

Oxford Handbooks Online

Hume's Philosophy of Irreligion and the Myth of British Empiricism

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The Oxford Handbook of Hume (*Forthcoming*)

Edited by Paul Russell

Online Publication Date: Jul
2015

Subject: Philosophy, History of Western Philosophy (Post-
Classical), Philosophy of Religion

DOI: 10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199742844.013.36

[–] Abstract and Keywords

This chapter outlines an alternative interpretation of Hume's philosophy, one that aims, among other things, to explain some of the most perplexing puzzles concerning the relationship between Hume's skepticism and his naturalism. The key to solving these puzzles, it is argued, rests with recognizing Hume's fundamental irreligious aims and objectives, beginning with his first and greatest work, *A Treatise of Human Nature*. The irreligious interpretation not only reconfigures our understanding of the unity and structure of Hume's thought, it also provides a radically different picture of the way in which Hume's philosophy is rooted in its historical context. By altering our understanding of the fundamentals of Hume's philosophy in this way, the irreligious interpretation also challenges the adequacy of the familiar and entrenched framework of "British Empiricism."

Keywords: Irreligion, skepticism, naturalism, atheism, Hobbes, science of man, British empiricism, causation, Radical Enlightenment, Treatise

Most philosophers do not deserve their historical legacy ...

– Bernard Williams

Throughout the twentieth century and into the present century, the dominant narrative covering the major thinkers and themes of early modern British philosophy has been that of "British Empiricism." The central figures in this tradition are generally identified as the triumvirate of Locke-Berkeley-Hume. On this view of things, the "British Empiricists" are taken to be primarily concerned to provide an account of the philosophical foundations of human knowledge in general and of modern science in particular. The mighty triumvirate of British Empiricism is positioned in opposition to the rationalists of continental thought, as represented by the equally formidable triumvirate of Descartes-Spinoza-Leibniz. The trajectory of the British empiricist tradition culminates in the work of Hume, who is read as advancing a form of radical skepticism about the scope and limits of human understanding. According to this grand narrative, the whole dialectical process of empiricists versus rationalists reaches its climax with Kant's triumphant synthesis of both empiricist and rationalist elements in his "critical philosophy," in which Kant is taken to have found a middle ground between the skeptical and dogmatical tendencies of the opposing parties. Although it is now common to question this grand narrative and the British Empiricism/Continental Rationalism dichotomy associated with it, it continues to command considerable authority and acceptance and leaves a considerable interpretive void when it is set aside.

There can be little doubt that the empiricist/rationalist schema has done much to shape and entrench the most familiar and well-established interpretations of Hume's philosophy. The view of Hume as an essentially skeptical thinker, drawing out the alarming implications of empiricist assumptions, was already gaining credibility well before Hume's death in 1776. The view that Hume is fundamentally a philosophical skeptic about the possibility of human knowledge also contributed to Kant's perspective on Hume's philosophy—famously waking the great German thinker from his "dogmatic slumber" (Kant 1783: 67). By the early twentieth century, however, an alternative

reading had emerged that challenged this orthodoxy. Hume should not be read as simply a destructive skeptic but rather as a “naturalist,” with constructive ambitions to contribute to “the science of man” (T, Intro 6–7/xx; TA, 1/645) as modeled after Newton’s achievements in the natural sciences. Throughout the twentieth century and up to the present time, Hume’s philosophy has generally been understood in terms of these two core themes, skepticism and naturalism. The fundamental difficulty we are faced with, however, is how these two themes are related to each other and which one represents Hume’s dominant aims and ambitions. Described in more specific terms, the most fundamental problem we are presented with is how to *reconcile* Hume’s seeming radical skepticism with his efforts to advance a “science of man”—a tension that pervades Hume’s entire philosophy but that is most apparent and acute in his first and most ambitious work *A Treatise of Human Nature*.

In this contribution, I provide an outline of alternative interpretation of Hume’s philosophy, one that not only deals with these perplexing challenges of interpretation but that also provides a radically different picture of the way in which Hume’s philosophy is rooted in its historical context. The key to solving these difficult interpretive puzzles concerning Hume’s philosophy—what one distinguished scholar has referred to as the “*Humesproblem*” (Popkin 1953: 267)—rests with recognizing Hume’s fundamental irreligious aims and objectives. This, in turn, requires rejecting some widely accepted claims about the development of Hume’s philosophy in relation to problems of religion and, in particular, the suggestion that Hume “castrated” the *Treatise*, removing from it almost all elements that touched on matters of religion and theology. According to the irreligious interpretation, there is an intimate relationship between the myth of castration and the myth of British Empiricism, along with the associated (mis)understanding of Hume’s fundamental philosophical concerns. So considered, the irreligious interpretation has far-reaching significance, not only for how Hume’s entire philosophical system is to be understood but also for the detailed analysis of his views on a wide and comprehensive range of more specific problems and topics. Beyond this, the irreligious interpretation not only reconfigures our understanding of the unity and structure of Hume’s philosophy; in doing this, it also alters our picture of the shape and structure of early modern philosophy as a whole.

I. Skepticism, Naturalism, and the Riddle

In order to understand the irreligious interpretation of Hume’s philosophy, we need to begin with the *Treatise*. The *Treatise* is not only Hume’s first work; it is also his most ambitious, judged in terms of both the range of the topics it covers and the depth and detail of the analysis provided. Moreover, as Hume’s first and most substantial work—it is by far the longest of Hume’s philosophical works—it lays the foundation for Hume’s later works and provides an indispensable orientation point for making sense of the trajectory of his subsequent philosophical development and assessing his overall philosophical achievement. The *Treatise* also serves as the principal text around which the established interpretations have been framed and constructed. For all these reasons, from the perspective of the irreligious interpretation, it is the *Treatise* that must serve as the relevant guide for understanding the core features of Hume’s philosophical system.

The skeptical reading of Hume’s philosophy dates back to its early reception, particularly as provided by two of Hume’s most influential Scottish critics, Thomas Reid and James Beattie. Reid and Beattie base their skeptical reading primarily on the *Treatise*, and they present Hume as following lines of thought laid down by Locke and Berkeley in the form of “the theory of ideas” (Reid 1967: I, 95, 101–04, 204–11; Beattie 1770: see esp. 142–56, 455–61).¹ Hume is presented as pursuing an essentially destructive or negative philosophical program, the principal aim of which is to show that our “common sense beliefs” (e.g., in causality, the external world, the self, and so on) lack any foundation in reason and cannot be justified. On this account, Hume is fundamentally concerned to draw out the radical skeptical consequences of adopting “the theory of ideas.” This skeptical reading places heavy emphasis on epistemology and metaphysics and relegates his moral philosophy to a secondary or derivative status. Viewed this way, Hume’s reputation is well-summed up by Bertrand Russell: “David Hume is one of the most important among philosophers, because he developed to its logical conclusion the empirical philosophy of Locke and Berkeley, and by making it self-consistent made it incredible. He represents, in a certain sense, a dead end: in his direction, it is impossible to go further” (Russell 1947: 685).

Throughout the nineteenth century and most of the twentieth century, the Reid-Beattie skeptical interpretation, as Norman Kemp Smith has called it (Kemp Smith 1941: 3–8), enjoyed considerable influence and was the dominant account of the central thrust of Hume’s philosophy. Although this view continued to enjoy considerable currency

throughout the twentieth century, as it still does, it was challenged and brought into question by Kemp Smith's enormously influential study *The Philosophy of David Hume* (1941). According to Kemp Smith, what is crucial to Hume's philosophical system "is not Locke's or Berkeley's 'ideal' theory and the negative consequences that flow from it ... but the doctrine that the determining influence in human, as in other forms of life, is feeling, not reason" (Kemp Smith 1941: 11). On Kemp Smith's interpretation, the "main thesis" of Hume's philosophy, as presented in the *Treatise* and the first *Enquiry*, is his claim "that belief is more properly an act of the sensitive, than the cognitive part of our natures" (Kemp Smith 1941: 546). Given this, Kemp Smith maintains, Hume's philosophy "can be more adequately described as naturalistic than as sceptical, and that its main governing principle is the thorough subordination of reason to the feelings and instincts" (Kemp Smith 1941: 84).

An important feature of Kemp Smith's naturalistic interpretation is that it presents Hume's basic philosophical strategy as essentially an extension of his views on morals and aesthetics. The key influence here, Kemp Smith claims, was Francis Hutcheson (Kemp Smith 1941: 12–3). More specifically, Hume applied Hutcheson's account of the role of feeling in the sphere of morals to "several of the chief problems to which Locke and Berkeley had drawn attention, but to which they had not been able to give a satisfactory answer" (Kemp Smith 1941: 13). Although this clearly restores a balance between Hume's concern with metaphysics and epistemology, on one side, and morals, on the other, it nevertheless remains focused on the problem of human knowledge as raised in the philosophy of Locke and Berkeley, holding that, contrary to the skeptical account, Hume advances a constructive solution.

Despite the firm emphasis on the influence of Hutcheson and the role of feeling in Hume's philosophy, Kemp Smith is clear that Hume's naturalism has another side to it that was inspired by Newton (Kemp Smith 1941: 53). It was Hume's plan, Kemp Smith suggests, to model his own project of providing a scientific account of the operations of the human mind after the example of Newtonian physics (Kemp Smith 1941: 71). Hume's "science of man" is, on this view, an expression of Hume's ambition to become "the Newton of the moral sciences"—a claim that has been made by a number of other commentators (e.g., Laird 1932: 20–4; Passmore 1980: 43, 131, 156; Mossner 1980: 73–5). Hume's naturalism, so considered, includes his "attempt to introduce the experimental method of reasoning into moral subjects," a theme that is neatly captured in the subtitle to the *Treatise*.

There remains, however, a fundamental difficulty that faces any interpretation that attempts to accommodate Hume's (supposed) ambition to become "the Newton of the moral sciences." The obvious difficulty here is that although Hume is plainly committed to *both* skeptical and naturalistic aims and objectives, these two sides of his thought seem to pull in opposite directions. On the one hand, Hume presents skeptical arguments that are understood systematically to discredit our common-sense beliefs about the world (i.e., undermine even our most ordinary, everyday claims to knowledge). On the other hand, he is understood to aim at being "the Newton of the moral science" by way of introducing "the experimental method of reasoning" into the study of human nature. These two themes do not just diverge from each other; the former defeats the latter. The difficulty is summed-up by Reid in these terms:

It seems to be the peculiar strain of humour in this author, to set out in his introduction by promising, with a grave face, no less than a complete system of the sciences, upon a foundation entirely new—to wit, that of human nature—when the intention of the whole work is to show, that there is neither human nature nor science in the world.

(Reid 1967: I, 102a).

To the extent that Hume advances extreme skeptical arguments, as he plainly does, Hume "the skeptic" appears to saw off the branch that Hume "the Newton of the moral sciences" is sitting on. Nor will it help if we follow Kemp Smith and appeal to a form of "naturalism" that teaches "that reason, as traditionally understood, has no role in human life." Clearly, this does nothing to answer the skeptic, nor does it serve as a secure philosophical basis on which to make (scientific) claims about the principles and operations of human nature considered as a contribution to human knowledge. These conflicts and tensions between Hume's skepticism and naturalism make up what we may refer to as "the riddle" of Hume's philosophy—which presents itself in the *Treatise* in its most acute and challenging form. In order to solve this riddle, we must look beyond the simple skepticism/naturalism dichotomy that has hitherto dominated the interpretive debate.

II. Irreligion and the Riddle's Solution: The Core Features

The solution to the riddle of the *Treatise*, I maintain, begins with a critique of the “castration” hypothesis, which, in its unqualified form, is simply a *myth*. For more than a century, there has been a widely accepted orthodoxy among Hume scholars that the *Treatise* has little direct or substantial concern with problems of religion. According to this view, although the two themes that do dominate the *Treatise*, skepticism and naturalism, are certainly relevant to Hume's views on religion, it is only in his later works that he applies his skeptical and naturalistic principles to this subject in any detail or systematic manner. Before he published the *Treatise*, he may well have intended to include some material that was directly concerned with religion (e.g., his discussion of miracles). Hume decided, however, to “castrate” his work and removed all discussion in it that might give “offence” to the orthodox.² As a result of this process, only a few traces of his original concern with these problems are still present in the *Treatise*. Hume's major contributions on the subject of religion are, therefore, to be found in his later writings. This begins with the first *Enquiry*, where he includes a discussion of miracles and the design argument (EU 10 and 11), continues with his *Natural History of Religion* (1757), and culminates with his posthumous *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* (1779), which is generally regarded as Hume's greatest work on this subject. Whatever Hume's aims and objectives in the *Treatise* may have been, religion was not central to his philosophical intentions in this work. This view of the *Treatise*, and of the subsequent development of Hume's philosophy in relation to problems of religion, has gone almost entirely unchallenged and continues to enjoy widespread acceptance.

Contrary to the castration hypothesis, Hume's *Treatise* is *systematically* concerned with problems of religion. Important evidence for this comes from the early responses to Hume's *Treatise*, which provide us with a better understanding of the relevant context in which this work was written and published. Early responses to the *Treatise* show that Hume's critics at this time interpreted his various skeptical arguments as being laden with “atheistic” or anti-Christian significance (see, e.g., LG). Hume's early reviewers and critics paid particular attention to his arguments concerning causation and routinely noted that his views on this subject served to discredit a number of fundamental doctrines of natural religion, especially the argument a priori. The most prominent defender of the argument a priori in the eighteenth-century context was Samuel Clarke, who was regularly identified as one of the primary targets of Hume's skeptical arguments throughout the *Treatise*. These and other features of the *Treatise* encouraged Hume's earliest critics to present his work as belonging in the tradition of “freethinkers” and “minute philosophers,” such as Hobbes, Spinoza, and Collins—the very same set of thinkers who served as the principal targets of Clarke's effort to demonstrate “the truth and certainty” of the Christian religion in his enormously influential *Discourse Concerning the Being and Attributes of God* (1704–05). In more general terms, the primary context in which Hume's earliest critics assessed and placed his work was within the wider debate between the “religious philosophers” and “speculative atheists,” which was the dominant or main philosophical debate throughout the century that preceded the publication of the *Treatise*.³ It has been a standard practice of proponents of the established interpretations to dismiss Hume's earliest critics as “bigoted” and “silly” (as Hume did for the most part). According to the irreligious interpretation, however, Hume's earliest critics—whatever their other characteristics and qualities—were fully justified in their assessment of Hume's intentions in the *Treatise* and in placing his work in the same general company as “speculative atheists” and others who opposed the “religious philosophers.”

Given the responses of Hume's earliest critics, it is evident that we should try to recover an understanding and appreciation of the way in which both Hume's skeptical and naturalistic arguments in the *Treatise* were themselves thoroughly embedded in problems of religion. The right place to begin these investigations is with the overall “plan” of Hume's *Treatise* (see Hume's remarks at TA 1/645). According to the irreligious interpretation, the basic scope and structure of Hume's *Treatise* is modeled or planned after Hobbes's similar project in *The Elements of Law* (1640) and the first two parts of *Leviathan* (1651). The *Treatise* is divided into three books: “Of the Understanding” (Book 1), “Of the Passions” (Book 2), and “Of Morals” (Book 3). This structure almost exactly mirrors the structure of Hobbes's *Elements*, which was first published in 1650 in the form of two treatises, *Human Nature* and *De Corpore Politico*. Moreover, the very title of the *Treatise of Human Nature* appears in Hobbes's work, which is also striking.⁴ The significance of these affinities between Hume's and Hobbes's projects goes well beyond their immediate structural similarities and shared title. The common aim of their projects is to develop a secular, scientific account of the foundations of moral and social life. This scientific investigation of moral life, they are agreed, rests on an analysis of human thought and motivation (i.e., the understanding and the passions). The metaphysical foundation for this project is their shared naturalistic and necessitarian conception of human nature—whereby human beings are viewed as part of nature's seamless causal order. Perhaps most importantly, the Hobbist plan of

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Hume's *Treatise*—what we may describe as the form of his overall project—manifests a general commitment to the autonomy of morality from religion.⁵ It is these general claims and objectives that make up the fundamental constructive or positive teachings and lessons of Hume's *Treatise*.

It is evident that this account of Hume's constructive aims and ambitions in the *Treatise* cannot be the whole truth about Hume's philosophy in this work. It leaves out the entire skeptical dimension of his thought—which is clearly negative or critical in content. According to the irreligious interpretation, there is an intimate and intricate relationship between Hume's skepticism and the constructive project of his “science of man.” In order to clear the ground to build the edifice of secular morality, Hume had to undertake a systematic skeptical attack on the theological doctrines and principles that threatened such a project. The varied and seemingly unrelated skeptical arguments Hume advances in the *Treatise* are, in fact, held together by his overarching concern to discredit Christian metaphysics and morals. The principal targets of Hume's skepticism in the *Treatise* were the most current and influential arguments presented by various “religious philosophers” who sought to prove (demonstrably) the fundamental articles of the Christian religion: the being and attributes of God, the immortality of the soul, the reality of free will, and so on. So considered, the critical side of Hume's philosophy in the *Treatise* is simply the other side of the same anti-Christian coin that directs and shapes his core Hobbist program concerning the “science of man.”

The immediate significance of the irreligious interpretation, as described, is that it accounts for the fundamental unity and coherence of Hume's philosophy in the *Treatise*. This should be understood, in the first place, in terms of the overall (Hobbist) “plan” of Hume's “science of man.” Contrary to the accounts suggested by the established interpretations, there is a close and intimate link among all three books of the *Treatise*. (This shows, among other things, that Kemp Smith and those who follow him are seriously mistaken when they treat Book 2 on the passions as of peripheral or marginal relevance to Hume's project.) At the same time, there is a shared or common purpose uniting the skeptical and naturalistic themes that appear throughout the *Treatise*. What holds these dimensions of Hume's thought together, as has been explained, is the aim to discredit religious philosophy and morals and replace them with a secular, scientific understanding of moral and social life. Clearly, then, the irreligious interpretation recognizes the role and importance of *both* Hume's skeptical and naturalistic commitments and identifies a common source for these (distinct) features of his philosophy. It provides, therefore, a more balanced interpretation that avoids emphasizing one side of the skepticism–naturalism dichotomy at the expense of the other.

It would be a mistake to present the philosophical significance of the irreligious interpretation as limited to providing an account of the unity and coherence of Hume's basic intentions in the *Treatise*. This would be too modest and understates what is at stake here with regard to getting an accurate and complete account of Hume's aims and objectives in this work. What Hume aims to provide in the *Treatise* is a *complete system* of irreligion or “atheism.” In his various other writings, Hume offers no such complete system or worldview. Only in the *Treatise* do we find Hume's philosophy presented as one complete system (which is not to deny that significant additions and amendments to that system come with his later works). In these respects, the *Treatise* provides us with an insight into the overall structure of his philosophy of a wholly different order.

It is arguable that the irreligious interpretation is just as significant historically as it is philosophically. The irreligious interpretation invites us to place Hume's philosophy in the *Treatise* in an entirely different tradition from those that the established interpretations have identified. The philosophy of Hume's *Treatise* belongs to an irreligious or “atheistic” tradition of thought in which Hume's principal predecessors were Hobbes and Spinoza. What characterizes this tradition—which can be traced back at least as far as Lucretius—is the fundamental aim to free humankind from the yoke of “superstition.” Hume's philosophy in the *Treatise* should be recognized as a particularly distinguished and substantial contribution to this tradition of thought. Considered in the more immediate context of the early eighteenth century, Hume's *Treatise* is arguably the single most significant contribution to the philosophical literature of the Radical Enlightenment—however much its significance may be neglected, if not entirely overlooked, in contemporary accounts (see, e.g., Israel 2001). In sum, from both a philosophical and historical perspective, the irreligious interpretation provides a fundamentally different account of the nature and character of Hume's aims and intentions in the *Treatise*. As such, this alternative interpretation has important implications that inevitably resonate far beyond the *Treatise* itself, extending not only to our understanding of Hume's philosophy as a whole, but also to the way we understand the entire period of early modern philosophy.

III. The Riddle and the Role of Pyrrhonism

In light of the foregoing summary of the core features of the irreligious interpretation, the question may be asked whether this interpretation, whatever its merits, succeeds in providing a satisfactory solution to the riddle? In order to answer this question we need to further refine the problem of the riddle. The first problem that we are faced with is that we need to explain why Hume selects and pursues the particular issues and topics that he takes up in the *Treatise*? Failing any satisfactory answer to this, we are left with a work that pursues a disjointed, fragmented set of topics and problems, presenting us with a Janus-faced work in which the core skeptical and naturalistic concerns are seemingly unrelated and poorly integrated with each other. Let us call this the *unity* problem. Neither the classical skeptical nor naturalistic interpretations provides convincing answers to this question about the unity of Hume's project in the *Treatise*. Both of them lean too heavily on one side or another of the skeptical–naturalist divide and make it very difficult to decipher any clear structure or organization in Hume's arguments and their arrangement. Whatever unity is secured on these accounts involves downplaying, if not neglecting, the other (equally important) dimension of Hume's thought.

In contrast with the established interpretations, the irreligious interpretation provides a detailed and convincing answer to the unity problem. What holds Hume's various skeptical arguments together, as has been explained, is not some unguided philosophical curiosity about an arbitrary set of issues and topics but rather the disciplined, focused aim of discrediting the metaphysics and morals of the Christian religion. More specifically, it is Hume's particular concern to *separate* philosophy and theology, identifying the scope and limits of human understanding in such a way that it excludes the use of philosophy for the purposes of religious doctrine and dogma. The key instrument employed by Hume to achieve this end is his *moderate* skepticism, which discourages theological speculations but permits philosophical investigations in the sphere of common life, most notably in the area of the science of human nature, where we may expect to make some (modest) contribution to human knowledge (T 1.4.2.1, 1.4.7.9–14/187, 269–73; TA 27/657; LG 19–22). To the extent that Hume's skeptical commitments are moderate or “academic” in character, it is a crucial feature of them that they serve the irreligious end of insulating philosophy from the “intangling brambles” of theology and religion (EU 1.11/11).

The irreligious account of Hume's core skeptical intentions also makes sense of another aspect of the unity problem because as it concerns the relationship between Hume's skepticism and his naturalism. Hume's fundamental naturalistic aim is to provide a secular, scientific account of morality, viewed as *autonomous* from religious metaphysics and morals. This project of a “science of man” would be impossible, however, if Hume embraced a stronger, more extreme Pyrrhonist skepticism—because this would require him to throw “the science of man” out along with the theological bathwater. Whatever ambiguities and complexities we may find in Hume's philosophy, he is careful to say that we should not do this. As such, Hume's (irreligious) skeptical efforts to *systematically* discredit Christian metaphysics and morals, suitably contained and constrained, are not just consistent with his ambition to provide a secular, scientific account of moral and political life: it is an essential part of that project. Clearly, then, the irreligious interpretation provides a convincing answer to the unity aspect of the riddle problem as it concerns Hume's various skeptical targets and the relation between his skepticism and his naturalism. His moderate skeptical principles serve as a powerful weapon to discredit the ambitions of “religious philosophers” while leaving his own ambitions to advance the science of man undamaged.

There remains, nevertheless, a further dimension to the riddle problem, lying deep within his system, which is not just a question about the unity of Hume's philosophy but about its very coherence. In the final analysis, this problem concerns the relationship that holds between Hume's moderate, academic skeptical principles and his more extreme Pyrrhonist arguments. More specifically, we require some further explanation for the specific role of Hume's Pyrrhonist arguments within the framework of his (irreligious) philosophy. With reference to Hume's stronger skeptical commitments, critics have argued that Hume's whole project in the *Treatise*, and perhaps throughout his entire philosophy, is not simply Janus-faced (i.e., fragmented and disjointed) but actually *broken-backed*. Hume, his critics point out, not only advances Pyrrhonist skeptical arguments, he also insists in several different contexts that they cannot be refuted—an observation that, famously, reduces him to a state of philosophical “melancholy” and “despair” (T 1.4.7.1/263–4; and 1.4.2.1, 1.4.2.57, 1.4.7.7–10/187, 218, 267–9; TA 27/657). Although Hume also maintains that a skepticism of this extreme kind is unlivable and would be entirely destructive to human life (T 1.4.7.7–9/267–9; cp. EU, 12.23/159–60), considerations of this kind do not (as Hume acknowledges) serve to discredit the skeptic: they can only encourage us to ignore them or simply set them aside. The critical objection remains, therefore, that the *Treatise*, and the rest of Hume's philosophy with it, is indeed

broken-backed. The irreligious interpretation, critics argue, still does not provide any solution to *these* concerns—concerns about the coherence of Hume's (core) irreligious intentions.

Hume is certainly alive to the difficulty that faces him here. He openly acknowledges that Pyrrhonist principles would entirely subvert and “cut off” all science and philosophy (T 1.4.7.7/268; D 1.13). He is equally clear that a more moderate skepticism has no such consequences (T 1.4.2.1, 1.4.7.10–14/187, 269–71; LG 19; EU 12.24–30/161–5; D 1.8–9). Hume explains in the conclusion to Book 1 of the *Treatise*, consistent with his remarks on this subject in his later works, that the value of Pyrrhonist reflections is that they serve to expose the weaknesses and narrow limits of human understanding (T 1.4.7.13–4/271–2; cp. EU 12.24–6/161–3; D 1.3–11). The (causal) effect of this is to sustain and support the fundamental tenets of a *moderate* (academic) skepticism. More specifically, as Hume explains in detail in his conclusion to the first *Enquiry*, when we engage in Pyrrhonist reflections, this affects us in two important ways. The first is that it serves to check our tendency to dogmatism (e.g., as manifest in all efforts to demonstrate or prove as certain the doctrines of the Christian religion). The second is that it should encourage us to confine our philosophical investigations to “common life” and to discourage all speculations beyond this sphere—in particular, speculations concerning “the two eternities” (D 1.10; EU 12.25/162). According to Hume, we should turn our philosophical attention away from theological systems and hypotheses and back toward investigations such as the “science of man,” which has hitherto been “most neglected” (T 1.4.7.14/278). This is the central lesson of Hume's skeptical observations and exercises in the *Treatise*. On Hume's account, therefore, the benefit we reap from Pyrrhonism is secured not by adopting its principles and putting them into practice, which would be as damaging as it is impossible, but rather through the way in which it *secures and sustains* our commitments to a more *moderate* skepticism. By providing this form of support for the principles of moderate skepticism, the more extreme form of Pyrrhonist skepticism serves the aims of Hume's fundamental irreligious aims and objectives in both its critical and constructive dimensions.⁶

At this point, the critic may respond that whereas these claims and observations may explain why Hume was motivated to advance Pyrrhonist arguments, they still do not show that his mitigated skeptical principles are well-founded, given his own (unrefuted) Pyrrhonist arguments. That is to say, no convincing argument has been provided that serves to discredit or restrain the extreme skepticism that Hume has unleashed. With regard to this critical response to Hume's (irreligious) position, there are, I suggest, two possible ways of replying on Hume's behalf. One is to note that the critic has not said anything that Hume does not acknowledge himself. Hume makes clear that “the skeptic still continues to reason and believe, even tho' he asserts, that he cannot defend his reason by reason” (T 1.4.2.1/187). If we are looking for secure *rational* foundations for the project of the “science of man,” immune from all skeptical doubts, then Hume will agree with the critic that this has not been provided. All that can keep us committed to pursuits of this kind, in face of skeptical doubts, are the practical requirements of human life and the pleasures of philosophy itself. However, it may also be argued, on Hume's behalf, that he provides more resources than this for defeating or at least restraining extreme skepticism. Hume points out, for example, that the “true skeptic will be diffident of his philosophical doubts, as well as his philosophical conviction” (T 1.4.7.14/273). Viewed this way, Pyrrhonism becomes self-subverting. In yielding to “the current of nature,” the moderate skeptic shows “most perfectly [his] skeptical disposition and principles” (T 1.4.7.10/269). In contrast with this, the Pyrrhonist is more rash and dogmatic “than even the boldest and most affirmative philosophy” (EU 1.15/15). Given this, it is not surprising that Hume dismisses all forms of “extravagant” or “total skepticism” as mere curiosities that we need not take seriously (T 1.4.1.7, 1.4.2.50, 1.4.7.9–11/183, 214, 269–70; LG 19–20; EU 12.15n/155n, 159–60). To these observations we may add that Hume may also be read as making the more general point about all human reasoning based on experience: that it bears strong resemblance with the reasoning of animals, and, as such, its operations have *natural* foundations, which Hume's own observations explain in some detail (T 1.3.16/176–9; EU 9). Viewed in this way, Hume's skeptical ambitions are not to discredit reason in general but rather to show that we must not misrepresent the operations of reason itself by demanding and seeking rational foundations where there are none. Once we identify the natural foundations of human reason, then we are in a much better position to recognize its limits (e.g., in relation to theological speculations).

These observations concerning Hume's response to the riddle objection make clear that the irreligious interpretation can not only account for the specific role of Hume's skeptical arguments as they concern the unity issue (i.e., how his various skeptical arguments are related to each other and to his naturalism), it can also provide a plausible response to the (further) criticism that Hume's entire project is incoherent or broken-backed. To understand this aspect of the irreligious interpretation involves understanding the way in which Hume maintains

that his Pyrrhonist arguments serve to support and sustain his more moderate skeptical principles, consistent with the requirements of his core irreligious aims and ambitions (separating philosophy and theology and securing the autonomy of ethics). Hume's remarks, although they reveal a degree of ambiguity or instability on this matter, nevertheless plainly suggest that this can be accomplished without leaving his irreligious philosophy entirely broken-backed. What is crucial, as he sees it, is that that the *extreme* forms of skepticism that he has unleashed (i.e., Pyrrhonism) can be brought back under control by means of the combined force of naturalism and skeptical reflection itself. On the irreligious account, therefore, Hume holds that there is a way to overcome (if not eliminate) the internal tensions that exist between his (strong) skepticism and his naturalist ambitions.

It is certainly true that some critics of Hume's philosophy may remain unconvinced by this way of responding to the riddle because it concerns the coherence objection. At this point, however, it is important to distinguish between the *interpretive* and *critical* adequacy of the irreligious account of Hume's arguments. Obviously, we may be presented with an interpretation that is entirely adequate, in the sense that it reliably and convincingly captures Hume's intentions and views, even though the position articulated may remain unconvincing from a critical perspective. That is to say, there is no necessary convergence between an accurate (and convincing) interpretation and a true (and convincing) philosophical position—a point that even the most rigid "Humean" will surely concede.⁷ Although the irreligious interpretation succeeds in providing a clear and convincing account of how Hume suggests the riddle objection should be handled, his position may well still be judged philosophically vulnerable based on concerns about the success of his efforts to contain his extreme skeptical arguments. Clearly, however, concerns of this kind do not serve to discredit the irreligious interpretation itself. What would discredit the irreligious interpretation, and does discredit the established interpretations, would be an inability to account for why the problem of the riddle even arises for Hume; why Hume's philosophy pursues two themes that stand in such obvious tension with each other; what connects and unites these seemingly opposed strands in his thought; and, finally, how Hume believes that these two strands can indeed be reconciled with each other. In all these pertinent dimensions of the riddle problem, the established interpretations fail where the irreligious interpretation provides clear and credible answers.

IV. Causation and the Limits of Philosophy

The irreligious interpretation is by no means limited or restricted to a high-level account of the way in which Hume's skepticism and naturalism are related to each other (as described in the preceding sections). On the contrary, the irreligious interpretation provides systematic, alternative interpretations and analyses of each of the various particular topics that Hume addresses. This includes topics such as space and time, causation and induction, the external world, mind and self, free will, morality, and so on. Although it is not possible to take up each and every one of these topics, there is one topic that demands some specific comment as it concerns Hume's irreligious program. There can be no doubt that Hume's views on the subject of causation serve as the "main pillar" of his philosophical system (Reid 1967: 2, 627–8). According to the irreligious interpretation, Hume puts his views on causation to work to secure his core skeptical and naturalistic objectives understood in terms of his irreligious aims. On one side, he advances his radical and innovative views about causation to establish the limits of human reasoning as it regards religious speculations (i.e., separating philosophy and theology). On the other, he employs his views on causation to serve as the relevant metaphysical foundation for his project of "the science of man"—causal foundations that serve to discredit the opposing philosophical anthropology of the Christian religion. Let us briefly review the central threads of Hume's views on causation as they concern these two dimensions of his thought.

The fundamental issue that separates "religious philosophers" from "speculative atheists" in the context of the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century debate was whether or not an intelligent, immaterial being was the original (necessary) first cause of all that exists. There were two distinct forms of argument that theists generally relied on in support of this hypothesis. The first is the argument a priori or cosmological argument, which was given its classical formulation by Samuel Clarke. Clarke's version of this argument, which was much admired and hugely influential, rests on the general causal principle: "Nothing can come from nothing" [*Ex nihilo, nihil fit*].⁸ This principle, which had been employed by Lucretius as a cornerstone for his system of ancient atheism (Lucretius 1951: 43), was now to be turned against atheism. Clarke employed this principle to show, first, that because the material world is not self-existent or a necessary being, there must be some further cause of it, distinct from the material world. Second, and related to this, he also employed this principle to argue that matter cannot be prior to

mind in existence because as no cause can give rise to perfections or excellences it does not itself possess (to suppose otherwise is contrary to the fundamental principle that "nothing can come from nothing"). This was, of course, a familiar form of argument advanced by many others, including Descartes (1984: 2, 28). In refuting this reasoning, Hume offers an alternative fundamental causal principle: *Any thing may produce any thing* (T 1.3.15.1/173; cp. 1.4.5.30/247; TA 11/650; EU 12.29/164). It is, Hume maintains, entirely possible for us to conceive of something beginning to exist without any cause. This is not to say that the world is created or produced by nothing, nor is it to say that the world was produced by itself—these claims would be absurd and contradictory (T 1.3.3.5–6/80–1). All that is claimed is that it is conceivable that the world was not created or produced or the effect of anything. As far as we can tell a priori, the world may have come into existence without any cause whatsoever.

All that there is to causation as we experience and know it, says Hume, is the constant conjunction or regular succession of resembling objects. In other words, to say X causes Y is to say that, in our experience, we discover that objects resembling X's are always prior to and contiguous with objects resembling Y's (T 1.3.14.28–31/168–70). Our idea of causation as it exists in the world reaches no further than this. On this basis, he concludes: "Causation, annihilation, motion, reason, volition; all these may arise from one another, or from any other object we may imagine" (T 1.3.15.1/173). In this way, Hume stands Lucretius on his head with a view to refuting those "religious philosophers" who aimed to refute Lucretius's atheism using his own causal maxim:

That impious maxim of the ancient philosophy, *Ex nihilo, nihil fit*, by which the creation of matter was excluded, ceases to be a maxim, according to my philosophy. Not only the will of the supreme Being may create matter; but for ought we know *a priori*, the will of any other being might create it, or any other cause that the most whimsical imagination can assign.

(EU 12.29n/164n)

Evidently, then, under cover of rejecting Lucretius's general causal principle, Hume has established that, a priori, it is not impossible for matter and motion to produce thought and consciousness. On the contrary, not only is it a priori possible for matter to be as "active" as thought and consciousness and to actually produce thought and consciousness, this is exactly what we discover from experience (T 1.3.5.31/248–9). There is, therefore, no basis whatsoever for the a priori claim that there necessarily exists an original, self-existent being that is an immaterial, intelligent being (i.e., God).

The general conclusion that follows from these interrelated arguments concerning the limits of causal reasoning is that all efforts to demonstratively prove the existence of God are doomed to failure—a point that Hume explicitly makes in the *Treatise* and the *Enquiry* and repeats in the *Dialogues* (T 1.3.7/94; EU 12.28/163–4; D 9.5). It follows from this that the existence of any being can be proved only by arguments from cause and effect and that all arguments of this kind are based entirely on experience. "It is," says Hume, "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" (EU 12.29/164). With respect to the claims of divinity and theology, insofar as it aims to prove the existence of God, all such arguments must be based on causal experience as Hume describes it.

Whereas the cosmological argument, as advanced by Locke, Clarke, and others, aims to prove the existence of God by means of a priori, demonstrative reasoning, the argument from design has at least the merit of being based on experience and analogical reasoning. The essentials of Hume's critique of this argument are first presented in his *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (EU 11) and given a more elaborate statement in the *Dialogues*.⁹ The design argument begins with the claim that we observe an analogy or resemblance between the world and man-made machines and artifacts (e.g., watches, houses, etc.) in respect of their shared features of order, structure, harmony and the evident way their parts are adjusted to perform some function or serve certain ends (see, e.g., the observations of "Cleanthes," one of the characters of the *Dialogues*, at D 2.5). When we discover an object that has these features (i.e., order, structure, etc.), we infer that these objects have not arisen just by chance but have been produced by human intelligence. We must allow that when we discover resembling effects, we may reasonably infer that the causes also resemble each other. On this basis, we may conclude, says the proponent of the design argument, that the cause of this world must be "somewhat similar to the mind of man" (D 2.5; EU 11.11/135–6).

The fundamental flaw with this argument, Hume maintains, rests with the weakness of the analogy involved:

In human nature, there is a certain experienced coherence of designs and

inclinations; so that when, from any fact, we have discovered one intention of any man, it may often be reasonable, from experience, to infer another, and draw a long chain of conclusions concerning his past or future conduct. But this method of reasoning can never have place regard to a Being, so remote and incomprehensible, who bears much less analogy to any other being in the universe than the sun to a waxen taper, and who discovers himself only by some faint traces or outlines, beyond which we have no authority to ascribe to him any attribute or perfection.

(EU 11.26/146; cf. D 2.2–3, 2.7)

In these circumstances, when we reason on the basis of such a weak and overextended analogy, we are vulnerable to the following dilemma. On one side, there is a tendency to anthropomorphize our conception of God and attribute human qualities and attributes to him (e.g., passions, faculties, etc.) without any credible grounds or experimental basis for this (D 3.12–3, 4, 5, 11–12, 59–12, 12, 5–6). We are, in particular, liable to attribute perfections to God that our limited and narrow experience of the universe, in respect of both time and space, cannot possibly justify or license (EU 11.25–7, 12.25–6; D 1.3, 12.7). On the other side, when we are duly and appropriately constrained in these conjectures, we will inevitably collapse into a form of mysticism, which maintains the “mysterious incomprehensible nature of the Deity” (D 4.1). In this way, because the tendency for anthropomorphism is to become a form of “idolatry” and for mysticism to become indistinguishable from a skepticism that claims “that the first cause of All is unknown and unintelligible,” both these forms of theism are liable to collapse into plain atheism (D 4.4). It is this general line of argument that serves as a central thread throughout Hume's *Dialogues*.

The crucial lesson to be learned from Hume's account of causation and causal reasoning is that the existence of any being can be proved only on the basis of arguments founded on our experience of cause and effect understood in terms of a constant conjunctions of objects and events. All efforts to establish matter of fact and existence based on a priori, demonstrative reason are flawed and without any foundation. It follows from this that the only plausible basis, methodologically speaking, for the theological claims of religious philosophers is our experience of the world and the analogies this may suggest to us. Hume is equally clear, however, that this line of reasoning takes us well beyond the narrow limits and confines of human understanding and should be rejected. The practical recommendation with which he concludes his first *Enquiry* is that all the volumes of “divinity or school metaphysics ... contain nothing but sophistry and illusion,” and we may, therefore, “commit them to the flames” (EU 12.34/165).

This account of the skeptical implications of Hume's observations concerning the scope and limits of causal reasoning make clear why his own contemporaries regarded his views on this subject, from their earliest statement in the *Treatise* to the arguments published posthumously in the *Dialogues*, as loaded with irreligious significance. This is, however, only the critical or destructive aspect of their irreligious significance. The main debate between religious philosophers and speculative atheists was concerned not just with questions of cosmology but also, as noted before, with issues of philosophical anthropology. More specifically, from any orthodox perspective, the problem of religion was understood as, crucially, a *practical problem*, one concerning our accountability to God in a future state—this being a matter of the greatest importance for human happiness or misery. In this regard, there were two hotly debated issues of particular importance: the immortality of the soul and free will. If the soul is mortal, then there is no basis for either hope or fear concerning a future state. Similarly, unless human beings have free will, it was argued, there is no just basis for any such state—nor even for moral accountability in this world. On both these vitally important issues Hume marshaled his views on causation to devastating effect against various prominent defenses of the Christian religion, such as those advanced by Clarke, Butler, and Berkeley, along with those of many others.

With respect to the question of the soul, since Plato, it has been argued that the best proof of the immortality of the soul is the argument that the soul is immaterial and therefore indivisible and incorruptible. In the *Treatise*, and in his essay “Of the Immortality of the Soul,” Hume takes up this topic. Among the many avenues and issues he explores and examines, one line of argument is especially prominent. The most fundamental question for Hume, as for others, is what is the relationship between mind and matter? In particular, what is the *causal* relationship between mind and matter? Clarke and others argued, drawing on the principle of causal hierarchy, that it is absurd and

impossible to suppose that mere matter and motion could produce thought of any kind. Hume replies, employing his principle, that “any thing may produce any thing” (T 1.4.5.30/247). It is an empirical question whether we perceive “a constant conjunction of thought and motion,” and experience, he argues, confirms a causal dependence of exactly this kind. One implication of this observation is that our existence as thinking subjects depends on our bodily existence. When our bodies die, therefore, it seems reasonable to suppose that mind will also perish. Although Hume does not explicitly draw these obvious conclusions in the *Treatise*, they are openly asserted in his posthumously published essay “Of the Immortality of the Soul.”

With regard to free will, it was argued by Clarke, along with many other prominent representatives of Christian orthodoxy (e.g., Butler, Berkeley, Baxter, et al.), that if human beings are simply material beings, then all our actions and activities would be the necessary outcomes of the mechanical laws that govern matter—we would be like clocks.¹⁰ Only immaterial beings, Clarke maintains, have active power, the power of beginning motion or initiating action (Clarke 1738: 2.697, 698). In reply, Hume argued that the basic obstacle to resolving this issue is that proponents of free will suppose that there is something more to causation and necessity in the operations of matter than mere constant conjunction and the inference of the mind that this gives rise to. Once we recognize that this is all that is involved in our experience or idea of causation and necessity, the only relevant question that remains is whether or not we discover similar regularities and inferences with respect to human thought and action. Hume spends much of his discussion showing that human life is as regular and uniform as the “operation of external bodies” (T 2.3.1.3–4/399–400), which allows us to anticipate and predict how other people will act in the future. Related to this, Hume also rejects any supposed distinction between physical and moral necessity—a distinction that Clarke and others relied on to support their free will views (T 1.3.14.33/171). As for liberty, properly understood, it is entirely compatible with causation and necessity. Liberty should not be understood as the absence of causation and necessity but rather as requiring only an absence of violence, force, or constraint (T 2.3.2.1/407). Agents are at liberty when their actions are determined by their own will and desires (EU 8.3/95). Not only is the doctrine of causation and necessity not a threat to liberty and morality, so understood, it is essential to them. Were actions not subject to causation and necessity, they would be entirely capricious, which would, among other things, erode the basis for all assessment of moral merit or demerit (T 2.3.2.6–7/410–12; EU 8.31/99–100). With these points established, Hume goes on to show, in the *Enquiry*, how the doctrine of necessity, as he describes it, generates a series of serious and intractable difficulties for the theological position (EU 8. 32–6/99–103).

The overall account of human nature provided by Hume, as grounded in his views about causation, is one that presents human beings as part of the seamless order of causes and effects in which there is no categorical divide that distinguishes human beings from the rest of nature, much less presumes their existence for all eternity. Clearly, Hume rejects any form of dualism between thinking, active immaterial beings (who are immortal) and inert, passive, material beings (who are corruptible and mortal). For Hume's contemporaries, this metaphysical picture of human nature, presented in terms of a naturalist and necessitarian framework, was plainly “dangerous” and destructive of core religious doctrine. It is this worldview and perspective on the human condition that is fundamental to Hume's philosophical anthropology, whatever label we may attach to it.¹¹

This general analysis of the way in which Hume applied his theory of causation to the various key themes and issues that he takes up in his writings makes clear that this central pillar of his entire philosophy was employed to support both the skeptical and naturalistic dimensions of his irreligious program. His account of the nature and limits of causal reasoning serves to cordon off and discredit the core ambitions of the religious philosophers as they concern various proofs for the existence of God—indeed, all such arguments stand condemned in light of Hume's observations. Similarly, Hume's account of causation serves to systematically naturalize the thoughts and actions of human beings. It rejects any view that presents us as in some way transcending the natural order of things. The metaphysical presuppositions of religious philosophy, as it involves a view of disembodied minds surviving in a future state with peculiar causal powers that distinguish them from the rest of nature, are all thoroughly discredited on Hume's account. Of all the weapons that Hume uses to achieve his fundamental irreligious aims and objectives, none is as effective or wide-ranging as his theory of causation. It could well be said that Hume's theory of causation is the philosophical guillotine upon which he proposes to execute, in a systematic manner, the entire spectrum of theological doctrine and dogma.

V. Philosophical “Fox” or an Irreligious “Hedgehog”?

Given the difficulties and challenges that the established interpretations encounter, especially in relation to the riddle problem, one easy solution is to simply deny that Hume is a philosopher whose diverse and varied concerns are held together by any single linking thread or unifying theme. Hume, it may be suggested, is a thinker who pursues a wide range of distinct and unrelated issues and topics and defies any reductivism of this kind. We should not, therefore, try and force any single framework on his thought—whether this concerns just the *Treatise* or his entire body of philosophical work, considered as a whole. It should be evident, however, that the irreligious interpretation, as I have described it, takes a different view. According to the irreligious interpretation, there are few, if any, “loose ends” in Hume’s philosophy that are wholly unconnected with his irreligious program. Just as it is a mistake to treat significant parts of his philosophy—such as his discussions of passions, morals, and even religion itself—as in some way tangential or peripheral to his central concerns, so, too, it is a mistake to suppose that his philosophy lacks any coherent, overarching structure or principle of organization. To this extent, the irreligious interpretation agrees with the established interpretations that it would be a fundamental mistake to simply abandon all efforts to identify and articulate these core features of Hume’s philosophy—however much it may disagree with how this has hitherto been done.

One way of explaining this issue is with reference to Isaiah Berlin’s celebrated distinction between “foxes” and “hedgehogs” (Berlin 1953). Foxes, Berlin suggests, are those thinkers who “know many things” and have multiple concerns and interests. The hedgehog, in contrast, “knows one big thing,” which guides most of what he does. One view, which is perhaps widely accepted at the present time, is that, given this broad distinction, Hume should be classified as a paradigmatic *fox*—pursuing a wide variety of philosophical problems and topics, which are scattered and more or less arbitrarily brought together in his various writings. If Hume is a philosophical fox, some may say, then surely we have reason to question the (hedgehog-like) claims of the irreligious interpretation. Two important and related questions arise out of this. The first is to what extent, when we look beyond the *Treatise*, do Hume’s writings taken as a whole reflect a consistent and unifying concern with his irreligious agenda? Second, to what extent does the irreligious interpretation commit us to viewing Hume as better understood as an irreligious hedgehog than a philosophical fox?

Let us begin with the first question. What is the significance of our observations about Hume’s irreligious intentions in the *Treatise* for our understanding of the general trajectory and coherence of his philosophy taken as a whole? According to the established interpretations, there is a significant discontinuity between the *Treatise* and his later writings. More specifically, as the castration myth has it, the *Treatise* is more or less unconcerned with matters of religion. This is surprising from any point of view because it generates a sharp schism between Hume’s greatest and most substantial work, the *Treatise*, and some of his most significant philosophical contributions and achievements, as found in his (subsequent) critique of religion. The irreligious interpretation reverses this situation by rejecting the castration myth. Whereas the established interpretations find radical discontinuity in the evolution of Hume’s philosophical thought and his central concerns in this regard, the irreligious interpretation finds continuity and consistency throughout. Hume’s concern with problems of religion begin with the *Treatise* and carry on through his entire philosophy, running from the *Enquiries*, to the *Natural History of Religion*, and finishing with the (posthumously published) *Dialogues*.

When Hume’s later works are considered in light of the irreligious interpretation of the *Treatise*, we can make better sense not only of their relations with each other but also of Hume’s philosophical development over the course of his life. This is perhaps most striking in the case of the *Enquiries*. Hume, of course, was disappointed by the reception of the *Treatise* in the period that followed its publication. He believed that his “want of success ... proceeded more from the manner than the matter” of his work, and, to remedy this, he “cast the first part of that work anew in the Enquiry concerning Human Understanding” (MOL, xxxv–vi).¹² The first *Enquiry* was published in 1748 and was followed by the second *Enquiry* in 1751, which cast anew much of the material in the third Book of the *Treatise*, “Of Morals.” The fundamental thrust of each of the *Enquiries* corresponds very neatly with the paired core irreligious pursuits of the *Treatise*. In the case of the first *Enquiry*, as Hume’s remarks in the first and last sections of that work make clear, it is his fundamental objective to show the limits of human understanding and, in particular, to discredit all efforts to employ philosophy in support of the metaphysical doctrines of the Christian religion (i.e., “superstition”). In the case of the second *Enquiry*, it is Hume’s particular concern to show the way in which our moral and social life is founded in basic principles and operations of our human nature or moral psychology—a project that serves the aim of separating morality from any supposed foundation or source in religion. Considered in these terms, taken together, the *Enquiries* simply “cast anew” the two core irreligious

themes and elements of the *Treatise*. Clearly, then, although Hume explicitly asks his readers to regard the *Enquiries*, and not the *Treatise*, as the representative statement of his mature philosophy, it would be incorrect to read this as any sort of repudiation of the core irreligious content of the *Treatise* or of its basic aims and ambitions. Those irreligious aims and ambitions resurface in the *Enquiries*, supplemented with further (important) irreligious material. Once the irreligious nature of Hume's ambitions in the *Treatise* is properly identified and articulated, the irreligious content and unifying central themes of the *Enquiries* become even more apparent.¹³ The important conclusion that follows from this is that there is very substantial continuity and consistency in respect of Hume's irreligious aims and objectives as they stretch from the *Treatise* to the two *Enquiries*.

With regard to Hume's later works, his preoccupation with irreligious themes is perhaps most apparent in his dissertation *Natural History of Religion* and, especially, in his *Dialogues*.¹⁴ Suffice to note, for our present purposes, that Hume's effort to identify the various natural causes of religion (primarily in problematic features of human existence, such as fear, anxiety, and ignorance) continues a project that was already a prominent feature in the writings of his immediate predecessors, Hobbes and Spinoza (Hobbes 1651: chap. 12; Spinoza 1670: preface). With regard to the *Dialogues*, which Hume was working on for more than a quarter of a century before his death, it is usually regarded as the culmination and fullest statement of his irreligious outlook (an assessment, as has been explained, that generally presupposes the "castration" myth about the *Treatise*). Although there is, of course, considerable debate about what exactly Hume's final position is in the *Dialogues* on the question of the existence of God, there is, nevertheless, little debate or controversy about the undeniable presence of irreligious arguments in this work.¹⁵ In the *Dialogues*, Hume presents in a more compressed form his critique of the cosmological argument (D 9), which draws on material first presented in the *Treatise* and first *Enquiry*. He also presents what is widely regarded as the classic and most forceful statement of the problem of evil—this being an issue he had been thinking about since before the *Treatise* was even published (MEM 2.18, 22–5; see also Stewart 1995). Most importantly, Hume presents, in detail, his critique of the argument from design, which was first presented in a more rudimentary and compressed form in the first *Enquiry* (EU 11). It is evident, therefore, that beginning with the *Treatise*, continuing through the *Enquiries*, the *Natural History of Religion*, and, finally, the *Dialogues*, irreligious concerns, broadly understood, constitute the central thrust and dominant preoccupation of Hume's entire philosophical program.

Does it follow from these observations concerning Hume's systematic commitment to irreligious aims and concerns that we are justified in presenting Hume as an "irreligious hedgehog"? It may be argued that even those who accept the irreligious interpretation in its essentials are not committed to this further claim. To explain this, we need to distinguish between two versions of the irreligious interpretation itself, a weaker and a stronger version. The weaker view rejects the suggestion that the *Treatise* has little interest or concern with issues of religion (as per the castration myth) and is committed to the view that (a) irreligion belongs *among* Hume's central preoccupations in the *Treatise*, an *equal* partner with his skeptical and naturalistic concerns and (b) acknowledges that there is indeed an underlying consistency in respect of Hume's concern with this issue *throughout* his all philosophical writings. These claims are qualified, however, with the further claim that Hume has, nevertheless, a plurality of aims and objectives guiding his philosophy, and irreligion has no claim to being either the dominant or most fundamental feature of his thought. Viewed in this way, Hume remains, a "philosophical fox" and should not be construed as an "irreligious hedgehog." We may, therefore, endorse the two claims of the irreligious interpretation mentioned earlier without forcing all the major aspects of his philosophy into this framework.

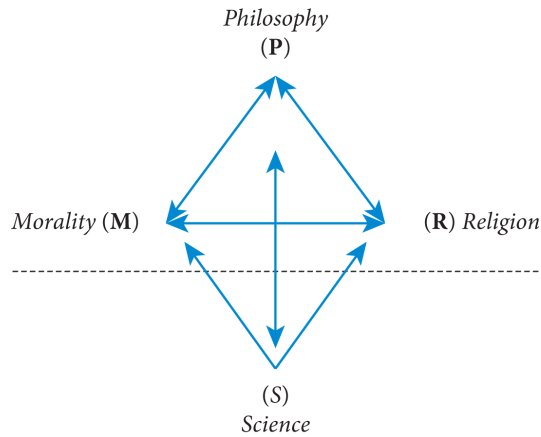
The stronger account holds that this weak view, although it clearly avoids the (more serious) errors of the established interpretations, fails to adequately and sufficiently identify the importance and significance of Hume's irreligious intentions and the role they play in his philosophy. More specifically, in presenting Hume's fundamental aims and objectives as pluralistic, the weaker account underestimates the degree and extent to which Hume's various arguments and discussions are *systematically* woven together, in a disciplined, careful, focused manner, as coordinated and directed by his underlying irreligious concerns. This is, perhaps, most apparent in the *Treatise* but applies to a great extent to the entire body of his philosophical work. The weaker view, although it avoids the error of altogether overlooking Hume's irreligious aims in the *Treatise* and the way this shapes the trajectory of his later work, still misrepresents Hume's concerns as a disjointed, shapeless collection of investigations, held together by little more than Hume's unguided philosophical curiosity. This not only leads to a failure to identify the main thread of Hume's philosophy; it also has a tendency to miss and to misrepresent the way in which *each component* is situated in and attaches to the whole edifice.

There are two further considerations—both of them spurious, in my view—that may encourage some to embrace only the weaker version of the irreligious interpretation. Some may suppose that if we endorse the stronger view, then we must also hold that Hume lacks any independent interest in the various specific topics and problems that he pursues and investigates. Clearly, however, it is entirely possible for the issue of, for example, causation to be of intrinsic interest and importance to Hume while he still, consistently and systematically, uses these investigations and the conclusions he draws from them to serve his central irreligious ends.¹⁶ Another suggestion is that if we endorse the stronger view, then this implies that Hume was willing to advance *any* argument, whatever its merits, so long as it served the purpose of his irreligious agenda. Plainly, once again, no such implication follows. Although it may well be true that some thinkers, who consider their conclusion to be both true and important, may be negligent about the soundness of the arguments they advance in support of these conclusions, Hume is not one of them. (This is a fault, however, that Hume does find in many—although not all—religious apologists.) In sum, it is not necessary to weaken the irreligious interpretation in order to free Hume of either of these vices (i.e., lacking philosophical curiosity beyond his irreligious concerns or negligently producing fabricated and faulty arguments to serve those ends). For all the variety and range that we find in Hume's philosophical contributions, he is, nevertheless, best understood as an "irreligious hedgehog"—albeit in fox's clothing.

VI. The Main Debate and the Myth of British Empiricism

The irreligious interpretation maintains that the primary historical context in which Hume's philosophy belongs, beginning with the *Treatise*, is the debate between "religious philosophers" and "speculative atheists." This debate, which I have referred to as the "main debate," dominated British philosophy from the publication of Hobbes's *Leviathan* in 1651 until well into the middle of the eighteenth century. (For details on this, see Russell 2008: chaps. 3 and 4.) Although the figures and issues involved in this debate clearly overlap with those identified in the British Empiricists versus Continental Rationalists schema, there are obvious and significant points of difference with respect to which specific figures and issues are of central concern and how they are related to each other. For this reason, it matters a great deal, when identifying and interpreting the central thrust and preoccupations of Hume's philosophy, which one of these contexts we place most emphasis on. When we consider the key set of issues that divided the parties involved in the main debate, it became evident that the very structure of Hume's philosophical thought is fundamentally different from what is suggested by any account that emphasizes Hume's place in the tradition of "British Empiricism."

The philosophy of atheism, as understood in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, was loosely identified with the metaphysical and moral outlooks of Hobbes and Spinoza—who were almost universally regarded as the most prominent representatives of "modern atheism" (see, e.g., the relevant writings by Clarke, Berkeley, et al.). Although the philosophical systems of atheism, like their theist counterparts, took many different forms, there were, nevertheless, two forms that were especially important for understanding Hume's concerns in the *Treatise* and throughout his philosophy. (These two forms are specifically identified and distinguished by Hume in his "Early Memoranda," which predates the publication of the *Treatise*.) The first of these is "the Pyrrhonian or sceptic" (MEM, 2.40). This mode of atheism is particularly associated with Sextus, Hobbes, and Bayle and insists on the limits of human understanding and philosophy, specifically in relation to theology. In contrast to this form of atheism, the second form of atheism is closely associated with naturalism and is more constructive in its commitments. Hume refers to this form of atheism as "Spinozism," although it resembles what Bayle calls "Stratonic atheism" (Bayle 1705; see also Kemp Smith 1947: 80–86). The key features of this form of atheism are that nature is self-existent, self-ordering, and self-moving. Human beings are part of this natural order of things, and our lives fall entirely within it and are governed by the same laws that regulate all its operations. Clearly, each of the two principal dimensions of Hume's own philosophical system converged on these two notable forms of atheism, as Hume and his contemporaries understood it.



The Pivotal Issues of the Main Debate
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Figure 1: Contested triangle/diamond

Each of these forms of atheism, falling on either side of the skeptic/naturalist divide, maps onto the core points of contention in the main debate. This may be explained with reference to what we may describe in terms of a triangular set of contested relations, which may also be expanded into a diamond to accommodate a fourth element and a further set of relations that come with this (Figure 1).

The three elements of the triangle are Philosophy (P), Religion (R), and Morality (M). The relations that hold among them serve as the crucial points of contention that divide the parties in the main debate. Two of these relations are vital to supporting the aims of religious philosophers. First, in the case of the relation holding between philosophy and religion (P–R), the former was taken to provide secure rational foundations for the latter. The various refutations of “atheism” advanced by the Boyle lecturers and others took this to be the very starting point of their defense of the Christian religion. Second, in the case of the relation between religion and morality (R–M), the latter was understood as depending on the former because no form of morality without religious foundations could be deemed complete or secure. It is precisely these two vital features of the theists’ philosophy that Hume, following his “atheistic” predecessors, struck at. By providing an account of the relationship between morality and philosophy (M–P) that rests the former on the science of human nature and not on religion, these thinkers advanced forms of philosophical naturalism that alarmed their Christian critics and opponents in every way. It is these three relations, which fundamentally divide “religious philosophers” and “speculative atheists,” that serve as the essential structure or framework of Hume’s entire philosophical system and direct the various complex arguments that he advances.¹⁷

The triangular analysis may be expanded into a four-cornered diamond to accommodate *science*, considered as a distinct element. This provides us with a further three relations to be considered. Each of them, so considered, also plays a distinct role in accounting for Hume’s fundamental irreligious intentions. (One caveat to this is that the science–philosophy distinction was not so clear in the eighteenth century and is, to that extent, anachronistic.) Hume’s position concerning each of these further relations may be briefly summarized. The most important of these further relations is the philosophy/science (P–S) relationship. On the familiar “British Empiricism” view, this relationship takes priority over all others because Hume’s primary concern is supposed to be with the philosophical foundations of human knowledge and science, in particular (i.e., the same general problem that is supposed to have preoccupied the major early modern philosophers from Descartes to Kant). It is Hume’s position on this problem—qua “Empiricist”—that serves to place him in the same company as Locke and Berkeley in opposition to the “Rationalists.”

In contrast with this, the irreligious interpretation maintains that it gets things backward to suppose that Hume’s primary interest rests with the general problem of the foundations of human knowledge and that his secondary interest is in the relevance of this for the philosophy–religion (P–R) relationship. On the contrary, Hume’s particular interest in the foundations of human knowledge, and the limits that these foundations impose on us, is principally motivated by his aim to put an end to the abuse of philosophical speculations by religion. It is the problems of religion, rather than problems of knowledge, that motivate, structure, and direct Hume’s philosophical

investigations. What matters to Hume is that his conclusions about the scope and limits of human knowledge have application to the main debate—not that they serve as the *terminus* of his own fundamental philosophical concerns.

With regard to the remaining two relations, morality–science (M–S) and religion–science (R–S), both may be understood as corollaries of Hume's views concerning other relations. That is to say, in the case of morality–science (M–S), in line with his irreligious predecessors, Hume is concerned to present a scientific account of morality that severs morality from religious foundations (as per his view on R–M and P–M). This form of naturalism, and all that it involved, was, as we have noted, anathema to the religious philosophers. In the case of religion–science (R–S), it was Hume's concern to show, contrary to all that the Newtonian theologians and their various Christian allies argued for, that the advances of modern science did not serve to support, much less secure, the case for theism. In opposition to all this, following his irreligious predecessors, Hume turned the apparatus of the scientific method onto religion itself, treating it as another item of natural phenomena capable of causal explanation and analysis. In other words, the general apparatus of the natural sciences is turned against religion, with a view to unmasking its origins in (problematic) features of human nature and the human condition. Clearly, then, in each and every major dimension of the structure of the main debate, whether we present it in terms of the triangular or diamond form, Hume decisively sides with the speculative atheists and against their opponents on the side of religious philosophy. It is this general structure that dominates not only Hume's philosophical system in the *Treatise* but also his whole philosophy.

The significance of this analysis for the view that Hume can be comfortably placed in the tradition of “British Empiricism” should now be very clear. It is a myth that Hume belongs in this company, and this myth is itself largely grounded in a deep and systematic misunderstanding of his core intentions in the *Treatise*, which has its own roots in the myth of “castration.” When the castration myth is discarded, the irreligious character of the *Treatise* is plain to see. It is no less obvious that all efforts to force Hume's philosophy into the empiricist–rationalist schema comes at great cost. There are three overlapping objections to this perspective on Hume's philosophy that are especially important. First, the empiricist–rationalist framework narrows our perspective in such a way that we are required to marginalize or neglect thinkers who do not fit neatly into this framework. This includes a range of thinkers who, along with their contributions, are absolutely essential to understanding Hume's principal philosophical concerns—most notably Hobbes and Clarke, along with a number of other important figures involved in the main debate and the polemics of the Radical Enlightenment (e.g., Toland, Collins, Tindal, et al.). Second, a related difficulty with the empiricist–rationalist dichotomy, as generally presented, is that it scrambles the groupings of philosophers in this period in a wholly implausible and unconvincing manner. To take just one example of this, Hume is grouped with Berkeley as an opponent of the “Rationalists.” The “Rationalists,” depending on how these boundaries are delineated, would include Spinoza and perhaps Clarke (who is evidently English, not “continental”). This view of things could hardly be more distorted and confused from the perspective of either Berkeley or Hume. Berkeley, like Clarke, was an Anglican cleric who was primarily concerned to provide a dogmatic defense of the Christian religion, with his arguments aimed directly against the “skepticism and atheism” of Hobbes and Spinoza (see, e.g., Berkeley's subtitle to Berkeley 1713 and also Berkeley 1710: no. 93 and no. 98.) The problem of knowledge is for Berkeley, as it was for Hume, subservient to his primary concern with the problem of religion, as it presents itself in the main debate. Although Hobbes and Spinoza were widely linked together in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, the empiricist–rationalist dichotomy almost entirely ignores this and makes it difficult to make sense of the relevant basis of this linkage (i.e., with respect to the issue of “atheism”). In general, the empiricist–rationalist schema groups and associates Hume's philosophy in a manner that is not only alien to his own primary concerns and self-understanding but is actually *contrary* to it (and contrary to the way his philosophy was generally received by his own contemporaries).

Arguably the deepest and most significant failing of the empiricist–rationalist schema is the way in which it distorts and misrepresents the core structure and focus of Hume's philosophical interests in terms of epistemological worries rooted in the philosophy–science relationship. On this view of things, what has priority and dominates Hume's philosophical agenda is his concern with the scope and limits of human knowledge, where the immediate target of his skeptical arguments is not religion but our (common-sense) scientific understanding of the world. On this account, the skeptical challenge as it concerns the philosophy–religion relationship is of derived or secondary importance and was not even a significant part of Hume's earliest and most important statement of his philosophy in the *Treatise*. This epistemological slant on Hume's philosophy is manifest in the very label “Empiricism,” which

gives prominence and priority to matters of epistemology and methodology rather than theology and religion. Obviously, the irreligious interpretation takes the view that this gets Hume's philosophy, from the beginning, the wrong way round. It is the set of issues developed around the philosophical structure or architecture of the main debate (as per Figure 1)—not the fabricated, post-Kantian anachronism of the empiricist-rationalist schism—that accurately and adequately captures the relevant structure of Hume's fundamental philosophical aims and objectives.

Whatever merit the empiricist-rationalist schema may have for prying out fragments and segments of Hume's philosophy to illuminate and stimulate subsequent philosophical developments (e.g., post-Kantian concerns regarding the foundations of science etc.), this is not the right framework for appreciating or assessing Hume's overall philosophical contribution and achievement. When we reconfigure Hume's philosophy in these (irreligious) terms, it is evident that the whole edifice of "British Empiricism" is suspect, as is the associated empiricism-rationalism dichotomy. The label and category of "British Empiricism" is, at best, an incomplete and one-dimensional perspective on the far more complex and much richer structures of early modern philosophy. When we rely on this way of dividing up "the great philosophers" of this period—including and especially Hume—we obscure not only what was most important to them, we obscure what is arguably the most interesting and significant features of their philosophy.

Acknowledgments

In preparing this contribution I have benefited from a number insightful reviews of *The Riddle of Hume's Treatise*, as well as from the comments and criticism provided by participants in several author-meets-critics sessions discussing this book. For this and other helpful conversations, I would particularly like to thank Don Garrett, Jamie Hellewell, Kevin Meeker, Peter Millican, Sam Rickless, and Ken Winkler.

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Notes:

(1) It is significant, however, that Reid identifies Descartes as the real source of the theory of ideas.

(2) What occasioned the process of "castration," according to this account, was Hume's unfulfilled plan, in late 1737, to meet with Joseph Butler, then Dean of St. Paul's Cathedral, and show him his manuscript of the *Treatise*. Hume wanted to avoid causing "offence." See, e.g., Mossner, 1980: 111–113; and also Laird, 1932: 282–283. For Hume's own remarks concerning this episode, see LET 1.24–5/no. 6.

(3) The labels and division between "speculative atheists" and "religious philosophers" is one that Hume employs at EU 12.1, where he introduces the concluding section of the first *Enquiry*. For a more detailed description of this debate and its relevance to the early reception of Hume's *Treatise*, see Russell 2008: chaps. 2–5.

(4) For more details about Hume's Hobbist plan in the *Treatise*, see Russell 2008: chap. 6. Hume's use of epigrams on the title pages of the *Treatise* also betray his significant associations with Hobbes's fellow travelers in the freethinking/atheistic camp, most notably Spinoza and Anthony Collins. On this see Russell 2008: chap. 7.

(5) It is important to note, however, that these (significant) similarities between the form and structure of Hume's project and Hobbes's do not imply that the *content* of Hume's philosophy is consistently "Hobbist"—which is plainly not the case. As this concerns Hume's views on morals, for example, see Russell 2008: chap. 17.

(6) In various passages Hume suggests that there are some significant analogies (and disanalogies) between the philosophical "extravagance" of Pyrrhonism or extreme skepticism and other "excessive" philosophies such as Stoicism, which also demand too much of human nature (D 1.7–8; and cp. T 1.4.1.7, 1.4.7.13/183, 272; LG 20; EU 5.1, 12.23/40–1, 160). Although both "species of philosophy" make demands that are from one point of view unlivable and from another destructive, they may, nevertheless, appear in more moderate forms that have some beneficial and desirable effects.

(7) Consider, for example, that we may accept a given interpretation of Hume's views on causation or morals without necessarily endorsing the particular view advanced because these are, obviously, distinct issues.

(8) Clarke's argument is still regarded by some of our own contemporaries as "the most complete, forceful, and cogent presentation of the Cosmological Argument that we possess" (Rowe 1998: 8).

(9) Although there is no detailed discussion of the argument from design in the *Treatise*, it would be wrong to conclude that in that work Hume's discussion of probable reasoning is unrelated to his irreligious aims and objectives. On the contrary, as I have argued at length elsewhere, at least one key target of his arguments relating to the problem of induction, as this arises in the context of his discussion of causal reasoning, is the doctrine of a future state. The particular view that Hume sets out to discredit is Butler's argument in his *Analogy of Religion* (1736), which aims to show that there is nothing incredible or unreasonable about revealed religion as it advances

this doctrine. Butler's *Analogy* was itself a response to Matthew Tindal's *Christianity as Old as Creation* (1730), which had aroused a storm of controversy at the time Hume was writing the *Treatise* (i.e., during the 1730s). For more on this, see Russell 2008: chap. 11.

(10) The relevant debates reached Hume's doorstep in the Borders during the 1730s, at the same time he was beginning work on the *Treatise*. The key figures involved were Andrew Baxter (a prominent Clarkean) and William Dudgeon (a radical freethinker). These debates also dragged in Hume's arch-nemesis William Warburton, who was a good and close friend of Baxter's. These figures and the controversies associated with them are of considerable importance and relevance for understanding both Hume's philosophy and its early reception—although they are matters that continue to be neglected and downplayed. See Russell 2008: chaps. 4 and 16 (esp. pp. 230–231); and also Russell 2007/2014.

(11) Among the various labels that Hume's own contemporaries employed for doctrines of these kinds were "Spinozism," "pantheism," "atheism," and "Hobbism"—any one of which is a reasonable fit for Hume's general naturalistic program.

(12) Hume, famously, later "disowned" the *Treatise*, rejecting it in favor of the *Enquiries* (as stated in the 1777 Advertisement to his *Essays and Treatises*; EU 83/2).

(13) It has been a familiar point for some time that the first *Enquiry* has significant irreligious content. On the standard view, this is one notable difference between the *Treatise* and the first *Enquiries* (see, e.g., Flew 1961). More recently, several commentators have helpfully emphasized the full extent of Hume's irreligious intentions in the first *Enquiry* (see, e.g., Millican 2002: esp. 34–48). Clearly, however, it is possible to recognize the presence of significant irreligious content in the first *Enquiry* without recognizing exactly how this relates this work to the second *Enquiry*, much less how these two works, taken together, are related to the *Treatise*. It is, therefore, the irreligious interpretation of the *Treatise* that, in these respects, secures a full and proper understanding of Hume's irreligious intentions as they inform his philosophy *as a whole*.

(14) Mossner presents the standard view on this matter when he says: "*The Dialogues concerning Natural Religion* and 'The Natural History of Religion' are [Hume's] most comprehensive and important contributions to the philosophy and psychology of religion respectively" (Mossner 1980: 319).

(15) My own view is that, subject to certain important qualifications, Hume is best understood as defending a form of "hard skeptical atheism" (Russell unpublished; see also Russell 2005/2013: esp. sec. 10). This is a position that lies between dogmatic atheism and agnosticism (or "soft skepticism"). Clearly, however, views differ in these respects, and there is a broad spectrum of views, stretching from some form of (attenuated) deism, through agnosticism, and on to atheism. At the same time, there is also wide agreement that the general thrust of Hume's discussion is one that is plainly hostile to any recognizable form of orthodox theism or religion. The term "irreligion" serves as a general enough label to cover the range of views that fall under this umbrella. The important point is that it is possible to endorse the irreligious interpretation of Hume's philosophy without being committed to any particular view within the broad spectrum that I have described.

(16) Compare the parallel case with Clarke's philosophy. There is no conflict between saying that Clarke found issues such as space and time, matter and mind, free will, morality, and so on, all to be of intrinsic interest while at the same time consistently and systematically marshalling his discussions of these topics in defense of the Christian religion.

(17) With this in mind, it should also be noted that given the assumptions of the castration hypothesis as it concerns the *Treatise*, since religion is supposed to make little or no appearance in this work, at least two of these relations would simply drop out as irrelevant to Hume's concerns in this work—i.e., the *very opposite* of what the irreligious interpretation maintains.

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