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

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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.

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Alan Bailey and Dan O'Brien

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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.

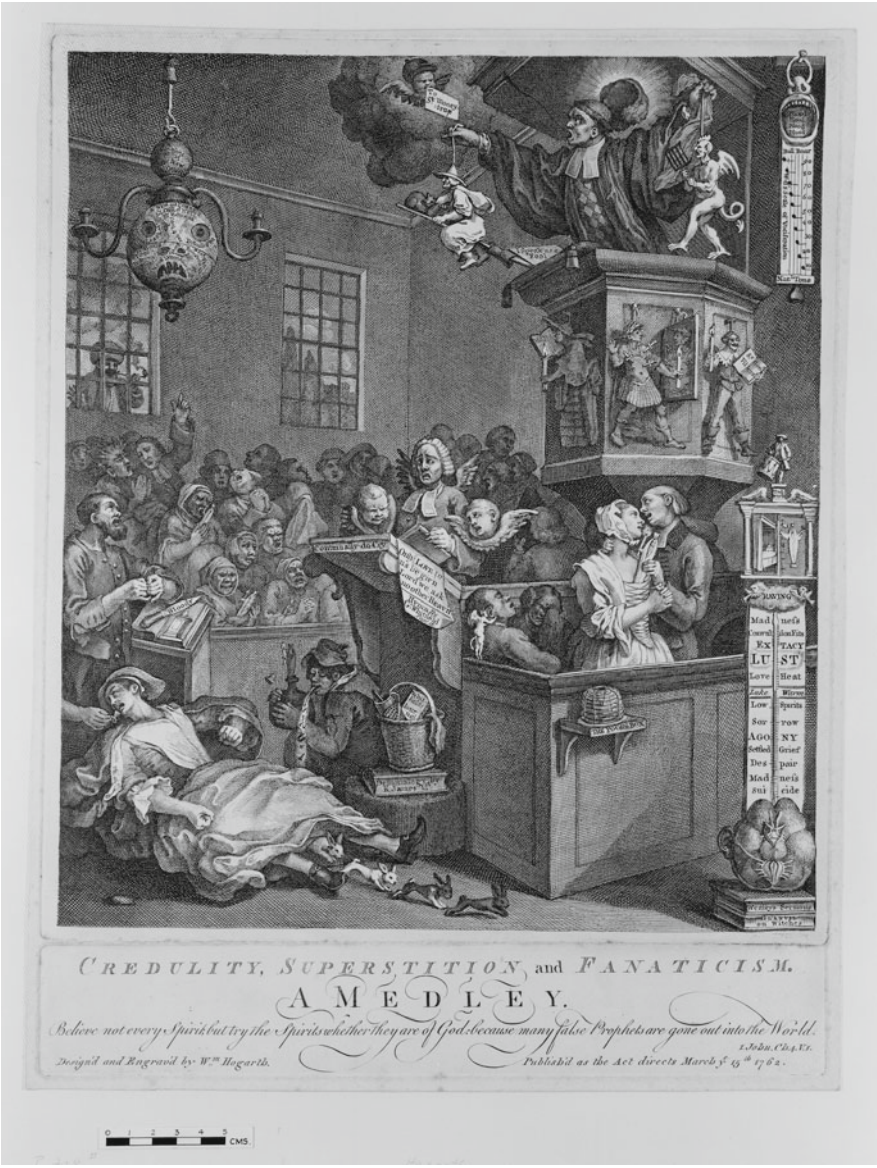
Hume, 1772a, 12.2/149, for example, refers to Section 12, paragraph 2 of David Hume, *An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*, ed. T. L. Beauchamp, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999, and to page 149 of *Enquiries concerning Human Understanding and concerning the Principles of Morals*, ed. L. A. 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).

Contents



"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).