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Epigram, Pantheists, and Freethought in Hume's *Treatise*: A Study in Esoteric Communication

Paul Russell

If men ... are forbid to speak at all upon such subjects, or if they find it really dangerous to do so, they will then redouble their disguise, involve themselves in mysteriousness, and talk so as hardly to be understood, or at least not plainly interpreted, by those who are disposed to do them a mischief.

—Shaftesbury, *Characteristics*¹

Hume's *Treatise of Human Nature* was published in the form of three separate books. The first two, "Of the Understanding" and "Of the Passions," were published in London in January 1739 by John Noon. The third, "Of Morals," was published independently in London by Thomas Longman in November 1740.² The title and subtitles on all three books are the same: *A Treatise of Human Nature: Being An Attempt to introduce the experimental Method of Reasoning into Moral Subjects*. On the title page of the first two books Hume employs an epigram from Tacitus: *Rara temporum felicitas, ubi sentire, quae velis; & quae sentias, dicere licet*. "Seldom are men blessed

¹ "Freedom of Wit and Humour," Pt. 1, sec. 41. This work has been supported by the (Canadian) Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council; I would also like to thank Roger Lund and the members of the audience of the 1991 Le Moyne Forum on Religion and Literature; Peter Jones and the members of his staff at the Institute for Advanced Studies in the Humanities at Edinburgh University, and D. D. Raphael and Jim Dybikowski.

² An account of the publication of the *Treatise* is provided in E.C. Mossner, *The Life of David Hume* (Oxford, 1980²), 114-15, 134-38. The title-pages of the *Treatise* are reproduced in the Selby-Bigge edition, 2nd rev. ed. P. Nidditch (Oxford, 1978).

with times in which they may think what they like and say what they think.”³ On the title page of the third book this epigram is replaced by an epigram taken from the ninth book of Lucan’s *Pharsalia: Durae semper virtutis amator, Quaere quid est virtus, et posce exemplar honesti*. “Thou that to virtue ever wer’t inclined, learn what it is, how certainly defin’d, and leave some perfect Rule to guide Mankind.”⁴ Given the context and the prominence of these epigrams, it is a curious fact that they have attracted little or no attention or comment from Hume scholars.

There are, I suggest, three general questions which we should ask about these epigrams: Do they have any relevance or significance for Hume’s general or fundamental intentions in the *Treatise*? Were these epigrams employed by any other philosophers or thinkers in a way that might shed light on Hume’s allegiances and objectives in that work? Do these two epigrams bear any important or interesting relationship to each other? Clearly this question may be addressed with reference to the first two.

Lucan’s Epigram and Cato’s Speech at the Oracle

In a series of articles I have argued that Hume’s fundamental intentions in the *Treatise* are best characterized as essentially anti-Christian or “atheistic” in nature.⁵ There are, I claim, two particularly important historical components or aspects of this interpretation.

(1) The project of the *Treatise* is modelled or planned after Hobbes’s very similar project in *The Elements of Law* and the first two parts of *Leviathan*. The structural parallels which hold between Hobbes’s works and Hume’s *Treatise* are indicative of the fundamental similarity of their projects. Both Hobbes and Hume agree that moral and political philosophy must proceed upon the same scientific methodology that is appropriate to the natural sciences (although they disagree about the nature of that methodology), and they agree that this scientific investigation of morals must begin with an examination of human thought and motivation. The metaphysical foundation of this project is their shared naturalistic and necessitarian conception of man.

(2) One of the principal targets of the skeptical arguments of Hume’s *Treatise* was Samuel Clarke, the most eminent Newtonian philosopher in early eighteenth-century Britain and a severe critic of Hobbes. In his highly influential Boyle Lectures of 1704-5—published as *A Discourse Concerning*

³ This translation of Tacitus, *The Histories*, I, 1, is taken from Hume, *Treatise*, ed. E. C. Mossner (Harmondsworth, 1969), 32.

⁴ Translation by Nicholas Rowe (the particular significance of which of is discussed below).

⁵ “Hume’s *Treatise* and Hobbes’s *The Elements of Law*,” *JHI*, 46 (1985), 52-63; “Skepticism and Natural Religion in Hume’s *Treatise*,” *JHI*, 49 (1988), 247-65; “‘Atheism’ and the Title-Page of Hume’s *Treatise*,” *Hume Studies*, 14 (1988), 408-23; and “A Hobbist Tory: Johnson on Hume,” *Hume Studies*, 16 (1990), 75-79.

the Being and Attributes of God—Clarke sought to demolish Hobbes's "atheistic" philosophy.⁶ In general it was Hobbes's secular perspective and his extension of scientific naturalism to the study of man that Clarke and other Christian critics regarded as particularly threatening to religion and morals. In response to the religious or theological skepticism of Hobbes and his "followers" Clarke sought to introduce demonstrative reasoning into the spheres of metaphysics and morals with a view to defending the truth and certainty of the Christian Religion.

Putting these two points together, it seems clear that there is a close relationship between these two aspects of Hume's *Treatise*. That is, in order to defend and articulate an essentially Hobbist, anti-Christian philosophical project, Hume found it necessary to undertake a skeptical attack against the leading light of the opposing Newtonian tradition. In more general terms we may therefore characterize Hume's fundamental objectives in the *Treatise* as an effort to refute Christian metaphysics and morals with a view to defending a secular, scientific account of moral and political life.

In light of this general account of Hume's intentions in the *Treatise* let us consider the epigram from Lucan. The subject matter of Lucan's *Pharsalia* is the civil war that marked the end of the Roman Republic. In the ninth book of *Pharsalia* Lucan is concerned with the struggle of Cato the Younger, in defense of the Republic, against the rising tyranny of Julius Caesar. Cato is unambiguously presented by Lucan as a model or exemplar of stoic virtue in the face of hardship and misfortune, and he is clearly the hero of this work.⁷ The epigram which Hume uses comes from an especially significant passage (IX, 544–605) that has as its centerpiece a speech by Cato at one of the great oracles of antiquity, that of Jupiter Ammon. Cato is encouraged by his lieutenant Lebenius to consult the oracle to find out whether the conflict is to end in victory or defeat for the forces of liberty. The lines of the epigram are delivered by Lebenius and addressed to Cato. Cato is described as a man of virtue and asked to consult the oracle regarding the nature of virtue and the pattern or model of virtue by which we should live. The narrator prefaces this speech by pointing out that Cato, possessed of "the God that dwelt within his Breast," becomes himself a worthy oracle. At the conclusion of the speech the narrator suggests that Cato is God-like and worthy of worship. In general it is evident from the design of the passage that it is Cato who is to serve as our pattern or model of virtue and goodness.⁸

⁶ Clarke, *A Discourse Concerning the Being and Attributes of God*, 6th ed. (London, 1725). In the sub-title of *A Discourse* Clarke describes his work as an "Answer to Mr. Hobbs, Spinoza... and other Deniers of Natural and Revealed Religion."

⁷ See, e.g., Fredrick Ahl, *Lucan* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1976), Ch. 7, describing Lucan's Cato (266) as "the oracle of civilized man, the wise man *par excellence*. But he is also something more. He is the last repository of Roman greatness, the shrine of *libertas*."

⁸ See Hume on "models of virtue," e.g., *Essays: Moral, Political and Literary*, ed. E. Miller (Indianapolis, 1985), 135, "A noble emulation...," 170; "Let a man propose ..."; and also *Enquiries*, ed. Selby-Bigge, 3rd rev. ed. P. Nidditch (Oxford, 1975), 216, "Frame

Cato's speech is too long to be cited in full. Nevertheless, the doctrines that he defends can be summarized under the following headings: pantheism, mortalism, necessitarianism, anti-superstition, and love of liberty. Cato makes plain that no oracle is required to tell us those truths which are required for the conduct of life. Each man is born with all the knowledge of such matters that he requires. Man already knows through his own lights that liberty is worth dying for, that virtue is impervious to fortune, and that virtue depends on the will and not the success of the agent. Moreover, we should not look for God anywhere other than in nature and within the virtuous mind. God, therefore, is all about us and not transcendent and beyond man and nature.⁹

Is there a place that God would chose to love
 Beyond this earth, the Seas, yon Heaven above,
 And virtuous Minds, the noblest throne of Jove?
 Why seek we farther then? Behold around,
 How all thou seest does with God abound,
 Jove is alike in all, and always to be found.

Those who depend on oracles are weak and anxious about the future. Consequently they live in doubt and fear. The only knowledge of the future that is certain, and all that we require, is that all men must die.

Let those weak Minds that live in Doubt and Fear,
 To juggling Priests for Oracles repair;
 One certain Hour of Death to each decreed,
 My fix'd, my certain soul from Doubt has freed:
 The Coward and the Brave are doom'd to fall;
 And when Jove told this Truth, he told us all.

It is this knowledge about God and man's condition which each person must find within himself. We can, therefore, leave the prophecies of priests to those weak and fearful individuals who rely upon them. The course of events is guided by nature itself, to which man is inescapably joined.

the model..."; and 270, "A philosopher might...." In the *Treatise and Enquiries* Hume contrasts the (differing) virtuous characters of Cato and Caesar (T, 607-8; E, 316). See also Hume's contrast between the Christian Pascal and pagan Diogenes considered "as models of imitation" (E, 342-43).

⁹ E.V. Arnold, *Roman Stoicism* (London, 1958 [1911]), 396, refers to this passage and notes that "Lucan emphasizes the pantheistic interpretation of the divine nature." On Stoic cosmology and natural philosophy see A. A. Long, *Hellenistic Philosophy* (London, 1974), 150, stating that "Fundamentally, Stoic theology is pantheist."

From God derived, to God by Nature join'd,
 We act these Dictates of his mighty Mind:
 And tho the Priests are mute and Temples still,
 God never wants a Voice to Speak his will:

These, in summary, constitute the central themes of Cato's speech.

What relationships hold between the content of Cato's speech and Hume's general or overall intentions in the *Treatise*? Considered from the perspective of the "atheistic" interpretation, I think it is evident that Cato's speech accords deeply with the general character of Hume's fundamental intentions. That is, Hume follows Cato in his aloof disdain and hostility to any philosophical system or morality which depends on superstition and prophecy (e.g., Christianity). With Cato, Hume embraces a moral outlook that rejects a transcendent God and the immortality of the soul as the basis of our moral and social practice. Moral practice, for Hume as for Cato, is founded not in belief in a future state, in which virtue is supposed to secure reward from God, but rather on a conception of virtue and honor that attaches to man's condition in this world (i.e., the world of nature, of which man is part). In general the pantheistic philosophy of Cato, with its emphasis on divine qualities as they are manifest in nature and especially in the virtuous person is very much in keeping with Hume's anti-Christian moral outlook in the *Treatise*. Cato's Stoic necessitarianism is similarly in line with the necessitarianism which Hume defends in the *Treatise*.¹⁰ Most important of all, perhaps, Hume cites Cato because of his unshakable commitment to the cause of liberty. More than anything else Cato represented and personified the cause of liberty and opposition to tyranny. In short, Hume shares Cato's deepest values—as encapsulated by his speech at the oracle—and thus makes reference to Cato's speech on the title-page of his own work. For Hume, it would appear, Cato is a God-like man who serves as a model after whom we may pattern our own character and conduct and it is, above all, the wise words of the Roman hero to which he is concerned to draw our attention.¹¹

Cato and Collins's *Freethinking*

The foregoing account of Hume's use of the epigram taken from Lucan suggests that its principal significance and interest lies with its reference or allusion to Cato's speech at the oracle. With this in mind I turn to the following question: was the name and character of Cato of any particular significance to Hume's contemporaries? More specifically, does any of the

¹⁰ *Treatise*, Bk. 2, Pt. 3, Sects. 1 and 2.

¹¹ Among other sources (for Hume and his contemporaries) who discuss Cato's life and character are Plutarch and Sallust, but see also Montaigne's essay "Of Cato the Younger," *The Complete Essays of Montaigne*, tr. D. M. Frame (3 Vols.; New York, 1960), I, 233-37, saying that Cato "was truly a model chosen by nature to show how far human virtue and constancy could go."

literature relevant to Hume's objectives and concerns in the *Treatise* suggest that his contemporaries may have seen some *further* significance in his reference or allusion to Cato's speech at the oracle? In Britain in the early eighteenth century there was tremendous interest in Cato.¹² Addison's "Cato" (first performed in 1713) was especially popular and influential, and it established Cato as a symbol of political liberty as well as a paragon of stoic virtue. To this extent, then, Hume's allusion to Cato, by means of the epigram from Lucan, was entirely in keeping with the spirit of his own times.

Things, however, are not as straightforward as they appear.¹³ The name, character, and principles of Cato were used for rather unorthodox and subversive ends by members of an influential circle of radical freethinking Whigs that arose in England during the first three decades of the eighteenth century. This circle included, among others, Anthony Collins, John Toland, John Trenchard, Thomas Gordon, and Pierre Desmaizeaux. According to Margaret Jacob this group galvanized into a "college" or secret society called "The Knights of the Jubilation."¹⁴ Jacob has linked this society with the "Socratic-brotherhood," which is described in Toland's *Pantheisticon* (1720), and which, she claims, was probably intended for use in the ritual performed at their meetings. The leading members of this circle, including Toland, Collins, Gordon, and Trenchard, were very active and hostile critics of Newtonian philosophy and theology in general, and particularly critical of the philosophy of Samuel Clarke.

For their part, Clarke and his disciples regarded thinkers such as Toland and Collins as nothing more than followers of Hobbes and Spinoza. That is to say, from the perspective of the Newtonians the writings produced by this freethinking circle were simply thinly concealed "atheism." In this judgment the Newtonians were, generally speaking, well justified. The philoso-

¹² "In England under the reign of Queen Anne a remarkable secular interest in Cato developed ... [I]n early eighteenth century England [Cato] was used as a symbol of political 'liberty' as well as moral virtue ... The English Augustan writers particularly admired the Roman Republic and Cato provided a focus for their neo-classical ideals" (Long, *Hellenistic Philosophy*, 240-41).

¹³ The manner of Cato's death was a topic of some considerable discussion and comment at this time. Cato committed suicide rather than surrender and submit himself to Caesar's rule. S. E. Sprott notes that at this time "Cato's death still marked a battle-ground in the debate about suicide" (*The English Debate on Suicide* [La Salle, Ill., 1961], 114, and more generally ch. 4). Christian moralists, such as Clarke, opposed suicide as an immoral act. Hume took a different view in his essay "On Suicide" (referring to Cato in a footnote at the end of this essay: ESY, 588-89). The debate on suicide was itself firmly embedded in the wider controversy concerning Christian morality and metaphysics, the significance of which I will explain below.

¹⁴ Jacob, *The Radical Enlightenment: Pantheists, Freemasons and Republicans* (London, 1981), esp. 151-57. On Toland's anti-Christian philosophy and the society described in *Pantheisticon*, see Paul Hazard, *The European Mind 1640-1715*, tr. J. Lewis May (Harmondsworth, 1978), 304-5. See also Jacob, *The Newtonians and the English Revolution* (Hassocks, 1976), Ch. 5 and 6.

phy of this circle was thoroughly anticlerical and critical of established religious dogma in both tone and substance. Thinkers such as Toland and Collins were clearly attached to what may be described as pantheistic materialism.¹⁵ It was principally over metaphysical matters of this nature that they engaged with Clarke.¹⁶ Both Collins and Toland rejected the fundamental tenet of Clarke's Christian metaphysics—i.e., that there is necessarily an Immaterial, Intelligent Agent that is distinct from, and ontologically (i.e., causally) prior to, the natural or material world.¹⁷ The Newtonians and their Christian allies regarded all philosophies which deny this thesis and suggest that the natural realm is self-existent (i.e., not a dependent being), self-ordering, and self-moving as essentially "atheistic" in character.¹⁸ In this way, it would not be incorrect to describe this extended and historically important conflict as one between defenders and critics of the Christian Religion.

It was at a key juncture in this debate that Collins made use of Cato's work. Collins engaged in a number of "battles" with the Newtonians, including an important series of exchanges with Clarke, and he defended the materialist and necessitarian doctrines associated with Hobbes. In 1713, in the middle of this series of exchanges with Clarke, Collins published *A Discourse of Freethinking*,¹⁹ a work of considerable impact, which attracted the attention and fire of a number of distinguished critics, including Jonathan Swift, George Berkeley, and especially Richard Bentley. The content of *Freethinking* is briefly summarized in an epigram taken from Shaftesbury's *Characteristics*, which appears on the title-page: "Fain would they confound *Licentiousness in Morals* with *Liberty of Thought*, and make the Libertine resemble his direct Opposite."²⁰ Collins sought to show that, pertaining primarily to matters of religion, freedom of thought neither corrupted men's morals nor society. Freethinking, he maintains, is a force for reason,

¹⁵ On Toland's and/or Collins's pantheistic materialism see Jacob, *Newtonians*, 230-40, and *Radical Enlightenment*, 60-61, 153; Rosalie Colie, "Spinoza and the Early English deists," *JHI*, 20 (1959), 40-46; F. A. Lange, *The History of Materialism*, tr. E. C. Thomas, 3rd ed. with introduction by Bertrand Russell (London, 1925), 324-30; Stephen Daniel, *John Toland* (Kingston, 1984), ch. 7, and David Berman, *A History of British Atheism* (London, 1988), 78-82.

¹⁶ See James O'Higgins, *Anthony Collins* (The Hague, 1970), ch. 5 and 7, and James Ferguson, *The Philosophy of Samuel Clarke and its Critics* (New York, 1974), 138-62.

¹⁷ See esp. Clarke, *Discourse*, prop. VIII, 47.

¹⁸ On the parallels between the views of Collins and Toland and the anti-Christian and anti-Newtonian metaphysical outlook which Hume develops in Book I of the *Treatise*, see "Skepticism and Natural Religion in Hume's *Treatise*."

¹⁹ Anthony Collins, *A Discourse of Free-Thinking Occasion'd by the Rise and Growth of a Sect call'd Free-Thinkers* (London, 1713); see O'Higgins, *Collins*, ch. 6. See E.C. Mossner, *Bishop Butler and the Age of Reason* (New York, 1936), 55-56, notes that it was Collins's use of the term "Freethinker" which gave it its specifically irreligious or anti-Christian connotation.

²⁰ Shaftesbury, *Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times* [1711], ed. J. M. Robertson, intro. S. Green, (2 vols.; Indianapolis, 1964), II, 346 ("Misc. Refl.," ch. 3).

progress, and the discovery of truth. Coercion and repression, by contrast, produce irrationality, deceit, and, worst of all, superstition and the various evils that come in its wake.

In the closing parts of the third and final section of *Freethinking* Collins cites a whole range of thinkers who questioned or challenged the orthodoxies of their time but who were, nevertheless, men of unquestioned virtue and good character. The names range from Socrates and Plato to Hobbes and Tillotson. In the middle of this list (ninth among nineteen) appears the name of Cato the Younger (141-47). More space is devoted to Cato than to any other virtuous freethinker whom Collins cites. Almost the entire section on Cato is given over to Nicholas Rowe's standard early eighteenth-century translation of the passage in Book IX of Lucan's *Pharsalia* where Cato arrives at the oracle and delivers his speech.²¹ Collins prefaces the speech by noting that "the inimitable Lucan has rais'd a noble monument, not only to his Wisdom and Virtue, but to his Freethinking" (141). Both the Latin original and the English translation are supplied by Collins. In this way we find that Cato's speech at the oracle, introduced by the words of the epigram uttered by Lebenius, constitutes the very heart of Collins's catalogue of virtuous freethinkers. Cato's speech also delivers in a pungent form the pantheistic materialist doctrine which Collins also embraced.

Collins not only quotes Cato's speech at length in the closing argument of *Freethinking* but he also explicitly refers to it earlier in this work in another context. In the second section of *Freethinking* Collins argues that the enemies of freethinking deny men the right to think on those very subjects which all men have a duty to think on—specifically, subjects such as "the nature and Attributes of the Eternal Being or God, of the Truth and Authority of Books esteem'd Sacred, and of the Sense and Meaning of these Books; or, in one word, of Religious Questions" (32). Collins defends the right and duty of freethought on such matters with a variety of arguments. One particularly important argument (his third) is that superstition is an evil and that "there is no just remedy to this immoral Evil but Freethinking." By freethinking alone, Collins continues, we can "understand the Causes of things, and by consequence the unreasonableness of all superstitious fears" (36-37). Collins proceeds to mock the useless actions and speculations of superstitious individuals and to point out the evil consequences of their beliefs and practices. He continues:

These Men [i.e., the Superstitious] have no quiet in their own Minds; they rove about in search of saving Truth thro the dark Corners of the Earth, and are so foolish as to hope to find it ... hid under the sands of Africa, where Cato scorn'd to look for it: and neglecting what God

²¹ Rowe published his translation *Pharsalia*, bk. IX, in 1710; the complete translation appeared in 1718.

speaks plainly to the whole World, take up with what they suppose he has communicated to a few; and thereby believe and practice such things in which they can never have Satisfaction ... Here is foundation laid for nothing but endless scruples, Doubts, and Fears. Wherefore I conclude, that every one, out of regard to his own Tranquillity of Mind, which must be disturb'd as long as he has any seeds of superstition, is oblig'd to think freely on matters of Religion. (39-40)²²

Collins, then, following the example of Cato, identifies superstition with vice and folly and suggests, similarly, that the virtuous man stands aloof from all beliefs and practices of a superstitious nature. Faith in priests, a future state, and other forms of superstition brings mankind only misery.

We have every reason to think that Collins's *Freethinking* is a book which Hume would have been thoroughly familiar with. For one thing, as I have already indicated, Collins's *Freethinking* was a book which had considerable impact and was widely discussed both in Britain and abroad. It was one of the most important works by an important thinker whose reputation and influence lasted well into the second half of the eighteenth century. Moreover, Hume's *Treatise* was significantly concerned, if not preoccupied with, a skeptical attack on Clarke's Christian rationalism; and Hume adopted positions on the subjects of materialism and necessitarianism that closely accord with the position taken by Collins in opposition to Clarke. In more general terms the anti-Christian and anti-Newtonian spirit and tone of Collins works, and *Freethinking* in particular, is entirely in keeping with Hume's own anti-Christian and anti-Newtonian intentions in the *Treatise*. Such considerations give us very strong reasons for believing that Hume would have been familiar with Collins's major philosophical writings, including *Freethinking*.

The most important response to Collins's *Freethinking* came from Richard Bentley, a prominent Newtonian, a close colleague of Clarke's, and the first Boyle Lecturer. Bentley published his *Remarks* on Collins's *Freethinking* in 1713.²³ This work sheds light on the nature and activities of the Collins-Toland freethinking circle. More specifically, Bentley seems to believe that he is dealing with an organized and active circle of thinkers, whom he describes as "preachers of Atheism" (p. 16). These atheists have, he suggests, an established "Set of Principles and Dogmata." He describes their dogma as follows:

²² In this passage Collins also refers to the "useless and unintelligible Speculations" of such superstitious individuals; a footnote at the bottom of the page suggests that he has Clarke's Boyle Lectures primarily in mind.

²³ Richard Bentley [Phileleutherus], *Remarks Upon a Late Discourse of Freethinking* (London, 1713).

That the Soul is material and mortal, Christianity an imposture, the Scriptures a forgery, the Working of God superstition, Hell a fable, and Heaven a dream, our Life without providence, and our Death without hope like that of asses and Dogs, are parts of the glorious Gospel of these truly Idiot Evangelists. If your Freethinking does not centre in these Opinions, you shall be none of their Family. (14)

Bentley also notes that the circle employs an “interior” or “occult” meaning in their texts. There is, furthermore, some suggestion that *Freethinking* was written in close association with others in the “atheistic” circle.²⁴

Bentley interprets Collins’s attempt to defend free-thinking as simply a thinly disguised assault on the Christian Religion and the established church. Throughout this work Bentley’s criticism is directed largely against the details of Collins’s scholarship. That eight different editions of Bentley’s *Remarks* had appeared by 1743 is clear evidence of the contemporary interest aroused by this debate. In 1737 the seventh edition was printed. In this edition the third and last Part of Bentley’s *Remarks* was printed for the first time, although in an incomplete form.²⁵ The third Part of Bentley’s *Remarks* is concerned entirely with a detailed analysis of Cato’s speech at the oracle as presented by Collins. In the 1737 edition Bentley’s discussion ends abruptly in the middle of his commentary on the very epigram that is cited by Hume (i.e., the words of Lebenius).²⁶ These considerations provide clear evidence that Hume’s immediate contemporaries had an ongoing interest in the Collins-Bentley debate and that Cato’s speech at the oracle was quite central to this controversy. The fact that Bentley’s discussion actually comes to an end in the 1737 edition with the epigram which Hume employs suggests one further reason for thinking that this epigram would be recognized by Hume’s contemporaries as having some direct relevance to the doctrines in Collins’s *Freethinking*.

Evidence about Hume’s personal connections further reinforces these points. When Hume was staying in London from 1737-39 and preparing the first two Books of the *Treatise* for publication, he was in direct personal contact with Pierre Desmaizeaux, a very active and well connected publisher, translator and editor of philosophical literature. Desmaizeaux was also, as I have noted, an established member of the freethinking circle to which Collins belonged.²⁷ Among our own contemporaries he is probably best known for

²⁴ Bentley, *Remarks*, 46. These points are relevant to my discussion of the relationship between Collins’s *Freethinking* and Toland’s *Pantheisticon* (section III below).

²⁵ It appeared in a completed form for the first time in the eighth edition of 1743. The eighth edition is reprinted in *The Works of Richard Bentley*, ed. A. Dyce (3 vols.; London: 1838), III (part III appears at pp. 453-72).

²⁶ Bentley, *Remarks*, 7th ed. (London, 1737), 292-94; for the problems surrounding the publication of the seventh edition, see the eighth edition of *Works*, III, 473-74.

²⁷ Leslie Stephen’s dismissal of Desmaizeaux in the *DNB* as a “careful and industrious literary drudge” is wholly misleading. Desmaizeaux was, as the evidence cited makes

his English translation of Bayle's *Dictionary* (1734-39).²⁸ Also of great importance is his role in editing and publishing the famous Leibniz-Clarke correspondence.²⁹ For present purposes, however, it is Desmaizeaux's close personal and philosophical connections with Collins and Toland that are of particular interest. Desmaizeaux worked closely with both Collins and Toland, but he was particularly close to Collins as both a friend and as a collaborator. There is, moreover, some evidence that Desmaizeaux worked along with Collins on *Freethinking*.³⁰

Before leaving London for Scotland in February 1739, Hume distributed several copies of the *Treatise*, which had been published just a few weeks before, to various individuals, including Butler and Desmaizeaux. In April Hume wrote to Desmaizeaux to ask for his opinion of the *Treatise*.³¹ Hume states in his letter that he regards Desmaizeaux as someone "whose Instruction and Advice he [Hume] depends on." Mossner points out that one of the earliest reviews of the *Treatise* was probably written by Desmaizeaux—and that it was, unlike most others, favorable.³² It should also be noted that while he was in London, Hume stayed at the "Rainbow" Coffeehouse, which only a few years before had served as an important meeting place for the circle to which Desmaizeaux, Collins, and Toland all belonged.³³ In light of this and given Hume's personal contact with Desmaizeaux, it would be quite extraordinary if he were anything other than familiar with this important work which Desmaizeaux was so closely concerned with.

In sum, Cato's speech at the oracle has a very high profile and a significant role to play in Collins's *Freethinking*, a book which was itself a very influential and widely read and discussed work among Hume's contemporaries; and so we have every reason to suppose that both Hume and his contemporaries would have been familiar with Collins's *Freethinking* and have been aware that his epigram from Lucan plays a significant role in that work and the controversy surrounding it.

plain, a rather significant figure in this context. See J. H. Broome, "An Agent in Anglo-French Relationships, Pierre Desmaizeaux, 1673-1745" (Ph.D. Thesis, London University, 1949).

²⁸ "One of the reasons why Bayle exercised such a strong influence on the early stages of the Enlightenment is that, thanks to Des Maizeaux, his works were more widely available in English than in any other language soon after their publication..." (Elizabeth Larousse, *Bayle* [Oxford, 1983], 90).

²⁹ See, e.g., Jacob *Radical Enlightenment*, 60.

³⁰ J. H. Broome, "Une Collaboration: Anthony Collins et Desmaizeaux," *Revue de littérature comparée*, 30 (1956), 161f; and see O'Higgins, *Collins*, 237-41, documenting in some detail the relations between Desmaizeaux and Collins.

³¹ *The Letters of David Hume*, ed. J. Y. T. Greig (2 vols.; Oxford: 1932), I, 29-30 (no. 10).

³² Mossner, *Life of Hume*, 119-20.

³³ See e.g., Jacob, *Radical Enlightenment*, 189; Daniel, *Toland*, 147; O'Higgins, *Collins*, 210; Broome, "An Agent..." 294-95, 324, 336, and 439.

Lucan, Tacitus, and the Radical Enlightenment

There is, I believe, a close and a significant relationship between the epigram from Tacitus and the epigram from Lucan as Hume employs them in the *Treatise*. The epigram from Tacitus is, obviously enough, concerned with the general issue of freedom of thought and expression. In the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries the epigram appeared in a particularly prominent and important context. It was used by Spinoza in a very slightly amended form as the title for the concluding and most important chapter of *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*. It reads: “That in a free state every man *may think what he likes, and say what he thinks.*”³⁴ This chapter heading, as a number of commentators have pointed out, simply summarizes the central thesis of Spinoza’s work. (The sub-title of the *Tractatus* reads: “... that freedom of thought and speech not only may, without prejudice to piety and the public peace, be granted; but also may not, without danger to piety and public peace, be withheld.”) On the basis of these considerations the relationship between the Tacitus and Lucan epigrams appears to be at least two-fold. First, they are both concerned with the cause of “liberty” or “freedom” broadly conceived, and, second, it was in defense of free thought that Collins employed the epigram from Lucan and Spinoza that from Tacitus.

The Spinozist associations of the epigram taken from Tacitus is also of some significance when considered in relation to the title of Hume’s *Treatise*.³⁵ Hume’s project in the *Treatise*, as I have already indicated, is modelled on Hobbes’s very similar project in *The Elements of Law*, a work originally published in 1640 in the form of two separate treatises, *Human Nature* and *De Corpore Politico*. In several different contexts in the latter work Hobbes refers to *Human Nature* as his “Treatise of Human Nature.”³⁶ It seems clear, then, that the title page of the first two books of Hume’s *Treatise* makes a direct allusion to the work of *both* Hobbes and Spinoza, who were the two most prominent representatives of “atheistic” philosophy at this time and the particular targets of Clarke’s Christian rationalism as presented in his *Discourse*. It is also worth noting that the very first review of Hume’s *Treatise*, referring to Hume as a “new freethinker,” points out that the “author’s evil intentions are sufficiently betrayed in the subtitle of the work,

³⁴ “Ostenditur, in Libera Republica unicuique & sentire, quae velit & quae sentiat, dicere licet.” Tr. R. H. M. Elwes in *The Chief Works of Spinoza* (New York, 1951), 257. The epigram from Tacitus also appears in Spinoza’s statement of his concluding claims as presented in the preface (11).

³⁵ I describe and discuss the significance of Hume’s use of the epigram from Tacitus and its relevance to Spinoza’s work in further detail in “‘Atheism’ and the Title-Page of Hume’s *Treatise*.”

³⁶ The connection between the titles of Hobbes’s and Hume’s work has been noted by D. D. Raphael, *British Moralists 1650-1800* (Oxford, 1969), v; and see my “Hume’s *Treatise* and Hobbes’s *The Elements of Law*.”

taken from Tacitus" (the complete epigram is cited). No doubt this reviewer was perfectly aware of the "Spinozist" significance of the epigram.³⁷ This reviewer may also have been aware of the use that radical freethinkers had made of this epigram.

There is some interesting evidence to suggest that the epigram from Tacitus that was used by both Spinoza and Hume had special significance for the freethinking circle of anti-Christian pantheists to which Collins belonged (a circle, as I have noted, that included Desmaizeaux, with whom Hume enjoyed direct personal contact at the time that he was preparing the *Treatise* for publication.) John Trenchard and Thomas Gordon were prominent members of this circle; and they were the authors of a very influential series of letters published under the title *Cato's Letters*, which first appeared in *The London Journal* between 1720-23 and were subsequently reprinted under the title *Cato's Letters* in six different editions between 1724 and 1755.³⁸ The two most notable themes of these letters are their anti-clericalism and their defense of freedom of thought. One letter (no. 15) written by Gordon in February 1720 is entitled "Of freedom of speech: That the same is inseparable from Public Liberty." The epigram from Tacitus features prominently in this letter, and the letter closes with praise of Cato as a noble defender of liberty.³⁹ Gordon's letter, therefore, provides further evidence of the significance of the Tacitus epigram in this context and of its relevance to the name of "Cato."⁴⁰

Along with Collins the most prominent member of the circle of anti-Newtonian free-thinking pantheists was John Toland. Toland had a strong and sympathetic interest in the philosophy of Spinoza, as indicated in his

³⁷ The review is discussed in Mossner, *Life of Hume*, 120; The Tacitus epigram also appears in another important context in respect of the reaction to Hume's *Treatise*. In 1745 Hume applied for the Chair of Moral Philosophy at Edinburgh University. In opposition to Hume's candidacy the Rev. William Wishart wrote a pamphlet accusing the author of the *Treatise* of defending "universal scepticism" and "principles leading to downright Atheism." Wishart's accusations, and Hume's reply to them, appear in *A Letter from a Gentleman to his friend in Edinburgh* (1745), eds. E. C. Mossner and J. V. Price (Edinburgh, 1967). Wishart begins his pamphlet attack by citing the epigram from Tacitus and noting the use that Hume makes of it on his title-page. For further details on this exchange see Mossner, *Life of Hume*, ch. 12.

³⁸ For further details see David Jacobson's introduction to *The English Libertarian Heritage* (Indianapolis, 1965), intro.

³⁹ A few years later Gordon published his English translation of *The Works of Tacitus* (London, 1728-31), which was the standard for many years.

⁴⁰ Hume had an established interest in the subject of civil and political freedom. In his introduction to the *Treatise* Hume states that "the improvements in reason and philosophy can only be owing to a land of toleration and of liberty" (T, xxi). More importantly, in 1741, not long after the *Treatise* appeared, Hume published his *Essays*, including "Of Civil Liberty" (originally entitled "Of Liberty and Despotism") and "Of the Liberty of the Press." Hume's defense of liberty, however, is more guarded and qualified than the position developed by radical Whigs such as Gordon.

Letter to Serena (1704) and, more overtly, in his *Pantheisticon* (1720).⁴¹ It is, as I have noted, *Pantheisticon* which Jacob believes describes meetings and “ritual” of the Toland–Collins circle. In *Pantheisticon* Toland introduces the distinction between “exoteric” and “esoteric” doctrine.⁴² Exoteric doctrine is constituted by “external,” public meaning that will not arouse the hatred and hostility of the clerics, the mob, and the superstitious. Esoteric doctrine is the private or secret meaning that is available or accessible only to the learned members of the “Pantheistic” society or “brotherhood.”⁴³ Out of considerations of prudence it is necessary for the brotherhood to be able to communicate with each other in such a way that they do not endanger their own lives and well-being. Clearly, the selective use of epigram might constitute one such obvious form of esoteric communication.

There are interesting parallels and overlapping themes between Toland’s *Pantheisticon* and Collins’s *Freethinking*. The metaphysical and moral outlook of Toland’s Pantheistic brotherhood, for example, is elegantly and neatly summed up in the form of Cato’s speech at the oracle. Similarly, in *Pantheisticon* Toland reiterates, in several different contexts, the central point of Collins’s *Freethinking*, namely, that freedom of thought is not to be confused with moral licentiousness.⁴⁴ Given that Toland and Collins were close friends and collaborators, these parallels and affinities are in no way surprising.

For our purposes, however, the most interesting feature of *Pantheisticon* is the reappearance of the epigram from Tacitus. It is fundamental to the practice of the Pantheists, Toland suggests, to exercise due caution when

⁴¹ See, e.g., Colie, “Spinoza and the Early English Deists,” 44, “... it is Spinoza’s strengths, rather than his faults, that seem to have impressed John Toland.”

⁴² See Toland, “Clidophorus” (the second part of *Tetradymus* [London, 1720]): “We ought in the meanwhile...” See also David Berman, “Deism, Immortality, and the Art of Theological Lying,” in J. A. Lemay, *Deism, Masonry and the Enlightenment* (London, 1987), 61–78.

⁴³ Toland refers to the members of his “Socratic Society” as both “Pantheists” and members of the “brotherhood.” Toland seems to have been the first person to coin the term “pantheist,” in 1705 in his *Socinianism truly stated* (O.E.D.). One of the earliest applications of the term “freethinker” was used by Locke with reference to Toland (Mossner, *Butler*, 55).

⁴⁴ “[Pantheists] not only steadfastly assent and hold to a Liberty of Thought, but also of Action, detesting, at the same time, all Licentiousness ...” (*Pantheisticon* 57; cf. 84 and 94). In his “Life of Toland” Desmaizeaux quotes a passage from Toland’s “Mangoneutes,” the last tract contained in *Tetradymus*: “*Civil Liberty and Religious Toleration*, as the most desirable things in this World, the most conducting to peace, plenty, knowledge, and every kind of happiness, have been the two main objects of all my writings. But as by Liberty I did not mean Licentiousness, so by Toleration I did not mean Indifference, and much less an Approbation of every Religion that I cou’d suffer” [*A Collection of Several Pieces of John Toland*, ed. with a “Life of Toland” by P. Desmaizeaux (2 vols.; London, 1726), lxxxiii]. The general background to this discussion of “liberty” and “license” is the controversy over the possibility of “virtuous atheism,” particularly as generated by the writings of Bayle and Shaftesbury (thinkers with whom Desmaizeaux was closely involved).

expressing their views. With this in mind he points out that “the Pantheists shall not be more open ‘till they are at full liberty to *think as they please, and speak as they think*.”⁴⁵ The epigram from Tacitus, therefore, appears at the very heart of Toland’s description of the principles and practice of the “Pantheists.”

It seems clear that Hume’s use of the epigram from Tacitus, in the context of his own profoundly anti-Christian work, is entirely consistent with the use it was put to by other anti-Christian thinkers in whose footsteps he directly follows, namely, Spinoza, Toland, and Gordon. We have every reason to believe that Hume would have been thoroughly familiar with most if not all of the relevant works in which the epigram appears.⁴⁶ All of these thinkers were, like Collins, concerned to defend the principle of freedom of thought and speech with a view to publishing and making available their anti-Christian philosophy. With these considerations in mind—taking note, in particular, of the relations between Collins and his pantheistic, free-thinking colleagues, along with their common concerns—it seems very evident that Hume’s use of the epigram from Lucan is directly relevant to his use of the epigram from Tacitus. The epigrams flag very clearly the anti-Christian nature of Hume’s intentions in the *Treatise* and his affiliations with and allegiance to an anti-Christian tradition of thought that stretches from Hobbes and Spinoza in the late seventeenth century to a circle of anti-Newtonian radical freethinkers that appeared in Britain in the first part of the eighteenth century. In more general terms these epigrams are a notable and illuminating example of esoteric communication in this context, and they indicate that the *Treatise* has an important place in the literature of the radical enlightenment.

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⁴⁵ *Pantheisticon*, 108.

⁴⁶ *Pantheisticon* was not translated and published in English until 1751. It first appeared in printed form in Latin in 1720. Toland, apparently, printed only a relatively small number of these works and they were distributed largely to his friends (as one might expect given the practical advice contained). Hume may have been provided with a copy by a person who was in some way connected with Toland’s circle, perhaps Desmaizeaux. Hume would have been familiar with the *Pantheisticon*, and the general nature of its contents, through Desmaizeaux’s “Life of Toland” (*A Collection*, lxxviii).