by as perennial natural and moral evils are inflicted upon us throughout history. (Religious responses to such evils were discussed in Chap. 8.) Further, God is vengeful: 'he that believeth not is condemned already' to eternal death (John 3:18), and his vengeance can seem totally out of proportion to the misdemeanor. In the Old Testament a man is struck dead for touching the Ark of the Covenant.

Hume claims that Christianity promotes a perverse set of virtues. In the *Natural History* Hume targets 'the monkish virtues of mortification, penance, humility, and passive suffering' (1777c, 163), and in the *Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals* he also mentions 'celibacy, fasting … self-denial, silence, [and] solitude' (1772b, 9.3/270). Philo criticizes religion for 'raising up a new and frivolous species of merit' (1779, 12.222).

> A gloomy, hair-brained enthusiast, after his death, may have a place in the calendar; but will scarcely ever be admitted when alive, into intimacy and society, except by those who are as delirious and dismal as himself. (1772b, 9.3/270)

Hume here compares the life of Diogenes, the ancient sceptic, with the 'artificial' and monkish life of Pascal:

> The foundation of Diogene's conduct was an endeavour to render himself an independent being as much as possible, and to confine all his wants and desires and pleasures within himself and his own mind: The aim of Pascal was to keep a perpetual sense of his dependence before his eyes and never to forget his numberless wants and infirmities. The ancient supported himself by magnanimity, ostentation, pride, and the idea of his own superiority above his fellow-creatures. The modern made constant profession of humility and abasement, of the contempt and hatred of himself; and endeavoured to attain these supposed virtues, as far as they are attainable. The austerities of the Greek were in order to inure himself to hardships, and prevent his ever suffering: Those of the Frenchman were embraced merely for their own sake, and in order to suffer as much as possible. The philosopher endulged himself in the most beastly pleasures, even in public: The saint refused himself the most innocent, even in private. The former thought it his duty to love his friends, and to rail at them, and reprove them, and scold them: The latter endeavoured to be absolutely indifferent towards his nearest relations, and to love and speak well of his enemies. The great object of Diogene's wit was every kind of superstition, that is every kind of religion known in his time…. The most ridiculous superstitions directed Pascal's faith and practice; and an extreme contempt of his life, in comparison of the future, was the chief foundation of his conduct.' (ibid., Dial., 55/342)

Suffering has a large part to play in Christianity, not only as something that good compassionate Christians should try to alleviate in others, but also as something that it is good for one to endure. The philosopher Marilyn Adams (1989) sees personal suffering as a positive experience since it enables one to have some appreciation of the suffering of Christ and therefore some insight into the mind of God. (The very symbol of Christianity is the crucifix, an instrument of torture.) We should be grateful that we have such insight, and therefore such suffering. Hume, however, would see such thinking as unnatural and perverse, something of a fetish, and certainly as alien to common life.

As well as misclassifying certain fetishes as virtues, Christianity also wrongly judges certain acts to be sinful. We will turn to Christianity's attitude to sex below, but here we will consider suicide, an issue that Hume addresses in a suppressed essay, 'Of Suicide'. The Church sees suicide as a sin since in taking one's own life one is destroying part of God's Creation. Hume, however, argues that it is a valid choice if 'the horror of pain prevails over the love of life' (1777a, 584), and that there is no reason for the religious prohibition against it; a prohibition, he notes, that has no scriptural authority (ibid., 588–9n6). According to the Christian, God has endowed us with the ability to manipulate the world in order that we can live our lives well. We may, for example, divert a river in order to supply water to those in need. Why should we not be able, therefore, in extreme cases to cure our own suffering through taking our own lives.[1]

> It would be no crime in me to divert the *Nile* or *Danube* from its course, were I able to effect such purposes. Where then is the crime of turning a few ounces of blood from their natural chanels! (ibid., 583)

Many critics of religion admit that there is much that is good in religion. Christianity may not be true but it promotes welfare and education. Christian charities, for example, provide large scale help to those on the planet who are most in need. Hume, however, 'when it comes to the possible good effects of religious belief … appears to have a blind spot' (Craig 1997, 76). On the face of it there may seem to be some concessions in his works, but most of these are tinged with irony and implicit criticism (although in Sect. 12.2, we shall go on to say more about Hume's views on the possible social and political advantages of state religions).

In the West Christianity has produced some of the greatest works of art. Michelangelo's *Pieta* and Bach's *St. John's Passion*, for example, are deeply Christian pieces, focusing on the kind of suffering that Hume (or the Humean) would find fetishistic, yet most critics of religion would consider both works to be of the highest value. Hume does admit that 'the pomp and splendour of worship which belonged to so opulent an establishment [as the Catholic Church], contributed, in some respect, to the encouragement of the fine arts, and began to diffuse a

[1] Herdt (1997, 91–3) notes Hume's championing of John Home's play, *Douglas*; Hume dedicated *The Four Dissertations* to Home. The final suicide of one of the characters, Lady Randolph, is portrayed as a noble death. The play caused much controversy at the time.

general elegance of taste, by uniting it with religion'; nevertheless, though, 'the advantages, attending the Romish hierarchy, were but a small compensation for its inconveniences' (1778, 3.137).[2]

Christianity promotes humility, pride being one of the seven cardinal sins. This is often applauded as a positive injunction, even by critics of religion, but not so by Hume: for him, humility is a vice and pride a virtue. 'Nothing is more useful to us in the conduct of life, than a due degree of pride, which makes us sensible of our own merit, and gives us a confidence and assurance in all our projects and enterprizes' (1739, 3.3.2.8/596–7). For Hume modesty is acceptable; it provides 'a just sense of our weakness' (ibid., 3.3.2.1/592), but humility has connotations of shamefulness and is one of the monkish virtues that should be rejected.

Hume is rather less scathing about early polytheistic religions, claiming that they are morally superior to monotheism and Christianity. First, 'the intolerance of almost all religions, which have maintained the unity of God, is as remarkable as the contrary principle in polytheists' (1777c, 162). 'The union in Christianity of sacred obligation with theoretical correctness … generates the new passions of *bigotry* and *zeal* which, Hume thinks, have poisoned the culture of Christendom' (Livingston 1998, 103). Second, the monkish virtues are a peculiarly Christian development and they 'sink the human mind into the lowest submission and abasement' (Hume 1777c, 163).

> The doctrines of the Christian religion … recommend only passive courage and suffering, had subdued the spirit of mankind, and had fitted them for slavery and subjection. (ibid., 164)

Polytheists, however, can 'aspire … to a rivalship and emulation of them [their gods]. Hence activity, spirit, courage, magnanimity, love of liberty, and all the virtues which aggrandize a people' (ibid., 163–4). The move from polytheism to monotheism has been a retrograde step.

> Instead of the destruction of monsters, the subduing of tyrants, the defence of our native country; whippings and fastings, cowardice and humility, abject submission and slavish obedience, are become the means of obtaining celestial honours among mankind. (ibid., 164)

Religion, then, has led to various historical atrocities and grounds a perverted form of morality. We can judge its morality perverse because we have a natural sense of morality, and it is to this that we now turn.

[2] See also Hume 1778, xvii: 'That delicious country, where the Roman pontiff resides, was the source of all modern art and refinement, and diffused on its superstition an air of politeness, which distinguishes it from the gross rusticity of other sects'. Such pomp, splendour and refinement were seen, by Hume, not as a reflection of the glory of God and thus as an aid to prayer and worship, but rather as a diversion from enthusiasm; instead of intense personal communion with God, one can simply 'relax … in the contemplation of pictures, postures, vestments, buildings, and all the fine arts, which minister to religion' (ibid., 5.460).

11.3 Hume's Moral Theory

Hume's account of morality is grounded in his naturalistic account of the passions.

> To approve of a character is to feel an original delight upon its appearance. To disapprove of it is to be sensible of an uneasiness. The pain and pleasure, therefore, being the primary causes of vice and virtue (1739, 2.1.7.5/296).

The apprehension of certain acts leads us to feel approval, whereas other acts lead us to feel disapproval, and our reactions to many kinds of cases are almost universal: acts that result in needless and avoidable suffering, for example, are disapproved of by nearly all. Further, when considering actions in terms of morality we do not think of them in isolation from the agent performing them; we think of them as being caused by her and by aspects of her character. Those aspects of an agent's character towards which we feel approval—those whose behavioural manifestation leads us to feel 'delight'—are virtues, and those towards which we feel disapproval are vices. Moral vices and virtues are simply those aspects of character towards which we have such feelings. Viciousness is a vice because it makes us feel uneasy, compassion is a virtue because it delights us.

Empathy or what Hume calls 'sympathy' also plays a crucial role. Our emotional responses to the actions of others can be biased. We may (wrongly) feel approval at Mike's viciousness towards someone we do not like. Such a response may be caused by a host of disturbing influences, those that subvert the usual mechanistic flux of the imagination. My moral judgements, though, are (more) constant and should be independent of my own interests, mood or circumstances. Such judgements should not be made solely from my own point of view, but from 'some common point of view' (ibid., 3.3.1.30/591). 'He must here … depart from his private and particular situation, and must choose a point of view, common to him with others' (1777b, 9.6/272). We must contemplate an agent's character, not just from our own perspective, but from the perspectives of others relevant to the action being appraised; it should be 'consider'd in general, without reference to our particular interest' (1739, 3.1.2.4/472). Hume does not demand that we take up an ideal point of view, that of a 'spectator who is fully informed and unsullied by prejudice' (Sayre-McCord 1994, 202), a view from nowhere, or an 'angelic equi-sympathetic engagement with all of humanity' (ibid., 203). Rather, we should 'confine our view to that narrow circle, in which any person moves, in order to form a judgment of his moral character' (1739, 3.3.3.2/602). I consider those who have a 'particular connexion' (ibid.) with Mike, those who have an 'immediate connexion or intercourse' (ibid., 3.3.3.2/603) with him.

> When we enumerate the good qualities of any person, we always mention those parts of his character, which render him a safe companion, an easy friend, a gentle master, an agreeable husband, or an indulgent father. We consider him with all his relations in society; and love or hate him, according as he affects those, who have any immediate intercourse with him. (ibid., 3.3.3.9/606)

We may feel approval at Mike's viciousness, but others disapprove and in sympathizing with their disapproval we can come to judge Mike's action as wrong.

Via empathy we 'receive by communication' (ibid., 2.1.11.2/316) and 'enter into' and 'embrace' (ibid., 2.1.11.5/318) the sentiments of others. 'The sentiments of others can never affect us, but by becoming, in some measure, our own' (ibid., 3.3.2.3/593). 'The minds of men are mirrors to one another' (ibid., 2.2.6.21/365). Such empathy brings (some measure of) objectivity to our moral judgements, and such judgements are an imaginative exercise in two senses: they involve the mechanistic workings of the Humean imagination—the causal interplay of ideas, impressions and passions—and also imaginative empathy with how others feel about the behaviour of those we are judging.

Hume was influenced by Hutcheson's sentimentalist account of morality. In the 1748 and 1750 editions of the first *Enquiry* Hume claims that:

> [Hutcheson] has taught us, by the most convincing Arguments, that Morality is nothing in the abstract Nature of Things, but is entirely relative to the Sentiment or mental Taste of each particular being; in the same Manner as the Distinctions of sweet and bitter, hot and cold, arise from the particular Feeling of each Sense or Organ. Moral Perceptions therefore, ought not to be class'd with the Operations of the Understanding, but with the Tastes or Sentiments. (Beauchamp 1998, xxi)

Moral distinctions are not based on, or discoverable through, reason or argument; they are, rather, grounded in our human nature and in our natural, emotional—or sentimental—responses to the actions of our fellows.

Sentimentalist theories, including that of Hume, influenced early utilitarian accounts of morality. Utilitarians argue that good actions are those that bring about an increase in happiness or utility. There is therefore a hedonistic flavour to their position, one opposed to Christian morality. Hume also shares this. In his account too, good actions are those that lead to pleasure or delight. It is important to note, though, that the relevant delight is that felt by the person judging the action, and not that felt by those who are subject to the action (although it is natural for us to feel delight towards the manifestation of character traits that are either pleasant to possess or that are useful in some way to the possessor or to society). Actions, according to Hume, are not good according to whether they maximise happiness; Hume is not therefore a utilitarian. Hume's moral theory is character-based rather than action-based. The primary focus of moral verdicts is on the character and virtues of those we are judging.

Further, Hume does not offer a moral theory from which a set of rules determining how we should behave can be derived, be these rules based on religious teaching, rational argument, or something akin to the hedonic calculus of the utilitarian; rather, he provides a moral psychology, an account of a set of virtuous character traits and a naturalistic account of how we come to see these traits as leading to laudable behaviour.[3] In the *History of England* we see royalty, politicians and noblemen exemplifying a wide range of virtues, including prudence,

[3] We will not focus here on whether Hume's naturalistic approach can adequately account for the justification of moral judgements. This is controversial. We will also say little concerning the debate over the subjectivist nature of Hume's account, as opposed to the objective morality of religion.

discretion, generosity, affability, bravery, patience, politeness, openness and sincerity. Note that faith, hope and charity do not appear, nor the monkish virtues—such displays do not, except in the heat of religious fervour, fill us with approbation, and if they do, this may be because we are not considering them from the common point of view. In the next section we will go on to look at a case study that highlights the distinction between Christian morality and Hume's naturalistic approach.

11.4 Sexual Morality

Christianity has a long history of seeing sex as sinful. Much of this tradition has its roots in St. Augustine's and the early Church Fathers' demonization of pleasure. In the 'Golden Age of theology' Pope Gregory the Great declared that 'sensual pleasure can never be without sin' (Ranke-Heinemann 1991, 153). Only in the nineteenth century did sexual relations for pleasure cease to be sinful, although there are still ecclesiastical regulations concerning sexual matters. Throughout the Middle Ages there was much debate over the precise ordering of the sinfulness of sexual offences. Any sexual act that was not performed joylessly in order to produce children was sinful and there were complex rules and injunctions concerning contraception and sexual positions; rules that Hume thought 'indecent and … ridiculous' (1778, 1.31). To accompany these rules and ordering, there was an equally complex range of penances. At times in ecclesiastical history particularly bizarre orderings were thrown up: oral sex has been considered worse than murder, and in Hume's time there was Church-driven mass hysteria concerning masturbation. Even marital sex is seen as shameful by Aquinas: intercourse 'always has something shameful about it' (1274, Suppl. 64.5.2). Sex is described by him in the following terms: 'filthiness', 'staining', 'disgustingness', 'shamefulness', 'disgrace', 'degeneration', 'sickness', 'corruption of integrity', a reason for 'aversion' and 'loathing'—bodily purity can only therefore be maintained through celibacy (Ranke-Heinemann 1991, 194).

With such an attitude toward sex, virginity is to be prized; '*it is* good for a man not to touch a woman' (1 Cor. 7:1). Saint Jerome recommends that 'those who have wives live as though they had none' (Ranke-Heinemann 1991, 247). Sex is demonized in this way because it is not an ordinary sin; it is the product of original sin, that perpetrated by Adam and Eve in Eden, and that carried through the ages from generation to generation by the sexual act. This is why we are all sinners; we are born sinful.[4] Unbaptized children must therefore go to Hell.

> All of us, who have descended from impure seed, are born infected with the contagion of sin. In fact, before we saw the light of this life we were soiled and spotted in God's sight. (Calvin 1559, ii.1.5)

[4] All except Christ, that is; his birth avoids connection to this 'depraved origin' (St. Augustine 413 CE, 251) through Mary's Immaculate Conception.

Here we have another example of the skewed balance sheet of Christianity and of how far Christianity has traveled from common sense morality: it hardly seems just to punish everyone for the sin of Adam and Eve.

> Consult this image, as it appears in the popular religions of the world. How is the deity disfigured in our representations of him! How much is he degraded even below the character, which we should naturally, in common life, ascribe to a man of sense and virtue! (Hume 1777c, 184)

Contrasting Christian attitudes to sex with those of Hume will be illuminating. We will see that Hume's naturalistic approach is encapsulated in the few passages where he writes about love and sex. There, in microcosm, we have his holistic treatment of cognition, morality, and religion.

Love comes in many forms, and Book 2 of the *Treatise* contains detailed descriptions of various 'amorous' passions, their causes and their effects. One can feel love for 'the little faults and caprices of [one's] … mistress' (1739, 2.3.4.3/420); because of certain 'signs of force and vigour' in the beloved (ibid., 3.3.5.3/615); or for their 'ability … to give enjoyment' (ibid., 3.3.5.2/615).[5] Love can also come through the appreciation of virtue: '*virtue* … [is] the power of producing love or pride' (ibid., 3.3.1.3/575), and pride is easily 'transfus'd into love' (ibid., 2.2.2.27/346) since 'nothing more readily produces kindness and affection to any person, than his approbation of our conduct and character' (ibid.); we easily come to love those who praise us. Love is also manifest in various ways: it 'may show itself in the shape of *tenderness, friendship, intimacy, esteem, good will,* and in many other appearances' (ibid., 2.3.10.31/448). And it is fickle, as Hume points out in his essay 'Of Polygamy and Divorces':

> love is a restless and impatient passion, full of caprices and variations: arising in a moment from a feature, from an air, from nothing, and suddenly extinguishing after the same manner. (1777a, 188)

Hume therefore provides a phenomenology of love, one that is familiar, one that is 'known from our common feeling and experience' (1739, 2.2.1.1/329), and he also offers a naturalistic, explanatory account of it. Love is a general term for various different passions, and passions for Hume are impressions, impressions of reflection. Thus, like all ideas and impressions, the flux of love is controlled by the imagination and the principles of association. Direct passions are those that 'arise immediately from good or evil, from pain or pleasure' (ibid., 2.1.2.4/276). We feel grief and despair when in pain, and joy and security are the result of pleasure. Love, however, is an indirect passion; such passions having a more complex causal source. As said, the causes of love are various; it may, for example, be caused by the caprices

[5] ''Tis a general remark, that those we call good *women's men*, who have either signaliz'd themselves by their amorous exploits, or whose make of body promises an extraordinary vigour of that kind, are well receiv'd by the fair sex, and naturally engage the affections even of those, whose virtue prevents any design of ever giving employment to those talents. Here'tis evident, that the ability of such a person to give enjoyment, is the real source of that love and esteem he meets with among the females' (1739, 3.3.5.2/614–5)—a rather racy suggestion by Le Bon David!

of one's mistress. The 'object' of love in this case is one's mistress; the 'cause', her caprices. And love, the passion—the impression of reflection—is caused by associating the idea of these caprices (the cause) with the idea of one's mistress (the object). The association of these two ideas causes one to experience this impression of reflection. Love runs the whole gamut from the cool end of the spectrum, where there is disengaged esteem for others, to the warmer end where one's amorous attitudes involve sexual attraction.

Hume sketches his account of sexual attraction in a short section of the *Treatise* entitled 'Of the amorous passion, or love betwixt the sexes' (ibid., 2.2.11/394–6). Such attraction is a kind of love, and 'in its most natural state, is deriv'd from the conjunction of three different impressions or passions, *viz.* the pleasing sensation arising from beauty; the bodily appetite for generation; and a generous kindness or good-will' (ibid., 2.2.11.1/394). In cases of sexual attraction three cognitive states are constantly conjoined: one's perception of beauty, sexual lust, and kindness (benevolence or friendship) towards the desired party.

> There arises such a connexion betwixt the sense of beauty, the bodily appetite, and benevolence, that they become in a manner inseparable: And we find from experience, that 'tis indifferent which of them advances first; since any of them is almost sure to be attended with the related affections. (ibid., 2.2.11.4/395)

Before turning to the alleged constant conjunction between beauty, lust, and kindness, and the problems that there may be with this claim, let us first consider these three components in turn.

Lust is an animal appetite; it:

> may justly be regarded as the first and original principle of human society. This necessity is no other than that natural appetite betwixt the sexes, which unites them together, and preserves their union, till a new tye takes place in their concern for their common offspring. This new concern becomes also a principle of union betwixt the parents and offspring, and forms a more numerous society. (ibid., 3.2.2.4/486)

This animal compulsion is not the source of our Fall from Eden, but rather our salvation. The world is harsh and we are infirm creatures; Philo claiming that:

> nature seems to have formed an exact calculation of the necessities of her creatures; and like a *rigid master*, has afforded them little more powers or endowments, than what are strictly sufficient to supply those necessities. (1779, 11.208)

It is only therefore through co-operation that man can 'raise himself up to an equality with his fellow-creatures, and even acquire a superiority over them' (1739, 3.2.2.3/485).

> By the conjunction of forces, our power is augmented: By the partition of employments, our ability encreases: And by mutual succour we are less expos'd to fortune and accidents. 'Tis by this additional *force, ability,* and *security*, that society becomes advantageous. (ibid.)

Lust, then, is an aspect of human nature that plays a positive social role.

The second component of sexual attraction is the appreciation of beauty. Beauty, for Hume, is not an objective feature of either people's appearance or character; it

is, rather, in the eye of the beholder. We project beauty onto certain people.[6] The most important kind of projection relevant to sexual attraction is what Rae Langton (2004) calls phenomenological 'gilding', taken from Hume's oft-cited claim concerning reason and taste:

> The one [that is, reason] discovers objects, as they really stand in nature, without addition or diminution: The other [taste] has a productive faculty, and gilding or staining all natural objects with the colours, borrowed from internal sentiment, raises, in a manner, a new creation. (1772b, App. 1.21/294)

People are not beautiful 'in themselves'. In the essay, 'Of the Standard of Taste', Hume says that 'it be certain, that beauty and deformity, more than sweet and bitter, are not qualities in objects, but belong entirely to the sentiment' (1777a, 235). And in 'The Sceptic' that:

> no objects are, in themselves, desirable or odious, valuable or despicable; but that objects acquire these qualities from the particular character and constitution of the mind, which surveys them. (ibid., 171)

Peter Kail contrasts projection with 'detective' accounts in which our mind detects the presence of certain properties out in the world. Through projection, however, 'Something "in here" is taken to be a feature of something "out there"' (2007, xxix). In the case of beauty, projection explains why we believe that someone is beautiful, and also why we see them as beautiful. Certain looks, character traits, or caprices cause us to feel certain sentiments, certain pleasurable aesthetic sentiments, and we come to believe, and to see, people as independently possessing the qualities that cause us to experience such pleasure.

The third component of sexual attraction—that conjoined with lust and beauty—is kindness, an indirect passion. As seen, indirect passions have a more complex causal source than direct passions such as grief or joy, and we will see below the crucial causal role that beauty plays in the genesis of kindness.

Sexual attraction is therefore an amalgam of animal lust and the passions and sentiments associated with the appreciation of beauty and the feeling of kindness. This, perhaps, is not news—it is commonplace that at times all of these contribute to sexual desire and to sexual relations—but Hume claims that these three are constantly conjoined: animal lust, the appreciation of beauty, and kindness always go together, or rather, they are 'almost sure' to be conjoined. Prima facie this seems implausible since it is not hard to think of cases where this is not so. So let us look a little closer at what Hume could mean here.

As with other key aspects of Hume's epistemology and philosophy of mind, the imagination plays a crucial explanatory role. The principles of association see to it that these three go together, and they do this in three different ways. First: 'the most common species of love is that which first arises from beauty, and afterwards

[6] Projection plays an important role elsewhere for Hume: we project necessary connections onto the world (1772a, 7/60–79), and belief in God is a projection of our fears (see Sect. 10.2).

diffuses itself into kindness and into the bodily appetite' (1739, 2.2.11.4/395). One sees a person as beautiful and this impression causes one to feel both lust and kindness. Second, 'One, who is inflam'd with lust, feels at least a momentary kindness towards the object of it, and at the same time fancies her more beautiful than ordinary' (ibid.). And third, 'there are many, who begin with kindness and esteem for the wit and merit of the person, and advance from that to the other passions' (ibid.). Here the complex role of projection should be noted. In the first kind of case beauty comes first, that is, projection occurs either through gilding, wishful thinking or pseudo-empathy (see Langton 2004, 292–9) and the projected beliefs concerning beauty cause other associated passions and appetites. And in the second and third kinds of cases lust and kindness are involved in the projection of beauty; they cause one to perceive it in others. Hume's account therefore seems to have the resources to explain the often spiralling nature of sexual attraction: after lust causes beauty to be projected onto someone, this beauty could then lead to further kindness and lust, each of these going on to cause further amplification of beauty, and so on.

It is thus the causal machinations of the Humean imagination and the principles of association that cause lust, beauty and kindness to be constantly conjoined. But these three, 'however mingled, never perfectly unite and incorporate' (1739, 2.3.9.17/443); they merely 'transfuse' (ibid., 2.3.4.7/421) into one another. It is not obvious what Hume means by this. We suggest, though, that Hume has two claims in mind. There is first the old Humean theme[7] that there is not a necessary connexion between these three cognitive states; they are merely connected ('constantly conjoined'). Second, there is the phenomenological observation that sexual attraction towards someone is a commingled riot of passions; various feelings blend together to provide that feeling characteristic of sexual desire—lust, the appreciation of beauty and kindliness are sometimes not distinguishable in one's feelings.

But this is not an easy transfusion.

> Kindness or esteem, and the appetite to generation, are too remote to unite easily together. The one is, perhaps, the most refin'd passion of the soul; the other the most gross and vulgar. (ibid., 2.2.11.4/395)

That kindness and lust do not 'unite easily' should, we claim, be read phenomenologically: there is some tension between the diverse feelings that we have for others; the calm passion of kindliness is here in conflict with the violent passions associated with lust. This tension is eased, though, because 'the love of beauty is plac'd in a just medium betwixt them, and partakes of both their natures: From whence it proceeds, that 'tis so singularly fitted to produce both' (ibid., 2.2.11.4/395). Beauty has the power to hold these two contradictory passions together. When we come to see someone as physically beautiful, then this naturally leads to lust; the focus here is on bodily beauty, such beauty holding the promise of 'commerce' with another (ibid., 3.3.5.2/615). But physical beauty is also associated with 'a MANNER, a grace,

[7] This theme is also 'Old' in that it is contrasted with the 'New' interpretation of Hume, according to which he believes in necessary connexions. See *The New Hume Debate*, eds. R. Read and K. Richmond.

an ease, a genteelness, an I-know-not-what … which is very different from external beauty and comeliness, and which, however, catches our affection almost as suddenly and powerfully' (1772b, 8.14/267). Beautiful people are beautiful in body *and* mind—or rather, it is natural for us to take someone's physical beauty also to be reflected in their thoughts and thus for us to feel kindness towards them. And beauty can still play this uniting role even when our first reaction to someone is kindness or lust. As seen these passions cause us to project beauty onto another, and when someone is seen as beautiful then the other two passions follow as natural responses to the beautiful person. Hume therefore provides an explanation for the constant conjunction central to sexual attraction.

Hume can also claim that 'the secret operation of contrary causes' (1772a, 8.13/87) plays a role in sexual attraction, in that it sometimes disturbs the constant conjunction of beauty, kindliness and lust that would naturally occur. These secret springs are multifarious. Beauty, lust and kindliness are constantly conjoined unless, for example, lust is suppressed for one reason or another, by perhaps the secret operation of bromide. A particularly important set of contrary causes are the monkish virtues encouraged by religion. Religious piety or enthusiasm and the beliefs associated with religious dogma encourage celibacy and the appreciation of beauty and kindness without the usually associated lust. As said, the Church has a long history of revering celibacy with ideal marriages seen as involving kindness and perhaps the perception of one's partner as beautiful, but not feelings of lust towards them. There may—and should—be cases of love that are not 'physical'. According to Hume, though, this is not natural. It is a law of nature—a law of cognition—that beauty, lust and kindliness are conjoined; such chaste marriages are therefore at odds with nature; they are at odds with what it is to be human. And this claim is at the root of Hume's rejection of religious morality. Such morality is divorced from human sentiments and:

> if ever there was any thing, which cou'd be call'd natural … the sentiments of morality certainly may … These sentiments are so rooted in our constitution and temper, that without entirely confounding the human mind by disease or madness, 'tis impossible to extirpate and destroy them. (1739, 3.1.2.8/474)

Something rather puzzling, though, has surfaced concerning Hume's attitude to sex. The 'monkish virtues'—including celibacy—are rejected, and thus one might expect Hume not to have moral qualms concerning sexual attraction. But we have also seen that Hume claims that lust is 'gross and vulgar' (ibid., 2.2.11.4/395). These seemingly contradictory attitudes are however compatible, and we can see how by uncovering Hume's reasons for the latter claim.

Benevolence, kindness and friendship are goods for Hume (1777a, 185): 'Destroy love and friendship; what remains in the world worth accepting?' It is a natural virtue to be devoted to particular individuals and so to exhibit partiality.

> This partiality … and unequal affection, must not only have an influence on our behaviour and conduct in society, but even on our ideas of vice and virtue …. From all which it follows, that our natural uncultivated ideas of morality, instead of providing a remedy for the partiality of our affections, do rather conform themselves to that partiality, and give it an additional force and influence. (1739, 3.2.2.8/488–9)

Virtuous passions are those that are calm, those that constitute one's underlying character and guide thinking and action on a day-to-day basis, those that aid social interaction and cohesion. 'The immediate feeling of benevolence and friendship … is sweet, smooth, tender, and agreeable' (1777b, 9.21/282). Untrammelled lust, however, is damaging to society and thus it is something towards which we feel disapproval. Even if from time to time we are lustful ourselves, through sympathy our natural response to it is negative. Sexual restraint contributes to the 'general interests of society' (1739, 3.2.12.7/572), to economic stability and also to social status. Hume claims that one reason for this is that men only provide for children if they know that they are their own, and this would not be so if women were indiscriminately lustful.[8] There would be accompanying concerns about rightful lines of inheritance and the transmission of property from generation to generation.[9] The disapproval of such consequences, and of the lustful behaviour that is their cause, is not based on economic *reasons*; the passions, rather, are at the root of our attitude towards such causes of social instability: inheritance, for example, and consequent class status is a source of pride in one's family and one's children, and a good lineage is essential for verifiable class status or 'consideration in life' (1772b, 6.13/238). The securing of social esteem is therefore something of which we approve and anything that endangers it is seen as a vice. Society thus insists on modesty for girls and shows 'repugnance to all expressions, and postures, and liberties' (1739, 3.2.12.5/572) that might lead to seduction and lust. The focus here is undoubtedly on women—and the sexual double standards of the eighteenth century are evident—but there are also reasons why male lustfulness should be tempered. Violent passions in general are disruptive to society and the calmer passions such as friendship should be favoured.

Sexual morality is complex and subtle; there are no absolute rules to be enforced. Lust is not a mortal sin; lust, rather, is something of which we sometimes disapprove, when, for example, such passions have a negative effect on friendships. There are also, however, times when our natural response to lust is that of approval; when, that is, our sympathizing with the narrow circle of lustful lovers leads to feelings of approbation.

As an aside, it should be noted that Hume is an interesting philosopher with regards to feminist thinking. Certain feminist epistemologists have noted and approved the holistic nature of Hume's philosophy of mind and epistemology:

> Hume enacts for us the turn he wants us to imitate, a turn from a one-sided reliance on intellect and methods of proceeding to an attempt to use, in our philosophy, *all* the capacities of the human mind: memory, passion and sentiment as well as chastened intellect. (Baier 1991, 1)
>
> Hume's version of 'wholeness' of mind, passions, imagination, and intellect enter a new unity; and the structure of that unity opens up new possibilities for rethinking the ideals of an intellectual life. (Lloyd 2000, 41)

[8] Note that Hume's target is only indiscriminate lust and not lust within marriage, that which is also targeted by religion.

[9] Female chastity is thus an artificial virtue, one that depends on social conventions. For the distinction between natural and artificial virtues see O'Brien 2012, 294–6.

Further, Lloyd (1984) argues that (male) philosophers have traditionally privileged reason over emotion and at the same time associated women with the latter. Philosophers must master their emotions in order to think rationally about the world and their own nature. Hume, therefore, with his emphasis on the passions is seen as breaking away from this pervasive androcentric undercurrent in philosophy.

Hume also, however, says much that is at odds with feminist thinking—much that is downright sexist. Hume may have rejected the traditional philosophical emphasis on reason over emotion, and its (alleged) androcentric bias, but there is still a divide between men and women reflected in the way that he ranks the emotions. Calm, virtuous passions—such as those involved in friendship—are associated with men. Women, however, are associated with emotions that are not virtuous and consequently with those that should be 'corrected', those that are violent and disruptive to society such as lust (and even romantic love). The passions that drive us to religious belief are also violent and unvirtuous, and Hume claims that women are naturally the most pious and susceptible to the passions associated with superstition.

> What age or period of life is the most addicted to superstition? The weakest and most timid. What sex? The same answer must be given. *The leaders and examples of every kind of superstition,* says STRABO, *are the women.* (1777c, 144; Hume's emphasis)

Further, as well as being more susceptible to such disruptive influences, they drag men along too! '*These excite the men to devotion and supplications, and the observance of religious days*' (ibid.). Hume also claims in the essay 'Of National Characters' that 'revenge is a natural passion to mankind; but seems to reign with the greatest force in priests and women' (1777a, 201n); and, in 'Of Love and Marriage', that 'no passion seems to have more influence on female minds, than this for power' (ibid., 558). For Hume, then, feminine emotions are in many cases disruptive to society and to the balance of the female mind. Such claims rather overshadow his noted proto-feminist credentials.

There is a Christian tradition that sex pollutes our human nature. Augustine claims that 'the core of human nature is not touched by sexuality' (Ranke-Heinemann 1991, 53). As recently as 1936, Pope Pius XI elaborated this point: 'Since God is spirit, it seems appropriate that everyone who consecrates and devotes himself to the spirit should also in a certain sense free himself from his body' (ibid., 117). Sex, however, is bestial: 'in sexual intercourse the human being becomes similar to the beast' (Aquinas 1274, I, 98.2). And this, it turns out, is something with which Hume would agree. This is not, though, to besmirch our human nature; it is to see it for what it is. Man is not made in the image of God; man is a natural creature who, as we see, feels certain sentiments that are constitutive of love and sexual desire.

In the throes of sexual attraction one is a living manifestation of Hume's worldview. In feeling such attraction one is simply caused to feel certain sentiments by certain individuals. These riots of feelings are sometimes seen as inappropriate, but this is not because our reason can determine that our sentiments are misplaced, but because we feel further sentiments towards our own sexual responses. We feel that

such desires are unworthy. Some of our passions are intertwined with the stability of one's wider society and our sympathy with those close to us. And the passions are not mere emotional responses to the world; rather, they constitute morality. Thus social factors play a role in determining what is seen as virtuous. Further, we feel certain sentiments—meta-passions, if you like—towards the different kinds of passions that we naturally feel towards each other: calm passions such as friendship elicit approbation, and violent passions such as lust elicit disapproval. Traditional reason is playing no role here; there are simply nested passionate responses to the character-driven actions of others. The actions we have been focusing on here are those involved in sexual desire, and we have emphasized the crucial role that the Humean imagination plays, not only in our moral judgements concerning such behaviour, but also in that behaviour itself. The principles of association see to it that the passions and appetites characteristic of sexual desire are constantly conjoined. The imagination, for Hume, is 'the cement of the universe'[10] and, on the more intimate scale, it is the cement that glues us together as friends and sexual partners.

Hume sees Christian morality as perverse. We praise God for deeds that would be considered evil if performed by men, and his followers preach moral virtue yet do not act in accord with it.

> Hence the greatest crimes have been found, in many instances, compatible with a superstitious piety and devotion; Hence, it is justly regarded as unsafe to draw any certain inference in favour of a man's morals, from the fervour or strictness of his religious exercises, even though he himself believe them sincere. (1777c, 182)

Religion creates 'frivolous species of merits', and unnecessarily demonizes human actions such as suicide, various sexual practices, and other—one would think—less serious transgressions.

> There was a mode, which, in that age, prevailed throughout Europe, both among men and women, to give an enormous length to their shoes, to draw the toe to a sharp point, and to affix to it the figure of a bird's bill, or some such ornament, which was turned upwards, and which was often sustained by gold or silver chains tied to the knee. The ecclesiastics took exception at this ornament, which, they said, was an attempt to bely the Scripture, where it is affirmed, that no man can add a cubit to his stature; and they declaimed against it with great vehemence, nay assembled some synods, who absolutely condemned it. But, such are the strange contradictions in human nature! Though the clergy, at that time, could overturn thrones, and had authority sufficient to send above a million of men on *their* errand to the desarts of Asia, they could never prevail against these long-pointed shoes: On the contrary, that caprice, contrary to all other modes, maintained its ground during several centuries; and if the clergy had not at last desisted from their persecution of it, it might still have been the prevailing fashion in Europe. (1778, 1.241–2)[11]

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[10] See Mackie 1980.

[11] See also: 'Some ornaments, which the ladies at that time wore upon their petticoats, excited mightily the indignation of the preachers; and they affirmed, that such vanity would provoke God's vengeance, not only against these foolish women, but against the whole realm' (Hume 1778, 4.41–2); 'They confined their avowed objections to the surplice, the confirmation of children, the sign of the cross in baptism, the ring in marriage, kneeling at the sacrament, and bowing at the name of Jesus. So fruitless is it for sovereigns to watch with a rigid care over orthodoxy, and to employ the

Hume has an alternative, secular, naturalistic account of morality, one based on social and personal interests. His approach is summed up in 'Of the Immortality of the Soul':

> whence do we learn, that there is such a thing as moral distinctions but from our own sentiments? ….
>
> The chief source of moral ideas is the reflection on the interests of human society. (1777a, 595)

It is because we have such natural moral sentiments that we are able to see the long-pointed-shoe-haters as silly and certain religious sexual prohibitions as perverse. 'So deeply are the sentiments of morality engraved in the human breast, that it is difficult even for the prejudices of false religion to efface them' (1778, 4.210).

As far as morality goes, Hume agrees with his contemporary and professed atheist, Baron d'Holbach:

> Would it not be a thousand times better to depend upon blind matter, upon a nature destitute of intelligence, upon chance, or upon nothing, upon a God of stone or of wood, than upon a God who is laying snares for men, inviting them to sin, and permitting them to commit those crimes which he could prevent, to the end that he may have the barbarous pleasure of punishing them without measure, without utility to himself, without correction to them, and without their example serving to reclaim others? (1770, II, 14)

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sword in religious controversy, that the work, perpetually renewed, is perpetually to begin; and a garb, a gesture, nay, a metaphysical or grammatical distinction, when rendered important by the disputes of theologians and the zeal of the magistrate, is sufficient to destroy the unity of the church, and even the peace of society.' (ibid., 4.123) See also 1772b, 3.36/198 for Hume's ridiculing of religious dietary rituals and prohibitions.

Chapter 12
History and the Evaluation of Religion

12.1 Religion in Hume's *History of England*

As we saw in the preceding chapter, Hume draws attention in the *History of England* to numerous occasions when people's religious beliefs have been implicated in acts of appalling brutality and savagery. Some of the events he records, like the Crusades and the religious persecutions initiated in England by Mary I, remain sufficiently salient even today to be used in popular denunciations of religion as a pernicious and destructive force in human affairs. However, Hume is also assiduous in uncovering a host of less well-known incidents that he deftly weaves together in order to construct an unedifying picture of the influence of religion, and more especially Christianity, throughout the course of British history.

It might be thought, for example, that it would be difficult to use an account of events in England prior to the Norman Conquest as a means of bringing religion into discredit. But although Hume's primary focus, even when writing about this remote period, remains centred on the emergence of the constitutional settlement of the Glorious Revolution of 1689 from the political arrangements that prevailed in earlier times,[1] Hume takes advantage of numerous opportunities to present religion in an unflattering light.

Hume is particularly acerbic when reporting the arrival of Christianity amongst the Saxons. The mission to England undertaken by Augustine at the behest of Pope Gregory the Great is described as relying on the support of a morally depraved sponsor, Queen Brunehaut, who had usurped power in France.

> This princess, though stained with every vice of treachery and cruelty, either possessed or pretended great zeal for the cause; and Gregory acknowledged, that to her friendly assistance was, in a great measure, owing the success of that undertaking. (1778, 1.29)

[1] In particular, Hume strives strenuously to refute the theory that the mixed monarchy of eighteenth century Britain and its attendant system of political liberty represent a return to ancient liberties that had been subverted in the intervening years by monarchs of a tyrannical disposition. See Forbes 1985, 260–307, Miller 1981, 163–73, and Wooton 1993, 296–307.

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Augustine himself is portrayed as a shameless liar and someone who ostentatiously affected the monkish virtues that are so witheringly dismissed by Hume in the *Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals*. Hume alleges that Augustine not only inculcated a false belief in spurious miracles but also deceptively affected at first to hold that 'the service of Christ must be entirely voluntary, and that no violence ought ever to be used in propagating so salutary a doctrine' (1778, 1.30). This latter piece of dissimulation about papal policy was immediately corrected by Gregory as soon as King Ethlebert of Kent embraced Christianity and the option of enforcing conversion through force became a realistic prospect. Hume reports that in a papal letter dispatched to this monarch, Gregory announced the glorious news that the end of the world was approaching, and then encouraged him to:

> display his zeal in the conversion of his subjects, to exert rigour against the worship of idols, and to build up the good work of holiness by every expedient of exhortation, terror, blandishment, or correction. (ibid., 1.31)

In addition to presenting him as full of persecutory zeal, Hume delivers a disparaging assessment of Gregory's intellectual abilities and literary taste.

> He had waged war with all the precious monuments of the ancients, and even with their writings; which, as appears from the strain of his own wit, as well as from the style of his compositions, he had not taste or genius enough to comprehend. (ibid., 1.29)

And Gregory's prurient obsession with matters of sexual behaviour is ruthlessly mocked by the inclusion in the *History* of some extracts from his answers to questions posed by Augustine (see ibid., 1.31). Hume's final assessment of the character of Gregory and his chosen instrument, Augustine, is magisterial in its barely concealed disdain for both men.

> And on the whole it appears, that Gregory and his missionary, if sympathy of manners have any influence, were better calculated than men of more refined understandings, for making a progress with the ignorant and barbarous Saxons. (ibid., 1.31–2)

After this pugnacious start in critiquing the initial spread of Christianity amongst the Saxons, Hume continues with a narrative of monkish hypocrisy, faked miracles, papal ambition, and shocking violence. A representative instance of the latter is provided by the fate that befell Queen Elgiva. King Edwy, who ascended to the throne of Wessex in 995 at the age of 16 or 17, was so infatuated with this princess that he married her even though she was, as Hume reports, within 'the degrees of affinity prohibited by the canon-law' (ibid., 1.94). This gave rise to an escalating dispute between that king and the ecclesiastical interest led by Odo, the archbishop of Canterbury. According to Hume, these God-fearing ecclesiastics denounced the king and queen for their supposed impiety and then made use of more forcible measures:

> Archbishop Odo sent into the palace a party of soldiers, who seized the queen; and having burned her face with a red hot iron in order to destroy that fatal beauty, which had seduced Edwy, they carried her by force into Ireland, there to remain in perpetual exile. (ibid., 1.95)

Unable to resist this overbearing and vindictive clerical cabal, Edwy was reluctantly forced to agree to a formal divorce, which was presided over by this same Odo. And a particularly unpleasant death awaited Elgiva herself:

> That amiable princess, being cured of her wounds, and having even obliterated the scars, with which Odo had hoped to deface her beauty, returned into England, and was flying to the embraces of the king, whom she still regarded as her husband; when she fell into the hands of a party, whom the primate had sent to intercept her. Nothing but her death could now give security to Odo and the monks; and the most cruel death was requisite to satiate their vengeance. She was hamstringed; and expired a few days after at Glocester in the most acute torments. (ibid., 1.95)

It is striking, in fact, that in the course of Hume's entire narrative of events in Saxon England, he finds scarcely anything positive to say about the moral influence of Christianity. Even in the case of Hume's panegyric concerning the merits and achievements of Alfred the Great,[2] the fact that he was a Christian rather than a pagan monarch is acknowledged, but none of his estimable qualities is ascribed to his religion. Hume sets out a detailed account of Alfred's military triumphs, his reforms to the laws and administration of the kingdom, and his promotion of learning and commerce.[3] But on no occasion does Hume explain Alfred's exceptional virtues and wise policies by referring to his religious beliefs.

Hume's account of the history of the Saxons is, moreover, entirely representative of his treatment of religion throughout the rest of the *History*. In the *Dialogues* Philo maintains that the influence of popular religion in public affairs is almost invariably destructive.

> If the religious spirit be ever mentioned in any historical narration, we are sure to meet afterwards with a detail of the miseries which attend it. And no period of time can be happier or more prosperous, than those in which it is never regarded, or heard of. (1779, 12.220)

Whatever the merits of Philo's claim might be when applied to all historical narratives, it undeniably offers an accurate summary of what ensues when the religious spirit is mentioned in any of Hume's own historical narratives.

12.2 Learning from the Historical Record

Hume holds that the study of history is of great value to the philosopher who wishes to construct a science of man on firm foundations rather than on the illusory support offered by *a priori* theorizing and the wild speculations prompted by an over-active

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[2] Hume describes Alfred as follows: 'The merit of this prince, both in private and public life, may with advantage be set in opposition to that of any monarch or citizen, which the annals of any age or any nation can present to us. He seems indeed to be the model of that perfect character, which, under the denomination of a sage or wise man, philosophers have been fond of delineating, rather as a fiction of their imagination, than in hopes of ever seeing it really existing' (1778, 1.74).

[3] Alfred's achievements in promoting learning are perhaps exaggerated by Hume, as he repeats the false story that Alfred founded or at least re-established the University of Oxford (1778, 1.79). However, the reputation of this university in the second half of the eighteenth century was so low that Hume's brother, John Home, saw no advantage in sending his elder son to finish his education there: 'He thinks his Son rather inclines to be dissipated and idle; and believes that a Year or two at Oxford woud confirm him thoroughly in that Habit, without any other Advantage than the acquiring of a little better Pronounciation' (Hume 1932, II, 207).

imagination. However, a serious problem potentially affects the attempt to introduce the experimental method into the study of social and political issues:

> Moral philosophy has, indeed, this peculiar disadvantage, which is not found in natural [philosophy], that in collecting its experiments, it cannot make them purposely, with premeditation, and after such a manner as to satisfy itself concerning every particular difficulty which may arise. (1739, 1, Intro. 10/xviii–xix)

Despite this problem, Hume is adamant that we cannot forgo the use of the experimental method in these areas. This method has, in his judgement, yielded important discoveries in the natural sciences; and if we wish to make genuine progress in the study of how human beings interact with each other, the same method needs to be applied again.

Hume's solution to this conundrum is that the moral philosopher should turn to the study of history. Thus Hume explicitly portrays history in the *Enquiry concerning Human Understanding* as providing the moral philosopher with the experimental data required in order to emulate the success that has been achieved in the field of natural philosophy.

> Its chief use is only to discover the constant and universal principles of human nature, by showing men in all varieties of circumstances and situations, and furnishing us with materials, from which we may form our observations, and become acquainted with the regular springs of human action and behaviour. These records of wars, intrigues, factions, and revolutions, are so many collections of experiments, by which the politician or moral philosopher fixes the principles of his science. (1772a, 8.7/83–4)

If the study of history is to serve as a good guide for the moral philosopher, then we require an accurate record of these past events. Hence one of Hume's motivations for writing the *History of England* was to provide an account of political and constitutional developments in Britain that avoided factional prejudice. In this way Hume hoped that he could put before the public a historical narration that was more accurate and reliable than any rival account. And in a letter to the Comtesse de Boufflers, Hume both complains about the prevalence of factional interest in Britain and sets out some evidence in support of his self-professed impartiality:

> The spirit of faction, which prevails in this country, and which is a natural attendant on civil liberty, carries every thing to extremes on the one side, as well as on the other; and I have the satisfaction to find, that my performance has alternately given displeasure to both parties. I could not reasonably hope to please both: such success is impossible from the nature of things; …. I shall always regard the anger of both as the surest warrant of my impartiality. (1932, I, 344)

It might be suggested, however, that Hume's attempts at impartiality in the *History* do not extend to his account of the role played by religion. Very little is said in the *History* about the educational and charitable works that could plausibly be regarded as flowing from religious faith. Nor does Hume devote much attention to the capacity of religion to inspire artistic creativity. Instead Hume returns again and again to more negative themes. Religious dignitaries and those people professing a great zeal for religion are generally portrayed as hypocrites and as consumed with a desire for power or monetary advantage. The most absurd reports of tawdry miracles are consumed with credulous enthusiasm by all elements of society. Religious oaths

are disregarded as soon as it becomes convenient to do so. And, above all, Hume repeatedly associates Christianity and its monotheistic rivals with a sordid, blood-soaked tapestry of persecution, savage violence, and unnecessary wars.

Hume is generally a fairly conscientious reporter of events. Although he seldom engages in substantial study of original sources, he builds his narrative with considerable care on an extensive range of the most authoritative printed sources available to an eighteenth century reader. In particular, Hume shows a great deal of sensitivity to issues of what biases and partialities might afflict particular commentators, and he is aware of the desirability, whenever possible, of securing confirmation for his assertions from two or more independent sources. However, the worry that most people are likely to have when assessing Hume's treatment of religion in the *History* relates to the potential lack of balance in Hume's account. It might also be thought that the way Hume presents his material encourages us to embrace certain conclusions without properly analysing the process by which those conclusions come to strike us as plausible. After we have encountered repeated reports of war and massacre carried out in the name of religion, we are likely to acquire at least the beginnings of a prejudice against religion in all its forms. But this might mean that we neglect to ask ourselves some pertinent questions. Would equivalent violence and cruelty simply have arisen from non-religious motives even if all religious considerations had been absent? And how sincere are the religious allegiances of those people who adopt the title of Protestants, Catholics, Muslims, or Christians, and yet then proceed to engage in acts of brutal aggression or other crimes?

12.3 The Redundancy of Religion

The foregoing worries about the selectivity manifested by the *History* when Hume's attention turns to the topic of religion, and more particularly Christianity, are not wholly unwarranted. If one were to invoke Hume's *History* as support for some conclusion about the overall contribution made by religious belief to human welfare or suffering, then this narrative would need to be supplemented by histories that make a greater effort to discern the positive aspects of religion. Moreover, the *History* concentrates almost entirely on the influence exerted by one specific religion, namely Christianity. Hume does include some brief disparaging comments about the religion of the ancient Britons and the paganism of the early Saxons. Thus he asserts, for example, that 'the superstition of the Germans, particularly that of the Saxons, was of the grossest and most barbarous kind' (1778, 1.26). Hume also makes some passing remarks about Islam[4] and Judaism. However, Christianity is the only religion discussed in sufficient detail for us to view the *History* as making

[4] Hume contrasts the religious stance of the early Muslims quite favourably with the attitudes prevalent in the Eastern Roman Empire: 'And though the Alcoran, the original monument of their faith, seems to contain some violent precepts, they were much less infected with the spirit of bigotry and persecution than the indolent and speculative Greeks' (1778, 1, 234–5).

a serious contribution to the stock of evidence on which a judgement about its full range of consequences might be attempted.

Having made these concessions to critics of the *History*, it is nevertheless important to keep in mind that in the eighteenth century the desirability of Christian belief was often advocated in strident and extremely aggressive terms. And in the context of a response to people who take it as obvious that Christianity is a great force for good in human affairs, even Hume's potentially one-sided selection of incidents and personalities exerts a valuable corrective influence. If Christianity is so beneficial, then why does it seem to have been the cause of so much violence and suffering?

Various responses to this question are available to defenders of Christianity. It might seem appropriate to argue, for example, that the true teachings of Christianity have been distorted or misapplied by its fallible human devotees. But the supposition that Christianity could, in the hands of a wiser and morally superior species of sentient beings, exert a positive influence is not an effective reply to the allegation that in the hands of beings like us its effects are generally harmful. A petrol-driven chain saw is potentially a useful tool when utilised by a trained tree surgeon. But pointing out that fact would not rebut a charge of gross negligence if such a device were to be given to a young child as a plaything.

Another reply often made on behalf of Christianity is that the perpetrators of serious wickedness are not genuinely Christians. In its crudest form, this response is simply a question-begging attempt to secure Christianity and Christians against criticism by incorporating a certain level of moral performance into the definition of a 'true' Christian. But as soon as it becomes anything less embarrassing than a piece of empty verbal juggling, the question of evidence comes sharply into focus. If someone is brought up as a Christian in an overwhelmingly Christian culture, publicly professes allegiance to Christianity, attends Christian religious services, and sincerely thinks of himself or herself as a Christian, then we seem to have excellent grounds for concluding that this person qualifies as being a Christian. And if he or she is also guilty of criminal or grossly immoral behaviour, the appropriate conclusion to be drawn in the absence of any further evidence would surely be that this is another instance of a morally depraved Christian rather than an instance of someone who previously manifested all the signs of being a Christian without actually being an adherent of this religion.

Perhaps the most plausible response on behalf of Christianity is the contention that even if Christianity does give rise on occasion to great moral evils, it prevents far more criminal and immoral behaviour than it unfortunately generates. In the absence of belief in Christianity or some alternative religion that postulates the existence of a judging and punishing God, oaths and promises would be worthless and anyone who could see a way of engaging in wrong-doing while evading punishment at the hands of other people would have no motive to refrain from such reprehensible actions. Human beings may be so morally corrupt and self-seeking that even fear of God's judgement and eternal punishment in hell is not entirely capable of restraining their wickedness. But just as it would be the height of foolishness to abolish the courts and prisons simply because they fail to deter all crime, it would be disastrous,

so the argument goes, to undermine the deterrent effect of belief in a divine judge by allowing the public profession and teaching of atheism and agnosticism.

Amusingly, when people who favour this line of argument are asked whether they would cease to behave in a moral fashion if they were to come to the conclusion that no punishment awaited them in an afterlife, they usually profess that they, of course, would continue to behave morally. It seems that their worries are merely about what would happen in the case of other people. Their own commitment to the demands of morality is allegedly sufficiently robust to prevent them from lapsing into moral depravity, but they are concerned about what would befall people of lesser intellectual insight and more restricted sympathies. And in the eighteenth-century debate this distinction was usually expressed in terms of social class. It was conceded that many gentlemen would continue to behave in a decorous and morally acceptable manner, but the danger to good order and the social hierarchy allegedly lay in the reactions of the artisans, labourers, and domestic servants.

Hume, however, regards the appeal to the deterrent effect of belief in a judging God as a wholly unsatisfactory defence of the moral influence of Christianity and similar religions. And the *History* provides us with the facts about human behaviour that allow Hume to strip this appeal of whatever initial plausibility it might possess.

Even if we are suspicious of the hostility towards Christianity that seems to permeate the *History*, it cannot credibly be maintained that Hume has not succeeded in documenting a host of morally reprehensible actions perpetrated by people who thought of themselves as Christians and subject to God's judgement. Some of these people actually thought that they were acting morally and carrying out God's will. As we saw in the preceding chapter, Hume would categorize these cases as ones where the agents involved were responding to a set of perverse moral values inherent in or at least encouraged by many varieties of Christianity. Indeed, some aspects of Christian teaching potentially threaten to subvert totally the everyday morality that Hume sees as founded in basic human sympathy and enlightened self-interest. That element in Christianity that downplays human moral endeavour and concentrates instead on whether a person has sincerely accepted Jesus as his or her saviour seems particularly dangerous in this regard, and in the *Dialogues* Philo expresses some vigorous disgust at this position:

> Amongst ourselves, some have been guilty of that atrociousness, unknown to the EGYPTIAN and GRECIAN superstitions, of declaiming, in express terms, against morality, and representing it as a sure forfeiture of the divine favour, if the least trust or reliance be laid upon it. (1779, 12.222)

In many of the cases described by Hume, however, there is nothing to point us toward the judgement that Christian belief is generating a distorted set of moral opinions. If we take, for example, the disorders that Hume reports in London in 1196, this seems to have been an outbreak of mass criminality undertaken by such a large number of its citizens that we can be confident that many of the people involved thought of themselves as Christians (see 1778, 1.405). Why, then, were these people not deterred from murder and robbery by the threat of divine punishment? If human laws and sanctions exert, as they evidently do, a marked deterrent effect,

how can people who embrace a religion that promulgates in full seriousness the doctrine of a judging God who consigns sinners to eternal punishment in hell fail to be deterred by the clear implications of their own beliefs?

The answer Hume develops to these questions exposes the full weakness of the supposition that threats of divine judgement and punishment can serve as a way of ensuring that people act in accordance with a prescribed moral code. Cleanthes argues in favour of the conventional eighteenth-century view that such threats are an essential bulwark of social stability and good conduct:

> Religion, however corrupted, is still better than no religion at all. The doctrine of a future state is so strong and necessary a security to morals, that we never ought to abandon or neglect it. (1779, 12.219)

Philo, in contrast, totally rejects Cleanthes' assumption that the potency of limited and temporary rewards and punishments in this world entitles us to conclude that sincere belief in infinite punishments in an afterlife will have an equivalent or greater effect on human actions. Philo points out that when we consult experience, we discover that belief in such punishments has, at best, a very limited effect. And he explains this initially puzzling phenomenon by invoking a familiar feature of our reflections and deliberations:

> Consider, I beseech you, the attachment, which we have to present things, and the little concern which we discover for objects so remote and uncertain. When divines are declaiming against the common behaviour and conduct of the world, they always represent this principle as the strongest imaginable (which indeed it is) and describe almost all human kind as lying under the influence of it, and sunk into the deepest lethargy and unconcern about their religious interests. Yet these same divines, when they refute their speculative antagonists, suppose the motives of religion to be so powerful, that, without them, it were impossible for civil society to subsist; nor are they ashamed of so palpable a contradiction. (ibid., 12.220–1)

This discounting of distant eventualities and putative states of existence that are radically unlike those familiar to us in the course of everyday life means that our natural inclinations are rarely checked by religious doctrines concerning punishments and rewards that might befall us in an afterlife. Moreover, as Philo points out, 'a man's natural inclination works incessantly upon him' (ibid., 12.221), whereas religious motives operate only intermittently and are difficult to internalise. Thus no matter how powerful these latter motives might be on particular occasions, a person's natural inclinations continue their work in the background and twist every available rationalization and exculpatory pretext to their own advantage.

Hume accordingly holds that the picture advanced by Christianity and other religions of a divine judge meting out rewards and punishments is not a psychologically efficacious defence against immoral behaviour. And when this conclusion is combined with Hume's view that other aspects of religious belief actually serve to weaken our commitment to the common good and our concern for the people immediately around us, it becomes clear that Hume would not concede that there are any good pragmatic grounds for restraining inquiry into the truth of the metaphysical claims that underpin the religious world-view. If those claims are false or lacking in evidential support, humanity gains nothing from the pretence that this is not the case.

Chapter 13
Was Hume an Atheist?

13.1 Hostility to Christianity

In a letter to Henry Home, Hume confesses that 'the Church is my Aversion' (1954, 26), and, as has been noted by various commentators, his hostility towards organized religion emerges quite plainly at various points in his writings. 'Hume's attitude to religion was one of the chief factors in all his philosophical thinking. His attitude was one of unqualified enmity' (Basson 1958, 18). 'It is no conjecture, but a fact that confronts anyone who reviews his philosophical books in order, that Hume became increasingly hostile toward religion' (Noxon 1973, 77–8).

This hostility was acknowledged by his contemporaries: Reverend John Brown (1722–1787) does not name Hume, but earlier in the following tirade refers to him as 'a certain historian'.

> [Hume] would not only offend the Godly. Now this very man, in defiance of all decency, hath for several years carried on a trade of essay-writing, in the course of which he hath not only misrepresented, abused, and insulted the most essential principles of Christianity, but to the utmost of his power, shaken the foundations of all religion. (Brown 1757, 58)

Hume was also aware of his own reputation. Here is his description of the attempt to prevent his appointment at the Advocate's Library in Edinburgh.

> The violent cry of Deism, atheism, and scepticism, was raised against me; and 'twas represented that my election would be giving the sanction of the greatest and most learned body of men in this country to my profane and irreligious principles. (1932, I, 165)

And 13 years later, in a letter to Gilbert Elliot concerning his appointment as Secretary to the Embassy, Hume says:

> that in spite of Atheism & Deism, of Whiggism & Toryism, of Scoticism & Philosophy, I am now possess'd of an Office of Credit, and of 1,200 Pounds a Year; without Dedication or Application, from the Favour alone of a Person, whom I can perfectly love & respect. (ibid., I, 510)

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It has been conjectured that there are several reasons for Hume's hostility; personal, political and moral. He failed to win chairs at both Edinburgh and Glasgow universities as a result of his perceived irreligious views. Religious tensions were also high at the time, with a Jacobite rebellion led by Bonnie Prince Charlie in 1745, just before the publication of Hume's *Philosophical Essays concerning Human Understanding* in 1748. This rebellion failed but, as Stephen Buckle (2001, 28) suggests, the continuing Catholic militancy was perhaps good reason to be sick of Catholicism in particular, and religion in general. And in Chap. 11 we looked at Hume's moral objections to Christianity: to Hume, the 'monkish virtues' are in fact vices and priests are consequently figures of scorn.[1] In his essay, 'Of National Characters', he writes:

> The ambition of the clergy can often be satisfied only by promoting ignorance and superstition and implicit faith and pious frauds….
>
> Most men have an overweaning conceit of themselves; but *these* have a peculiar temptation to that vice, who are regarded with such veneration, and are even deemed sacred, by the ignorant multitude. (1777a, 200n)

Further, in Chap. 8 we explored the tension between the existence of an allegedly benevolent God and the existence of evil.

That Hume had such personal and political reasons to be hostile to religion is not of first significance. His moral claims, however, are philosophically more important and are problematic for the theist. In this chapter we will consider whether such claims, along with Hume's other arguments against religious belief, provide him with reason to reject religion.

13.2 Hume, the Moderates and the Social Role of Religion

Two aspects of Hume's thought are very clear. First, there is no rational basis for the doctrinal beliefs of particular religions. Second, religion has been the source of many ills. It is, though, too quick to move from these claims to the claim that Hume is intent on defending or promoting atheism or to the claim that *all* religion is a sickness and that the world would be a better place without it. Hume may, for example, think that the world would be better without, what we call today, fundamentalists since, 'where the interests of religion are concerned, no morality can be forcible enough to bind the enthusiastic zealot. The sacredness of the cause sanctities every measure' (1779, 12.222). But what about milder forms of religion, and,

[1] See Hume 1932, I, 150: 'It appears that apothecaries bear the same relation to physicians, that priests do to philosophers; the ignorance of the former makes them positive, and dogmatical, and assuming, and enterprising, and pretending, and consequently much more taking with the people. Follow my example—let us not trouble ourselves about the matter; let the one stuff the beasts' guts with antimony, and the latter their heads with divinity, what is that to us?' There were, however, some exceptions: the Arch-Bishop of Toulouse was 'one of the Men of best Understanding in France' (Hume 1954, 115).

in particular, that of the moderates of Hume's day? In this section we shall consider Hume's relationships with his religious friends and his views on the interplay of politics and religion.

Many of Hume's friends in Edinburgh were religious and these friendships may help us to interpret the scope of Hume's attack on religion. The religious scene of Hume's Scotland was complex. To perhaps oversimplify, there was friction between orthodox Presbyterians of the 'Popular' party (the 'highflyers') and the 'moderates'. The former, following John Knox, rejected all religion that required there to be mediation between God and man, such as that performed by the Catholic priesthood and the bishopry of English Protestantism; believers, rather, could have a direct relationship with God—often involving powerful religious experiences and 'rapturous extasies' (1777c, 179). In contrast, many of Hume's friends were of the moderate party; they were, Penelhum notes, 'learned, urbane, and anxious to free the church from narrowness and bigotry'; their emphasis was on a 'moderate and restrained attachment to the religious life' (2008, 324–5). There was no monkish devotion, zealousness or condoning of the execution of Thomas Aikenhead—all, to the moderates, regrettable features of the orthodox Church. Hugh Blair's sermons and lectures recommended neither retreat from the world nor 'monkish' behaviour; moderate ministers were even allowed to dance, restrictions on ministers-in-training dancing having only been relaxed in 1737 (another of Hume's friends, Alexander Carlyle, was very keen on dancing) (Herman 2001, 108). Other members of the moderate party included John Home, the historian William Robertson, Alexander Wedderburn and Robert Wallace. The latter two came to Hume's defence when efforts were made to excommunicate him, Wallace suggesting that such 'calm contemplative wronghead writers' as Hume need not be hounded (Buchan 2003, 102). Religious debates were not to be conducted with bluster and brimstone, but politely—the moderates embracing the urbane politeness exemplified by the writings of Addison and Shaftesbury.[2] Baier (2011, 92–3) notes that Hume was often 'screened and protected' in this way by his moderate friends, over both religious matters and those less sublime: Hume was forced to resign after having ordered 'obscene' books for the Advocates library (one such being Bussy-Rabutin's *L'Histoire amoureuse des Gaules*, a racy account of the French court). Hume was grateful for such friendship and aware that he was sometimes a burden on his friends: 'Scotland … is the seat of my principal friendships; but it is too narrow a Place for me, and it mortifies me that I sometimes hurt my Friends' (1932, I, 169, 314).

[2] Such politeness and good breeding were ridiculed by the orthodox minister John Witherspoon in his pamphlet, *Ecclesiastical Characteristics: Or The Arcana of Church Policy, being an humble attempt to open up the Mystery of Moderation*. As Herman (2001, 187) points out, though, it was the moderate party that was to prevail: 'In 1756 the Moderates managed to prevent an official censure of David Hume by the General Assembly. In December of that year the pillar of the old orthodoxy, Reverend George Anderson died. Hugh Blair was already minister at St Giles, Edinburgh's biggest church. Five years later William Robertson was named Principal of the University of Edinburgh, and Blair became its Professor of Rhetoric'. Witherspoon, however, contributed to the spread and influence of the Scottish Enlightenment, leaving Scotland for American where he became President of Princeton University.

Hume was protected because he was a good friend, as Smith attests in a letter to Strahan.

> His constant pleasantry was the genuine effusion of good-nature and good-humour, tempered with delicacy and modesty, and without even the slightest tincture of malignity, so frequently the disagreeable source of what is called wit in other men. It never was the meaning of his raillery to mortify; and therefore, far from offending, it seldom failed to please and delight, even those who were the objects of it. To his friends, who were frequently the objects of it, there was not perhaps any one of all his great and amiable qualities, which contributed more to endear his conversation. (Smith 1987, 221)

Hume earned the moniker 'Le Bon David' in virtue of his friendly attitude towards his rival historians, Wallace and Robertson (Hume 1954, 46). In a letter to Wallace, Hume asks 'Why cannot all the world entertain different Opinions about any Subject, as amicably as we do?' (ibid., 30). One topic they discussed was that of miracles (1954, 33n), and something so divorced from everyday life was not going to get in the way of friendship. In response to Price's (1768) criticism of his discussion of miracles in 'On the Importance of Christianity, the Nature of Historical Evidence, and Miracles', Hume says:

> it is but too rare to find a literary Controversy conducted with proper Decency and Good Manners, especially where it turns upon religious Subjects, in which men often think themselves at Liberty to give way to their utmost Rancour and Animosity. But you like a true Philosopher, while you overwhelm me with the Weight of your Arguments,[3] give me Encouragement by the Mildness of your Expressions: and instead of Rogue, *Rascal* and Blockhead, the illiberal Language of the Bishop of Glocester [Warburton] and his School, you address me, as a man mistaken, but capable of Reason and conviction. I own to you, that the Light, in which you have put this Controversy, is new and plausible and ingenious, and perhaps solid. (1954, 233–4)

And, as we saw in Chap. 11, friendship was very important to Hume: 'Destroy love and friendship; what remains in the world worth accepting?' (1777a, 185).

It is not clear, though, whether such friendships and such an atmosphere of decency and good manners give us any reason to think that Hume had any respect for even moderate religion. It must be remembered that the moderates accepted that God is necessary for morality and that there exists a future state, two positions for which it is clear Hume had no sympathy. Moderates may be gentle, urbane people, and they may be friends, but that is not to deny that some of their beliefs could be non-sensical or dangerous in less moderate hands.[4]

There are, though, further reasons to think that Hume is at least tolerant towards certain religious views and practices, and these can be found in his thoughts on wider society and politics. A liberal strain in Hume is clear: 'we, in this island, have ever since enjoyed, if not the best system of government, at least the most entire

[3] See fn. 3, p. 148.

[4] Speaking of Archbishop Laud, Hume thinks 'it is to be regretted, that a man of such spirit, who conducted his enterprises with so much warmth and industry, had not entertained more enlarged views, and embraced principles more favourable to the general happiness of society' (1778, 5.458). Laud was no moderate, but it seems plausible that Hume would also wish for his friends to have more 'enlarged views'.

system of liberty, that ever was known among mankind' (1778, 6.531), and Hume notes the irony in the fact that:

> the precious spark of liberty had been kindled, and was preserved, by the puritans alone; and it was to this sect, whose principles appear so frivolous and habits so ridiculous, that the English owe the whole freedom of their constitution. (ibid., 4.145–6)[5]

Liberty is a good thing and thus, it would seem, people should be free to practice religion in their own way. And in various places Hume does advocate toleration with respect to religion. This, though, would appear not to be for ideological reasons but for practical ones. Religion can stabilise society.[6]

> There was here [in Scotland under Charles II], it is apparent, in the governing body, a disease dangerous and inveterate; and the government had tried every remedy, but the true one, to allay and correct it. An unlimited toleration, after sects have diffused themselves and are strongly rooted, is the only expedient, which can allay their fervour. (ibid., 6.322)

What is important here is stability and that 'the civil union acquire a superiority above religious distinctions' (ibid.).

> In all former ages, not wholly excepting even those of Greece and Rome, religious sects and heresies and schisms, had been esteemed dangerous, if not pernicious to civil government, and were regarded as the source of faction, and private combination, and opposition to the laws. The magistrate, therefore, applied himself directly to the cure of this evil as of every other; and very naturally attempted, by penal statutes, to suppress those separate communities, and punish the obstinate innovators. But it was found by fatal experience, and after spilling an ocean of blood in those theological quarrels, that the evil was of a peculiar nature, and was both enflamed by violent remedies, and diffused itself more rapidly throughout the whole society. Hence, though late, arose the paradoxical principle and salutary practice of toleration. (ibid., 5.130)[7]

There are all sorts of concerns with religion—rational, moral, epistemic, metaphysical—but some of these, or some degree of these, can be overlooked if there are sufficient practical advantages to having some religion or other. 'Disputes concerning religious forms are, in themselves, the most frivolous of any; and merit attention only so far as they have influence on the peace and order of civil society' (ibid., 6.171). And, advantages there are. In the *Dialogues* Cleanthes suggests that 'men, when afflicted, find consolation in religion' (1779, 12.225), and in the *History* he points to how Archbishop Laud (1778, 5.458) and Charles I found such consolation.

> While every thing around him bore a hostile aspect; while friends, family, relations, whom he passionately loved, were placed at a distance, and unable to serve him; he [Charles] reposed himself with confidence in the arms of that being, who penetrates and sustains all nature, and whose severities, if received with piety and resignation, he regarded as the surest pledges of unexhausted favour. (ibid., 5.518)

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[5] See also Hume 1739, 3.2.10.15/564: 'nothing is more essential to public interest, than the preservation of public liberty.'

[6] Voltaire also adopted a sceptical stance towards religion combined with the view that it would be disastrous if religious belief lost hold on the populace. See also fn. 25, pp. 142–3.

[7] See also Hume 1778, 2.14, 3.432–3, 6.328.

Further, monks 'were a sure resource to the poor and indigent' and were 'the best and most indulgent landlords' (ibid., 3.369). The 'advantage' of an accurate historical record 'we owe entirely to the clergy of the church of Rome; who, founding their authority on their superior knowledge, preserved the precious literature of antiquity from a total extinction' (ibid., 2.518); the fifteenth century clergy's knowledge of ancient texts and philosophy meant they 'surpassed all the other members of the society' (ibid., 2.518n, 2.537); and the 'severity of manners' and 'rigid inflexibility of character' encouraged by puritan enthusiasm were good for military discipline (ibid., 5.429).

History thus shows that it can be helpful to have religion yoked to the state. Of course, not all sects are suited to be state religions—'[t]he sentiment of religion, which, if corrupted into superstition, has often little efficacy in fortifying the duties of civil society' (ibid., 1.282)[8]—but Hume might well have accepted that the religion of his moderate friends would be suited for such a role.

There was an ancient model for such pragmatism. Ancient sceptics were not necessarily averse to religion playing a role in society. Penelhum notes that:

> in our own day the term 'skeptic' tends to connote a rejection of religious beliefs, the sceptics of antiquity did not respond to them in this way. For them the wise man would conform to the religious traditions and practices of his own community, but would do this undogmatically: that is, without supposing that they have cosmic backing and without attempting to support them by reason. (2008, 328)

One can dress appropriately in certain buildings, set one's diary to sabbaths and saints' days, while 'keeping one's inner distance' (ibid.).

> It is not totally clear that Hume has no sympathy for this view of religion, at least if the institutions that embody it are in suitable urbane hands, such as those of his moderate friends. (ibid., 336)

There is also, then, a seam of conservatism in Hume. If society is stable even given the existence of certain established religious practices and conventions, then why risk upsetting the balance: take part in the practices and ceremonies, respect the established authority that has evolved in the state in which you happen to live while—if one has a philosophical turn of mind—being aware that such political authority and religious significance is shot through with contingency.

The suggestion is that it is an empirical matter how best for State and Church to be entwined.[9] And, once entwined, it is a relationship that needs careful maintenance on the part of both State and Church: 'Monarchs are expected to bend the knee to whatever god or gods are worshipped in the national church' (Baier 2008, 86),

[8] Although cf. Hume 1778, 3.137: 'The eccliastical privileges, during barbarous times, had served as a cheque on the despotism of kings. The union of all the western churches under the supreme pontiff facilitated the intercourse of nations, and tended to bind all the parts of Europe into a close connection with each other'.

[9] It is similarly an empirical matter whether monarchies should be favoured or republics, and on the whole Hume would seem to favour the former. See 'That Politics May be Reduced to a Science' (1777a, 14–31). For detailed discussion of this question, see Forbes 1985, Ch. 5.

and sometimes it is useful for them to influence and tinker with the details of religious practice:

> It was obvious to all discerning eyes, and had not escaped the king's, that, by the prevalence of fanaticism, a gloomy and sullen disposition established itself among the people; a spirit, obstinate and dangerous; independent and disorderly; animated equally with a contempt of authority, and a hatred to every other mode of religion, particularly to the catholic. In order to mellow these humours, James endeavoured to infuse a small tincture of ceremony into the national worship, and to introduce such rites as might, in some small degree, occupy the mind, and please the senses. (1778, 5.68–9)

Flexibility on the part of the Church can also be advantageous. Baier (2008, 81–99) discusses Hume's attitude to Bishop Tunstall who:

> conformed to each system of religion that was established. His known probity had made this compliance be ascribed, not to an interested or time-serving spirit, but to a sense of duty, which led him to think, that all private opinion ought to be sacrificed to the great concerns of public peace and tranquillity. (ibid., 3.392)

Hume thought Tunstall wise.

Sometimes such interplay and accommodation on the part of Church and State leads to, if not quite harmony, a certain stability.

> The same alliance, which has ever prevailed between kingly power and ecclestiastical authority, was now fully established in England [under James I]; and while the prince assisted the clergy in suppressing schismatics and innovators, the clergy, in return, inculcated the doctrine of an unreserved submission and obedience to the civil magistrate. The genius of the church of England, so kindly to monarchy, forwarded the confederacy; its submission to Episcopal jurisdiction; its attachment to ceremonies, to order, and to a decent pomp and splendour of worship; and in a word, its affinity to the same superstition of the catholics, rather than to the wild fanaticism of the puritans. (ibid., 5.558)

We do not have to take such praise of religion as ironic or as part of a strategy of concealment—it could be sincere, yet pragmatic.[10]

Such an interpretation also applies to Hume's essay on the 'Idea of a Perfect Commonwealth' where he comments on religion (although only cursorily). The clergy is to be included along with a militia because without them 'it is vain to think that any free government will ever have security or stability' (1777a, 525). There is no ideological commitment here; merely pragmatic conservativism:

> To tamper … in the affair, or try experiments merely upon the credit of supposed argument and philosophy, can never be the part of a wise magistrate, who will bear a reverence to what carries the marks of age; and though he may attempt some improvements for the public good, yet will he adjust his innovations, as much as possible, to the ancient fabric, and preserve entire the chief pillars and supports of the constitution. (ibid., 512–3)

That religion plays such a minor role in the ideal commonwealth suggests that its stabilising role is a highly contingent, historical fact about the development of human society and that this does not provide philosophical justification for religion.

[10] And so perhaps Russell's (2008, 284) claim that Hume's irreligion commits him to the view 'that we are better off without religion and religious hypotheses and speculations' needs to be softened.

That certain relations between State and Church have at points in history helped stabilize societies does not in any way legitimize the tenets of particular, historically-situated, religions. This is illustrated by Hume's (tongue-in-cheek) suggestion that clerics should be paid by the state—not to cement their legitimacy—but in order to 'bribe them to indolence' (1778, 3.136). Without a steady income and a steady congregation:

> [e]ach ghostly practitioner, in order to render himself more precious and sacred in the eyes of his retainers, will inspire them with a most violent abhorrence of all other sects and continually endeavor, by some novelty, to excite the languid devotion of his audience. No respect will be paid to truth, morals, or decency, in the doctrines inculcated. Every tenet will be adopted that best suits the disorderly affections of the human frame. (ibid.)

Given that religion exists, it would be dangerous to suppress it. We should instead—and this is cunning indeed—buffer religious fanaticism with state-funded moderates. As Baier says: 'A less religious justification for establishing religion could scarcely be imagined' (2008, 92).[11]

In Sects. 2.2 and 2.3, the negotiations surrounding the planned posthumous publication of the *Dialogues* were discussed, and it is worth looking here at the controversy surrounding Adam Smith's part in the posthumous publication of Hume's short autobiography, *My Own Life*, and the light this might shed on Hume's attitude to religion. Hume gave his friend 'liberty to make what Additions [Smith] pleases to the account of [Hume's] life' (1932, II, 336, 540) and this he did in a letter to the publisher, Strahan, which was then added as a supplement to Hume's piece in 1777. In Smith's account of Hume's final hours, Hume died with 'the utmost cheerfulness, and the most perfect complacency and resignation' (Smith 1987, 203, 218, 206), quipping that he would like Charon to delay his last journey so that he might have the pleasure of 'seeing the downfall of some of the prevailing systems of superstition' (ibid., 204, 219). However, there are, as we noted in Sect. 2.3, various other versions of this account that are more pointedly anti-Christian. In the original letter to Strahan—before it was massaged for publication—Hume longed for 'the churches [to be] shut up, and the clergy sent about their business'. Such sentiments were also expressed in a letter to Wedderburn, along with the observation that Hume dies with 'great chearfulness … and more real resignation to the necessary course of things, than any Whining Christian ever dyed with pretended resignation to the will of God' (Smith 1987, 203). In a recently unearthed letter of 1775, Hume piles on the irony, claiming that our prosperity would be aided if 'all the Churches shall be converted into Riding Schools, Manufactories, Tennis Courts or Playhouses. Old as I am, I expect to see [this] … much advanced. Amen, So be it' (Savage 2012, 257). If the content of these letters is to be taken as accurate, then it seems plausible that, in moments when Hume could fantasise about what he would desire if only the world would allow, then—in a really ideal commonwealth—religion of no kind would have a place; certainly not the religion of the zealots,

[11] That Hume is driven primarily by pragmatic concerns and that he has no wish to endorse the creedal content of any established religion is suggested by the advice he gives to a curate to keep his job even though he had lost his faith. See Hume 1932, I, 439.

but neither the religion of his moderate friends.[12] Given that religions exist, there are certain pragmatic reasons to be tolerant towards their practice; nevertheless, it would have been better if they had never come into existence.

As it turned out, Smith's censorship of the published version of Hume's death proved to no avail—his thinly veiled admiration of Hume's refusal to turn to religion on his death bed caused consternation in the church both north and south of the border. Johnson and Beattie were particularly offended by the allusion to the death of Socrates (Buchan 2003, 307–8). Compare Plato's obituary for Socrates in the *Phaedo* (118)—'Such was the end of our companion, Echecrates, a man who, we would say, was of all those we have known the best, and also the wisest and the most upright'—with Smith's closing paean to Hume: 'Upon the whole, I have always considered him, both in his lifetime and since his death, as approaching as nearly to the idea of a perfectly wise and virtuous man, as perhaps the nature of human frailty will permit' (Smith 1987, 221). With a turn of phrase that Hume would have enjoyed, Smith comments on the controversy:

> A single, and as, I thought a very harmless Sheet of paper, which I happened to Write concerning the death of our late friend Mr Hume, brought upon me ten times more abuse than the very violent attack I had made upon the whole commercial system of Great Britain. (ibid., 251)

We have claimed, then, that Hume at times is pragmatic with respect to the role of religion in society: certain forms of religion can be tolerated if they are conducive to peaceful sociability, and the religion of many of his friends was of just this kind. Hume's feelings for his friends were deep, and they were so important to him that they even played a role in persuading him not to publish his most extended, developed and final study of religious belief, *The Dialogues concerning Natural Religion*, in his lifetime. It is this work to which we now turn.

13.3 Hume's 'Reversal'

Parts 1–11 of the *Dialogues* involve Philo uncovering the weakness of Cleanthes' arguments and the emptiness of Demea's mysticism. In Part 12, however, there is a rather baffling change of tone on Philo's part and he seems to lose his hostility to religion and to adopt some kind of deist position.

[12] He was, though, a realist. He did not expect it to die out soon. Hume's Charon predicted that it would take quite a while: 'O you loitering rogue; that won't happen these two hundred years; do you fancy I will give you a lease for so long a time? Get into the boat this instant' (Smith 1987, 204). Having said that, there was certainly optimism with respect to some enlightenment to come: 'Though in a future age, it will probably become difficult to persuade some nations, that any human, two-legged creature could ever embrace such principles' (1777c, 168) as that of the Real Presence; 'it is a thousand to one, but these nations themselves shall have something full as absurd in their own creed, to which they will give a most implicit and most religious assent' (ibid.).

> No one has a deeper sense of religion impressed on his mind, or pays more profound adoration to the divine Being, as he discovers himself to reason, in the inexplicable contrivance and artifice of nature. 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 as at all times to reject it. (1779, 12.214)

This is a most perplexing statement and 'this volte-face is one of the crucial features of the *Dialogues,* success in the explanation of which is a test of any interpretation' (Dancy 1995, 30). There are various readings of what is going on here, and most of these fall into two basic kinds: either Hume is expressing Philo's (and his own) genuine form of theism or deism, or he is engaging in additional self-protective dissimulation. In what follows we will consider various interpretations along these lines; these are not mutually exclusive and we will end by suggesting that the truth may lie in more than one of them.

Perhaps the most popular interpretation of Hume's Reversal is that he is simply dissimulating, and, as discussed in Chap. 2, this is because overt atheism could be dangerous. At the very least, openly atheist writers would have been seen as too much of a risk for publishing houses. Hume's Reversal could therefore be seen as a way of concealing his views since (casual) readers will take the pious ending of the book as sincere. Good grounds for this interpretation are that, as we have seen, Hume admits to concealing his views when publishing the *Treatise*; 'castrating' his work, 'cutting off its nobler Parts' (1932, I, 25).

There are, though, reasons to doubt this interpretation, or to doubt that this is the full story. First, Hume's views were well known. As we saw in Chap. 1, efforts had already been made by Reverend Anderson to excommunicate him in 1756, following a pamphlet published by Reverend John Bonar in 1755, *An analysis of the moral and religious sentiments contained in the writings of Sopho and David Hume Esq.* Bonar claimed that there was 'poison contained in these volumes' and that Hume was a 'worker of iniquity'. Hume, in a letter to Ramsay, says of these events:

> They did not propose to burn me, because they cannot. But they intend to give me over to Satan, which they think they have the power of doing…. Anderson, the godly, spiteful, pious, splenetic, charitable, unrelenting, meek, persecuting, Christian, inhuman, peace-making, furious Anderson, is at present very hot in pursuit of Lord Kames. (1932, I, 224)

Hume quips that he is 'preparing for the Day of Wrath' (ibid.).

It might be thought that since Hume was resigned to publishing the *Dialogues* posthumously, then why should he bother to conceal his views. Hume, however, may have feared potential repercussions for his friends and publishers and so decided to be elusive to the end.[13] Forceful efforts would probably also have been made to restrict the open circulation of any avowedly anti-religious work. And Hume, rightly or wrongly, was interested in literary fame, his 'ruling passion' (1777b, 9).

[13] See also Hume 1932, I, 112: 'I hope I have examined this Question [concerning the Protestant Succession] as coolly & impartially as if I were remov'd a thousand Years from the present Period: But this is what some People think extremely dangerous, & sufficient, not only to ruin me for ever, but also throw some Reflection on all my Friends, particularly those with whom I am connected at present'.

In order to secure the protection of his friends and of his literary legacy, Hume might have thought that he only required enough in the way of plausible deniability to persuade perhaps indifferent civil magistrates that there is some room for doubt about the overall message of the *Dialogues*. For these reasons, it is, as Coleman (2007, xxxv) puts it, 'deliciously easy to interpret' Hume as being wholly ironic in his Reversal, and in the other seemingly conciliatory things he says elsewhere in his works concerning religion. We will claim, though, that the irony interpretation is not the whole story.

In order to get to the bottom of Hume's Reversal, it should first be noted that the *Dialogues* have another layer of interpretative difficulty not obvious to most modern readers. There is a certain amount of literary allusion to Cicero (106–43 BCE), the Roman orator, and this would have been obvious to learned contemporary readers of Hume. His *De Natura Deorum* (*On the Nature of the Gods*) is a dialogue concerning the existence of the Roman gods, and some of Hume's dialogues echo the ancient text. Cicero writes as though reporting on a conversation in which Cotta, an Academic sceptic (Cicero's own position), criticizes the views of Balbus (a Stoic) and Velleius (an Epicurean).[14] In Hume's introduction Pamphilus asserts that the interest lies in the nature, rather than the existence, of God since no one would question the latter. Cicero makes the same claim. Neither Pamphilus' nor Cicero's suggestion is heeded since the various protagonists clearly do go on to discuss God's existence. The respective narrators' conclusions are also strikingly similar. Here is Hume: 'I cannot but think, that PHILO's principles are more probable than DEMEA's; but that those of CLEANTHES approach still nearer the truth' (1779, 12.228)—an odd pronouncement given that Philo seems to have had the better of the argument (and that Philo is usually seen as expressing Hume's own line). And here is Cicero: 'we parted, Velleius thinking Cotta's discourse to be the truer, while I felt that that of Balbus approximated more nearly to a semblance of the truth' (1951, 383)—and again, odd, given Cotta's performance and Cicero's seeming allegiance with him. Further, Cotta, like Philo, criticizes all the theistic arguments on offer, but then professes that he nevertheless believes in a deity; Hume's Reversal, therefore, has a precursor in Cicero. What are we to make of these parallels? First, any interpretation that focuses on concealment takes on a different character. The Reversal cannot be seen as straightforwardly diversionary since the literary allusion to Cicero would be readily understood by Hume's likely readership. Perhaps, though, this is what makes the concealment so effective. There are no clues to what Hume really thinks since the structure of the *Dialogues* could be seen as merely a literary exercise in presenting a contemporary version of an ancient text; it is not *Hume's* (rather clumsy) cover-up; it is, if anyone's, Cicero's.[15]

[14] The real Cotta, who was one of Cicero's closest friends, was, like Cicero, a pupil of the Academic scholarch *Philo* of Larissa. And one of the Stoic philosophers cited as an authority by Balbus is *Cleanthes*.

[15] 'Those however who seek to learn my personal opinion on the various questions show an unreasonable degree of curiosity. In discussion it is not so much weight of authority as force of argument that should be demanded' (Cicero 1951, 13).

Some interpreters of Hume have argued that religious beliefs are 'natural beliefs' in a sense of 'natural' laid out, but not endorsed by, Gaskin (1988, 116–31).[16] Natural beliefs are those that are essential for action, universal, and those that cannot be dislodged by philosophical argument. Sceptical conclusions concerning inductive reasoning and the existence of the external world clash with common life beliefs about the existence of the world and the regularities within it, and the only resolution of such a clash is that we must continue to follow our natural belief-forming propensities: 'nature will always maintain her rights, and prevail in the end over any abstract reasoning whatsoever' (1772a, 5.2/41). Some have argued that this is the case with respect to religious beliefs. The sceptical arguments that Hume articulates in the *Treatise, Enquiry* and the *Dialogues* clash with our natural religious propensities, but again nature prevails and our religious propensities are unaffected by such abstract reasoning. Philo's Reversal involves the expression of his natural beliefs concerning God, beliefs that he cannot but hold.

It is very plausible that certain beliefs are natural in this sense—those concerning inductive uniformity, the reliability of the senses, and the independent continuity of the external world would appear to satisfy these criteria—but it also seems plainly false that religious beliefs have this status. Such beliefs are not essential for action, or universal.

> The belief of universal, intelligent power has been very generally diffused over the human race, in all places and in all ages; but it has neither perhaps been so universal as to admit of no exception, nor has it been, in any degree, uniform in the ideas, which it has suggested. (1777c, 134)

Theistic beliefs can also be dislodged by philosophical argument. One who does not believe in the external world needs treatment; atheists, however, are not crazy or pathological even though their views may not be correct.

To reject the claim that religious beliefs are natural in this sense may seem to be inconsistent with what Hume sometimes says. The following, for example, is suggestive of the natural belief interpretation: 'the universal propensity to believe in invisible, intelligent power, if not an original instinct … [is] at least a general attendant of human nature' (ibid., 184). This claim, however, should be taken to concern a historical trend, not an essential feature of human cognition—people have, perhaps for various psychological or sociological reasons, believed in all kinds of gods throughout history. Thus Philo's (and Hume's) Reversal is no indication of the naturalness of religious beliefs.[17]

Even though Philo has provided a powerful case against certain *arguments* for the existence of God, there may still be another route to belief. The argument from

[16] Gaskin follows Kemp Smith's (1941) use of 'natural belief'.

[17] Livingston (1998, 148) cites the following passage in support of his interpretation of Hume as some kind of theist: '[it is] ridiculous to assert that our Author [Hume] denies the Principles of Religion, when he looks upon them as equally certain with the Objects of senses. If I be as much assured of these Principles, as that this Table at which I now write is before me; Can any Thing further be desired by the most rigorous Antagonist?' This is taken, though, from Hume's *Letter from a Gentleman to a Friend*, which, as discussed in Chap. 3, is not a safe guide to the position that Hume actually wishes to defend.

design in particular may have some persuasive power even in the face of Philo's objections. In the presence of the majesty of nature one cannot help but *feel* that there is a creator. Cleanthes asks us to:

> anatomize the eye: Survey its structure and contrivance; and tell me, from your own feeling, if the idea of a contriver does not immediately flow in upon you with a force like that of sensation. (1779, 3.154)

And Philo offers a similar suggestion:

> In many views of the universe, and of its parts, particularly the latter, the beauty and fitness of final causes strike us with such irresistible force, that all objections appear (what I believe they really are) mere cavils and sophisms. (ibid., 12.202)[18]

Such an interpretation of Hume is easy to read into his reported comment on walking back from the Advocates' Library one night in Edinburgh with Adam Ferguson, Chair of natural philosophy at the university (Graham 1901, 42): 'Oh, Adam, can anyone contemplate the wonders of the firmament and not believe in a God!'). Perhaps, then, Hume's Reversal is sincere (and not ironic), brought on by the 'irresistible force' of nature.

We do not, however, find such an interpretation to be fully satisfying. Even if there is some truth to it, and Hume was perhaps sometimes struck in this way, it is not the whole story of the Reversal. It is true that people sometimes have such 'transcendental' experiences, or experiences of the 'numinous', as they are sometimes called. One can, like Ansel Adams the photographer, have them standing in front of mountains: 'No matter how sophisticated you may be, a huge granite mountain cannot be denied—it speaks in silence to the very core of your being' (Adams 1994, 70). But whether one takes such experiences to be indicative of a supernatural designer is a matter of one's temperament and one's prior beliefs. Thomas Gray, the eighteenth-century poet, finds religious significance in such experiences:

> In our little journey up to Grande Chartreuse I do not remember to have gone ten paces, without an exclamation that there was no restraining: Not a precipice, not a torrent, not a cliff, but is pregnant with religion and poetry. There are certain scenes that would awe an atheist into belief without the help of any other argument. (1739, 66)

But atheists, of course, would not find this kind of significance in such experiences, even though they may find them uplifting, life-affirming and important. Further, we do not think too much weight should be put on Hume's reported comment concerning the wonders of the firmament; it is better to seek a coherent interpretation of Hume's texts.

13.4 Friendship

Two of the main characters in Hume's *Dialogues*, Cleanthes and Philo, are friends; they live together in 'unreserved intimacy' (1779, 12.214). Richard Dees (2002) argues that since Philo is concerned that his argumentative zeal may be damaging to

[18] Note that in Hume's final revision of the text, 'I believe' has been added in place of 'perhaps'.

the friendship between him and Cleanthes, he pulls away from his attacks and instead emphasises the points of agreement between them. This indicates, Dees argues, that Philo *and Hume* think that morality (broadly speaking) is more important than metaphysics: it is more important to nourish friendships—a natural virtue—than it is to win arguments about matters that are so far removed from common life, as was suggested in Sect. 13.2 of this chapter. Hume is therefore seen as some kind of pragmatist.

This is an attractive reading of Hume since it is what Sessions (2002) calls an 'internal' interpretation of the *Dialogues*, that is, one not (solely) involving the analytic extraction of arguments from the text, or placing the text in its historical context—these would be external interpretations—but one that involves 'not simply comparing words (especially not just statements or propositions) spoken by one character with words spoken by another, but also seeing how what a character says connects with what he and other agents do, with how he speaks and acts, with the dramatic setting, personal relationships, and so on' (ibid., 3). The dramatic relations of the characters illustrate the relative importance of the topic of discussion—God—in the wider context of common life. The dialogue form (at least in Part 12) is not therefore part of a strategy for the concealment of Hume's anti-religious views, or simply an interesting and literary way of presenting an argument; it is, rather, integral to the argument itself—it illustrates an important aspect of Hume's naturalistic approach. The characters' discussion of religion relates not just to the philosophy of religion, but also to morality, the latter illustrated not by *what* the characters say, but by *how* they say it.

This interpretation therefore suggests a rather different reason for why Hume's last words on religion were written in dialogue form. Philo's claims in Part 12 are not simply ironic as many commentators have claimed. 'These, Cleanthes, are my unfeigned sentiments on this subject' (1779, 12.219)—it would be hard to say this to a friend if one did not mean it. Philo, then, is genuinely looking for a belief to latch onto that he can share with Cleanthes, and this he finds: a belief in some kind of designer or ultimate cause of the universe, although his belief concerns an altogether less grand version of Cleanthes' traditional, Christian God (as we will see below). And he arrives at this belief, not via philosophical reasoning along the traditional lines of the argument from design; it is, rather, the imagination—Hume's naturalistic version, that is—driven by the moral demands of friendship that leads him to such a belief. On such an interpretation the *Dialogues* are a dramatic portrayal of the interplay between our causal, probabilistic and moral reasoning, an illustration of how we do think and of how we should think. And the final twist in Part 12 highlights the causal role of friendship with respect to testimony. In line with Hume's naturalism, Philo is driven to such a reconciliation by the causal influence of the intimate relations he has with his friend. Demea's departure is of great importance to the kind of internal interpretation that is recommended here. When he is around, Philo cannot help dazzling with the destructive power of his arguments. Without such an audience, and when he is only in the company of his intimate friend Cleanthes, then his pronouncements have a rather different character.

Perhaps, though, the importance of friendship and morality could be maintained without impacting on Hume's account of belief. Philo is in danger of offending Cleanthes; he has already offended Demea who 'did not at all relish the latter part of the discourse; and he took occasion soon after, on some pretence or other, to leave the company' (ibid., 11.213). Action is therefore required, but this need only amount to being tactful. Hume also claims that it is virtuous to be a polite conversationalist and to show good manners, and perhaps this is all that Philo's Reversal indicates—tact. On such an interpretation he does not really have beliefs in common with Cleanthes; he is just saying that to be conciliatory, and thus friendship can remain subordinate to probabilistic causal reasoning when it comes to the acquisition of belief.

The responsibilities of friendship bear more on the question of the manner in which a debate between friends should be conducted rather than on the question of what should ultimately be believed by the parties concerned. Hume does hope that the *Dialogues* can be seen as a portrait of how debate on matters of religion can be conducted without the destruction of friendships, but it would be an odd philosopher who altered his actual opinions, rather than his mode of expressing those opinions, simply because a friend held some opposed view.

There is a difference, though, between simply believing what your friends say, and probing your differences in order to find core beliefs that are shared. It is worth exploring further, then, whether Philo can be seen as being sincere in Part 12 and whether he does indeed believe in some kind of deity.

13.5 True Religion

Key to the Reversal is the claim that there is just a 'dispute of words' (ibid., 12.216) between the theist and the sceptic; it is a 'mere verbal controversy' (ibid., 12.217). What could Hume mean by this? There certainly appears to be more to the dispute since, on the face of it, it would seem to concern metaphysical and moral issues of the highest import.

First, the reflective theist should accept some of Philo's criticism. The analogy between nature and the works of man is weak and thus there need only be a weak analogy between the designer and creator of the universe and man. And the religious sceptic should accept that the argument from design, as an argument from analogy, is valid—it abides by the everyday canons of good reasoning—and therefore its conclusion '*that the cause or causes of order in the universe probably bear some remote analogy to human intelligence*' (ibid., 12.229; Hume's emphasis) should be accepted. Philo asks:

> Where then, cry I to both these antagonists, is the subject of your dispute? The theist allows, that the original intelligence is very different from human reason: The atheist allows, that the original principle of order bears some remote analogy to it. Will you quarrel, Gentlemen, about the degrees, and enter into a controversy, which admits not of any precise meaning, nor consequently of any determination? (ibid., 12.218)

Both the reflective theist and the religious sceptic believe that the ultimate cause of the universe is *in some way* similar to man.

> The principle which first arranged, and still maintains, order in this universe, bears not also some remote inconceivable analogy to the other operations of nature, and among the rest to the œconomy of human mind and thought. (ibid.)

The verbal dispute is over whether to call this cause 'God'.

On this interpretation of Hume's Reversal, proper reflection on the argument from design leads to 'true religion' (ibid., 12.219) and to a belief concerning the existence of a deity. The content of this belief is therefore crucial to our interpretation of Hume. First, there is certainly no need to infer that the cause of the universe has the attributes associated with a Christian God such as omnipotence, omniscience and omnibenevolence. Nevertheless there is something intelligence-like behind creation—a deity of some sort—and thus Gaskin (1988, 219–22) interprets Hume as arguing for 'attenuated deism'.[19] In merely saying this, however, we have a position that is threatening to organized religion. If there is no reason to attribute the Christian attributes to the deity, then there is no need to embrace the trappings of Christianity. There is, for example, no reason to think that the deity will be listening, could listen, and, if he were, that he would answer—there is no reason to pray.

> The Addressing of our virtuous Wishes & Desires to the Deity, since the Address has no Influence on him, is only a kind of rhetorical Figure, in order to render these Wishes more ardent & passionate. (Hume 1932, I, 51)

Organized religion, though, 'still seek[s] the divine favour … either by frivolous observances, by intemperate zeal, by rapturous extasies, or by the belief of mysterious and absurd opinions' (1777c, 179). Further, there is no reason to love the deity, one of the mainstays of Christianity: 'A remote Ancestor, who has left us Estates & Honours, aquir'd with Virtue, is a great Benefactor, & yet 'tis impossible to bear him any Affection, because unknown to us' (1932, I, 51). As Penelhum puts it: attenuated deism is not 'devotionally nourishing' (2000, 19).[20]

It is certainly the case, then, that Hume is not a Christian, but we will also claim that the term 'deist' is misleading. Deism implies belief in a being, one that has supernatural elements; the deity, for example, creates the natural world, thus acting from outside of nature. We argue, though, that Hume is not committed to any such claims. The strength and content of the analogy between man and the ultimate principle is crucial here. The most sceptical interpretation of Philo's Reversal is that his claim that God is in certain ways analogous to man is empty: since every thing resembles every other thing *in some way*, there is no content to Philo's concept

[19] Others call such deism 'minimal' or 'anaemic'. See Sessions 2002, 259nn14, 15. Such a minimal claim can also be seen as shared by Demea. Cleanthes asks: 'how do you mystics [such as Demea], 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?' (1779, 4.158).

[20] See Huxley 1878, 146: 'if we turn from the *Natural History of Religion*, to the *Treatise*, the *Inquiry*, and the *Dialogues*, the story of what happened to the ass laden with salt, who took to the water, irresistibly suggests itself. Hume's theism, such as it is, dissolves away in the dialectic river, until nothing is left but the verbal sack in which it was contained.'

of a deity. Nothing more is being said than 'there is a cause of the universe'. Philo's pronouncements concerning 'true religion' are ironic. Philo, after all, claims that the cause of the universe has some resemblance to vegetable growth and animal reproduction: 'the rotting of a turnip, the generation of an animal, and the structure of human thought … are energies that probably bear some remote analogy to each other.' (1779, 12.218)[21,22]

The attenuated deist view, however, suggests that Philo is committed to a stronger analogy. The cause of the universe has *intelligence*; it is *a being*. This interpretation should therefore be rejected since Philo's empiricism commits him to belief only in the very minimum necessary to explain the order of nature, and for this an intelligent being is not required.

There may, however, be middle ground between these two interpretations, between a contentless 'deity' and an intelligent being. To investigate this middle ground let us consider Hume's conception of human intelligence, that which is analogous to the intelligence of the deity. There is a dominant tradition in which humans are seen to hold a special place in the natural order of things, a place higher than that of animals. This, some philosophers have argued, is because we have a form of cognitive insight into the nature of reality that animals lack. Through *a priori* reasoning we can come to acquire knowledge of the world: we can learn, for example, that God exists and that every event has a cause. Such knowledge is acquired using our 'reason' or 'understanding'. The first sentence of Locke's *Essay concerning Human Understanding* reads: 'it is the *Understanding* that sets Man above the rest of sensible Beings, and gives him all the Advantage and Dominion, which he has over them' (1689, 43). And later he claims that reason is 'that Faculty, whereby Man is supposed to be distinguished from Beasts, and wherein it is evident he much surpasses them' (ibid., 668). Such cognitive powers elevate us above animals and nearer to God in the natural order or in 'the great chain of being'[23] and ground the popular Enlightenment idea that we are made in the image of God.

Hume's philosophy involves a thorough rejection of this picture. First, we cannot have *a priori* insight into the nature of reality; rather, all our beliefs about the world are explained in terms of mechanistic psychological processes resulting from our regular experience. Second, we are not made in the image of God. Our cognitive powers are not a reflection of the divine that distinguishes us from animals. We are just another mechanism within the natural world, and the difference between human and animal thought is one of degree.

Hume's account of the similarities between human and animal thought is key to understanding his overall naturalistic philosophy. To many eighteenth-century thinkers—and still to some people today—Hume's claims concerning animals are

[21] Kemp Smith notes that in Part 5 of the *Dialogues* Hume originally wrote 'that the universe, sometime, arose from some kind of design' (1779, 5.169), but later replaced 'some kind of design' with 'something like design'.

[22] At (1777c, 168) Hume makes reference to certain Egyptian sects who worshipped leeks and onions. See Beauchamp 2007, 152 for further information about his sources.

[23] See Lovejoy 1936, for an extended discussion of this conception of nature.

extremely shocking. Enlightenment thinkers embraced new scientific methods and great advances were being made in the study of the physiology and anatomy of our bodies. The Cartesian view, however, was that such investigations could not explain the essence of the mind. A wholly mechanistic explanation could perhaps be given of animal behaviour, but the mind, the seat of our understanding, reason and free will, could not be accounted for in this way. According to Hume, though, we are all—humans and animals alike—mechanistic creatures and therefore fit subjects for the scientific investigation of both our physical constitution and mental functioning; this is so for our bodies and for our minds.

> One of the most basic points of his whole philosophy: that where philosophers thought they saw the operations of reason, the divine spark at work in man, they were watching nothing more than a mundane mechanism and its natural effects in the mind. (Craig 1987, 85)
>
> For Hume, the human being is no longer the darling, even the fallen darling, of the cosmic order, the pinnacle of a rational plan executed by a benevolent deity who built us in his own image, but a struggling, not terribly well-equipped, and not terribly nice animal fighting for its niche alongside other human beings, with whom, when things go well, it is just about able to cooperate in a fragile social order. (Blackburn 2008, 7)

For Hume, then, human cognition and reasoning amounts to the regular machinations of the principles of association. Perhaps, then, this is where the analogy with the 'deity' lies. The way in which the cause of the order of the universe is similar to human intelligence is that it is lawlike and runs according to regular principles. The claim that there is an analogy between the original principle of nature and human intelligence is not an entirely empty one; they are similar in virtue of their lawlikeness.

Philo points to the regularities in nature:

> were I obliged to defend any particular system of this nature (which I never willingly should do), I esteem none more plausible than that which ascribes an eternal, inherent principle of order to the world; though attended with great and continual revolutions and alterations. (1779, 6.174)[24]

And perhaps appreciation of these revolutions and alterations could lead to the kind of revelation that Hume had on walking back from the Advocate's library, the kind of revelation acceptable to atheist naturalists such as Dennett.

> [The universe] is surely a being that is greater than anything any of us will ever conceive of in detail worthy of its detail…. I could not pray to it, but I can stand in affirmation of its magnificence. This world is sacred. (1995, 520)

On such an interpretation, Hume is a naturalist. We should look for—and we cannot help seeing the world in terms of—a mechanistic explanation of the order of the world and of the creatures within it.

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[24] Similarities with Cicero can again be seen here: 'And so I fully agreed with the part of your discourse that dealt with nature's punctual regularity, and what you termed its concordant interconnexion and correlation; but I could not accept your assertion that this could not have come about were it not held together by a single divine breath. On the contrary, the system's coherence and persistence is due to nature's forces and not to divine power' (1951, 313).

In Chap. 1 we suggested that the Mindedness Hypothesis helps focus the dispute between theists, deists and atheists. Theists and strong deists claim that the order of the universe is best explained by the existence of a minded being. We may not be able fully to comprehend the mental powers of such a being, although the coherence of these positions depends on our seeing the mind of God as more similar to the human mind than it is to any set of processes that would not normally be construed as constituting a mind. Hume's ultimate position, though, is neutral with respect to the Mindedness Hypothesis. As far as Hume is concerned, chance is not the name of any real phenomenon and everything in the world is, when properly understood, lawlike and runs according to regular principles. One thing or potential thing that would not fit that description is the God of traditional theism with his supposed radical freedom to act in a genuinely anomalous way. But the supposition that the cause of the order in the universe is something that operates in a lawlike way would not rule out much else. The claim that the original principle is lawlike may in some way suggest analogies with the lawlikeness manifest by minds, but there may also be analogies, as said, with rotting turnips and animal generation. Hume is therefore agnostic with respect to whether the original principal of the universe is more similar to the human mind than it is to other lawlike processes that are not seen as minded. True religion is a very broad church. The order of nature does not suggest the existence of the Christian God or a minded being who is the author of that order. Hume is not a Christian, nor is he a deist, at least in the sense that he does not believe in a supernatural cause of the universe. He is better seen as a naturalist, and one who is (at least) agnostic and genuinely suspends judgement with respect to the Mindedness Hypothesis. The only question that remains, then, is whether Hume is engaged in a defence of atheism in the modern sense of the term.

13.6 Atheism

Piecemeal reading of Hume's writings on religion can be confusing. There are, for example, apparent suggestions that we should turn to faith given the poor testimony in favour of miracles, but then, at the end of the *Dialogues*, after rejecting the argument from design, he suggests that we should turn to revealed religion and miracles: 'A person, seasoned with a just sense of the imperfections of natural reason, will fly to revealed truth with the greatest avidity' (1779, 12.227). It is important, then, that Hume's writings are looked at synoptically. And if we do so, we see that they combine to form a multi-fronted attack on organized religion. Tactically his approach is shrewd given his intention to persuade people that their religious beliefs are unwarranted. He aims to undermine the various routes to religion one by one and, after one has read his whole corpus, one can join up the dots to discover the shocking picture: perhaps there is no reason at all to believe in a Christian God. And further, in the *Natural History* Hume explains why some of us nevertheless have such beliefs even though we are lacking good reasons, even of an everyday kind, in support of them. The fact, then, that Hume never reveals the

full destructive power of his arsenal in any particular text has both prudential advantage—(partial) concealment is forced on him by society—and strategic advantage: it enables him to keep Christian readers with him, even though the ground is shifting underneath them—miracles are in danger, and then natural theology—until, hopefully, they come so far with him that the ground falls away completely, leaving their beliefs with a naturalistic explanation and without justification. Thus, 'Hume's critique of religion and religious belief is, as a whole, subtle, profound, and damaging to religion in ways which have no philosophical antecedents and few successors' (Gaskin 1993, 313).

Is, then, Hume constructing in his writings a case for full-blooded atheism? There is some reason to deny that he is. Agnosticism may better capture Hume's stance. Agnostics are non-committal: they do not think that there are any good reasons to believe in God, but they do not believe they have the epistemic authority to claim he does not exist—he still could; it is possible. And on this last count, Hume perhaps looks to be an agnostic: he has not proven that God does not exist. The closest he comes is in his discussion of the argument from evil. If the logical argument were to be successful, then this would constitute a demonstration of atheism, but Hume admits that he cannot conclusively defeat theodicy. We have also argued that Hume is agnostic with respect to the Mindedness Hypothesis. We do not have enough evidence to decide whether or not the original principle of the universe has properties that would make it natural for us to place it in the category of minded things.

Atheists, however, do not have to claim that the non-existence of God can be *proven*. We have argued that Hume is a naturalist. He believes in a mechanistic explanation of man and nature. Beliefs concerning the original principle can be inferred from the ongoing order of nature, but these beliefs are highly indeterminate and do not amount to traditional theism or even to deist commitments. The bare possibility of the existence of a deity may be consistent with Hume's arguments, but nevertheless we think that, to all intents and purposes, Hume is an atheist.

We have seen that in places Hume explicitly denies that this is so. This could, as discussed, be for prudential reasons, and here there is an illuminating claim from the *Natural History*.

> The gods of all polytheists are not better than the elves or fairies of our ancestors, and merit as little any pious worship or veneration. These pretended religionists are really a kind of superstitious atheists, and acknowledge no being, that corresponds to our idea of a deity. No first principle of mind or thought: No supreme government and administration: No divine contrivance or intention in the fabric of the world. (1777c, 145)

Hume can talk openly about the views of ancient polytheists without fear of accusations concerning his own views. What is it, then, that leads Hume to say that such thinkers should be seen as atheists. They do not acknowledge the existence of the traditional God of theism. They do not believe that the universe was created by a minded being, or that such a being continues to play a providential role, or that such a being is the source of earthly justice. How accurate a characterization this is of the views of all early polytheists is somewhat disputable, but what does seem clear is that Hume does not merely lack these foregoing beliefs but actually holds that they are considerably more likely to be false than true.

There are, then, two dominant themes in Hume's attitude to religion. First, it is clear, or so we have argued, that Hume is engaged in constructing a defence of atheism. There are no good reasons to believe in a deity (in any religious sense of the word) and, furthermore, religion is seen as a generally pernicious element in society and it would have been better if it had never acquired such a hold over us.

> Hume's writings on religion are anything but frivolous: they are motivated by his earnest desire to 'open the eyes of the public' to what in his view is, and has been historically, one of the world's greatest evils. (Millican 2002, 40)
>
> All of Hume's philosophy, all of his history, was to be directed towards the goal of teaching men and women to seek happiness in the world of common life, not in the life hereafter, and to pay attention to their duties to their fellow citizens rather than to a suppositious god. (Phillipson 1989, 14)

Second, fanaticism in all its forms is to be avoided and it is therefore difficult to see Hume arm in arm across the centuries with certain militant atheists of today. There are more important things than debate concerning such sublime metaphysical matters.

> If men attempt the discussion of questions, which lie entirely beyond the reach of human capacity, such as those concerning the origin of worlds, or the œconomy of the intellectual system or region of spirits, they may long beat the air in their fruitless contests, and never arrive at any determinate conclusion. (1772a, 8.1/81)

There are friendships, civility and virtues to be cultivated. Hume was not overly concerned that some, probably most, of his friends were religious even if, from time to time, his friends found his scepticism frustrating. In a letter to the Reverend Hugh Blair, Hume says:

> Whenever I have had the pleasure to be in your company, if the discourse turned upon any common subject of literature or reasoning, I always parted from you both entertained and instructed. But when the conversation was diverted by you from this channel towards the subject of your profession; tho I doubt not but your intentions were very friendly towards me, I own I never received the same satisfaction: I was apt to be tired, and you to be angry. (1932, I, 351)

The published works, though, are far from tired. And if present-day atheists of a combative temperament feel they are in need of scripture, of chapter and verse to quote to support their views, then there is no better place to go than the collected works of David Hume. There they will find a sophisticated arsenal of arguments for their purpose; a lifetime's worth of interpretative puzzles; much humour; elegant prose; and, certainly to their liking, an all-out—although to some extent concealed—assault on their common enemy.

> Survey most nations and most ages. Examine the religious principles, which have, in fact, prevailed in the world. You will scarcely be persuaded, that they are any thing but sick men's dreams: Or perhaps will regard them more as the playsome whimsies of monkies in human shape, than the serious, positive, dogmatical asseverations of a being, who dignifies himself with the name of rational. (1777c, 184)

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