

The Material World and Natural Religion in Hume's *Treatise*¹

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“[...] if the external world be once called into question, we shall be at a loss to find arguments, by which we may prove the existence of the [supreme] Being or any of his attributes.” David Hume

Abstract: In the early eighteenth century context there was an intimate connection between problems concerning the existence of the material world and problems of natural religion. Two issues are of particular importance for understanding Hume's irreligious intentions in the *Treatise*. First, if we are unable to establish that we know that the material world exists, then all arguments for the existence of God that presuppose knowledge of the material world (i.e. its beauty, order, design, etc.) are placed in doubt. Second, if we are naturally disposed to believe in the existence of God, but this belief is false, then it seems to follow that God must be a deceiver – or does not exist. Hume's arguments in 1.4.2, I maintain, are finely crafted to present both these (irreligious) challenges to the orthodox view.

Among the various “sceptical topics” that Hume raises in the *Treatise*, his discussion of the material world, as presented in the section entitled “Of scepticism with regard to the senses”, has proved one of the most puzzling and perplexing for commentators.² In this paper I show that

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² See, e.g., Fogelin 1985, who says that this section is “one of the most perplexing portions of the *Treatise*” (64). See also Bennett 1971, who notes that this section “is extremely difficult, full of mistakes and – taken as a whole – a total failure; yet its depth and scope and disciplined complexity make it one of the most instructive arguments in modern philosophy” (313). – References to Hume's writings are

for Hume and his contemporaries the problem of the existence of the material world was deeply embedded in wider problems of natural religion. When Hume's arguments are carefully considered from this perspective, I argue, it is evident that his fundamental aims and motivation on this subject are essentially *irreligious* in character, which is consistent with his more general intentions throughout the *Treatise*.

I. God, Deception, and the Material World

There is, of course, an enormous amount of secondary literature devoted to Hume's views on the material world. Almost all of it is framed in the context of the debate about Hume's sceptical and naturalistic intentions and how they are related.³ While many of these studies contain valuable insights, it is nevertheless a striking fact that generally they say little or nothing about the close connection between the problem of the material world and issues of natural religion for understanding Hume's intentions on this subject.⁴ From one point of view, this is not entirely

to *A Treatise of Human Nature* [T], ed. D.F. Norton/M.J. Norton (Oxford 2000); *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* [EU], ed. T.L. Beauchamp (Oxford 2000). I will also provide references to the Selby-Bigge/Nidditch editions of the *Treatise* and *Enquiries*. Following the convention given in the Nortons' *Treatise* (and Beauchamp's *Enquiry*), I cite Book.Part.Section.Paragraph, followed by page references to the Selby-Bigge/Nidditch editions. Thus T,1.2.3.4/ 34: will indicate *Treatise* Bk.1, Pt.2, Sec.3, Para.4/Selby-Bigge/Nidditch pg.34. Other references are to *A Letter from a Gentleman to his friend in Edinburgh*, ed. E.C. Mossner/J.V. Price (Edinburgh 1967); *Essays: Moral, Political, and Literary* [ESY], rev. ed. E.F. Miller (Indianapolis 1985); *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* [D], ed. N. Kemp Smith, 2nd ed. (Edinburgh 1947).

³ Thomas Reid and James Beattie are usually cited as providing the classical statement of the sceptical interpretation. See, e.g., Reid, *Inquiry into the Human Mind* (1764), Introduction, esp. sects. v-vii, and Conclusion; and *Essays on the Intellectual Powers* (1785), Essay II, chp.12. Influential 'naturalist' critiques of the sceptical interpretation are presented in Smith 1941, esp. 79f.; and also Stroud 1977, chp.5. A more recent statement of the sceptical interpretation is presented in Fogelin, 1985 and 1993, 105f. John Wright (1983, chp. 2) gives a more historically oriented treatment. Among the more interesting recent accounts see Garrett 1997, 209–20; Dicker 1998, chp.6; and Noonan 1999, chp.4.

⁴ The only book length study of Hume's views on this subject is Price 1940. Price's interests, however, focus sharply on the relevance of Hume's discussion for subsequent developments in empiricist philosophy (e.g. phenomenism). Price indicates that he has little interest either in the historical background of Hume's arguments, or how they relate to other doctrines in the *Treatise*. In general, much of the commentary on Hume's discussion of the external world interprets his aims and objectives with a (narrow) view to twentieth-century preoccupations and concerns.

surprising. That is to say, it is widely held among the leading commentators on Hume's philosophy – indeed, it is a point of near orthodoxy – that in the *Treatise* Hume has no substantial or specific interest in problems of natural and revealed religion. These are questions, it is said, that Hume came to address in a direct and detailed manner only in his later works, such as the first *Enquiry* and the *Dialogues*. In a number of papers I have argued that this understanding of Hume's concerns in the *Treatise* is mistaken.⁵ More specifically, in my view Hume's basic intentions in the *Treatise* can be properly characterized as essentially irreligious or anti-Christian in nature – what his contemporaries labelled as “atheism”. I will describe in more detail below what Hume's “irreligious” or “atheistic” intentions involve. For our present purposes, however, suffice it to say that, from this perspective, we ought to *expect* Hume's discussion of the material world to be relevant to his (critical) views regarding the claims of natural religion.

Whatever our interpretation of Hume's general intentions in the *Treatise*, there is overwhelming reason to believe that he would be *well* aware that the debate about the existence of the material world was directly relevant to the various theories of natural religion that were on offer in the early eighteenth century. In the first *Enquiry*, for example, where Hume presents a considerably compressed discussion of the problem of the “external world”, he explicitly comments on the importance of this relationship.

To have recourse to the veracity of the supreme Being, in order to prove the veracity of our senses, is surely making a very unexpected circuit. If his veracity were at all concerned in this matter, our senses would be entirely infallible; because it is not possible that he can ever deceive. Not to mention, that, if the external world be once called in question, *we shall be at a loss to find arguments, by which we may prove the existence of that Being or any of his attributes.* (EU, 12.13/ 153 – my emphasis)

The issue here, in its most fundamental terms, concerns the connection between proofs for the existence of God and proofs for the existence of the material world, and their priority in respect of each other.⁶

⁵ See Russell 1985; 1988; 1993; 1995; 1997a and 1997b.

⁶ Hume's remarks in the *Enquiry* suggest that in respect of proofs of God and the external world we fall into a “circle” problem. More specifically, without antecedent knowledge that (a non-deceiving) God exists, we have no proof that the material world exists; and without antecedent knowledge that the material world exists, “we shall be at a loss to find arguments, by which we may prove the existence of that being [God] or any of his attributes” (EU,12.13/ 153). As I ex-

Although there is nothing corresponding to this passage in the *Treatise*, Hume is nevertheless flagging a very important set of problems – problems (he knew) his contemporaries were entirely familiar with. The principal figures in the background debate are, for the most part, familiar to us.⁷ The list begins with Descartes and Malebranche, but also includes Bayle, Locke and, most notably, Berkeley. In order to understand Hume’s views on this subject, it is necessary to follow the general trajectory of this debate as Hume encountered it.⁸

In the *Meditations* Descartes argued, famously, that we can demonstrate that there exists a material world by proving that God exists and cannot be a deceiver. God, he observes, has given us “a great propensity to believe that [ideas] are produced by corporeal things”⁹. From this Descartes concludes that “God could not be understood to be anything but a deceiver if the ideas were transmitted from a source other than corporeal things. It follows that corporeal things exist” (*Writings*, II,55). For Descartes, then, knowledge of the existence of the material world depends on prior proof of the existence of God. His demonstration of the existence of the material world stands or falls with the particular proofs of God’s existence that he advances.¹⁰

While Malebranche follows Descartes on many points, he nevertheless rejects his demonstration for the existence of material bodies. “To be fully convinced that there are bodies”, says Malebranche, “we must have demonstrated for us not only that there is a God and he is no deceiver, but also that He has assured us that He has really created such a world, which proof I have not found in the works of Descartes”¹¹. Malebranche proceeds to argue that while “faith obliges us to believe there are bodies”, we

plain below, some (e.g. Descartes) claim to break out of this circle by advancing independent proofs for God’s existence, and others (e.g. the Newtonians) claim to escape by denying that the existence of the material world can be put in doubt.

⁷ Although all these figures are familiar to us, I am not aware of any commentator (including those cited) who have emphasized the importance of problems of natural religion for understanding Hume’s intentions on the subject of the external world; much less, any who have argued that his intentions in this area are specifically irreligious. Beyond this, as I argue below, there are important gaps in the way that the background debate has generally been described – particularly as it relates to Hume’s immediate Scottish context.

⁸ See, in particular, Hume’s letter to Michael Ramsay, dated 26 August 1737, which says that to “comprehend the metaphysical Parts” of the *Treatise* Ramsay should read works by Malebranche’s *Search After Truth*, Berkeley’s *Principles*, Descartes’s *Meditations*, and “some of the more metaphysical articles of Bailes Dictionary; such as those [of] Zeno & Spinoza”. (Cited in Mossner 1980, 104. 626f.)

⁹ Descartes, *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, 3 vols., trans. by J. Cottingham, R. Stoothoff and D. Murdoch (Cambridge 1985), II, 55 [*Meditation*, VI].

¹⁰ Descartes’s two proofs for the existence of God both proceed from our idea of God: *Writings*, II,31f.,45f. [*Meditations*,III, V].

¹¹ Malebranche, *Philosophical Selections*, ed. S. Nadler (Indianapolis 1992), 82 [*Search After Truth*, Eluc. #6].

are “not invincibly led to believe there is something other than God and our own mind” (*Selections*, 82). He agrees with Descartes, however, “that we have a strong propensity to believe that there are bodies surrounding us” – even though this “does not constrain our belief through evidence”¹².

Bayle, in his *Dictionary* article on “Zeno of Elea”, cites this passage from Malebranche and comments on it at some length. He indicates, in particular, that although Malebranche agreed with Descartes that we have a natural inclination to believe in body, he was also anxious to show “that God would in no way be a deceiver even though no bodies might exist in reality”¹³. The point that Bayle draws his readers’ attention to is that those who hold that we know (demonstrably) that the material world exists on the ground that God is no deceiver (e.g. Descartes and those who follow him), may have this argument reversed against them. That is, it follows from this position that if it can be demonstrated that the material world does not exist, then we must conclude, on the assumptions given, that God is a deceiver.¹⁴ However, on the assumption that God *cannot* be a deceiver, it follows that God does not exist.

More specifically, Descartes’ argument for the existence of the material world has the following structure:

1. We naturally believe that there exists a material world.
2. If God exists, and the material world does not, then God is a deceiver.
3. God cannot be a deceiver.
- *4. God exists.
5. Therefore, the material world exists.

Bayle simply observes that it follows from this argument that if we deny the conclusion (5), but accept premises (1) and (2), then we must then deny (3) and/ or (4), since the argument is valid. Malebranche accepted (3) and (4), but held, as I have indicated, that (1) and (2) can be challenged. He also argued that it is not possible to *demonstrate* the non-existence of bodies.¹⁵ Nevertheless, the obvious “danger”, as

¹² Malebranche, *Selections*, 82. Further below Malebranche goes on to say (83) that we have “more reason to believe there are bodies than to believe there are not any. Thus, it seems that we should believe there are bodies [...] For since all natural judgments come from God, we can make our voluntary judgments agree with them when we find no means of discovering them to be false; and if we are mistaken in these instances, the Author of our mind would seem to be to some extent the Author of our errors and faults”.

¹³ Bayle 1965, art. “Zeno of Elea”, Note H, 373f. Cp. Bayle’s remarks on this subject in art. “Pyrrho”, Note B, 197f.

¹⁴ In the same context, Bayle cites a passage from Arnauld that makes exactly this point. Arnauld argued, says Bayle, “that if there are no bodies, we are ‘forced to admit in God things that are completely contrary to the divine nature, such as being a deceiver [...]’”. (Quoted from *Traité des vraies et des fausses idées*; Bayle 1965, 375.)

¹⁵ Malebranche, *Selections*, 83: “Certainly it is at least possible that there are external bodies [...]”.

Bayle's observations make plain, is that if we accept, with Descartes, premises (1) and (2), but have reason to conclude that our belief in the existence of the material world is "false" or "illusory" (i.e. deny (5)), then either we will (in Arnauld's words) be "forced to admit in God things that are completely contrary to the divine nature" (i.e. deny (3)); or we must deny (4), the existence of God.

Where, then, does Locke stand on this subject? Despite Locke's detailed concern with the limits of human understanding in respect of our knowledge of the material world, he differs from Descartes in so far as he treats all sceptical worries about the existence of the material world as hardly worth taking seriously. The existence of material beings, he says, is supported by "the testimony of [our] eyes, which are the proper and sole judge of this thing [...]"¹⁶. He notes briefly, with Descartes, that ideas arise in our minds involuntarily and so must have some "cause without" (*Essay*, 632).

[I]f after all this, any one will be so sceptical, as to distrust his Senses, and to affirm, that all we see and hear, feel and taste, think and do, during our whole Being, is but the series and deluding appearances of a long Dream, whereof there is no reality [...] I make him this answer, That the certainty of Things existing in rerum Natura, when we have the testimony of our Senses for it, is not only as great as our frame can attain to, but as our Condition needs [...] (*Essay* 634; and cp. 312, 537)

In this way, for Locke, our knowledge of the existence of the material world is not capable of demonstration, but rather grounded in the immediate evidence of sensation.¹⁷ Like Descartes, he is a dualist, but he rests his confidence in the existence of matter on the senses, not reason.

This brings us to Berkeley, the pivotal figure for any understanding of Hume's position and strategy on this subject. Berkeley's immaterialist philosophy, as T.E. Jessop suggests, is best understood "as a piece of religious apologetics"¹⁸. In this regard his system has both a negative and a positive aspect. At its most basic level, the negative aspect aims to refute demonstrably the atheistic materialism of Hobbes, Spinoza and their followers. (PK,92f.; TD,98) The positive aim is to defend "the great articles of religion", specifically the being and attributes of God and the immortality of the soul. The negative aspect of Berkeley's immaterialism turns on the claim that matter, understood as an "inert, senseless substance" that exists "without the mind" (PK,9), is impossible and has no existence (PK,4,56). The supposition of sen-

¹⁶ John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. Ed. P.H. Nidditch (Oxford 1975), 631 [IV,xi,2].

¹⁷ Clearly, then, for Locke, unlike Descartes, our knowledge of the existence of the material world does not depend on (prior) proofs of the existence of God. On his account, therefore, we can use our knowledge of the existence of the material world, along with knowledge of our own existence, to prove the being and attributes of God. (Cp. Locke, *Essay*, 621 f.) The significance of this point is discussed below.

¹⁸ T.E. Jessop 1966, 96. References to Berkeley's writings are to *The Principles of Human Knowledge*. Ed. J. Dancy (Oxford 1998) [PK – citations to section numbers]; and *Three Dialogues*, Ed. J. Dancy (Oxford 1998) [TD – citations to page numbers].

sible things or objects existing unperceived, it is argued, is unintelligible, and the result of a mistaken attempt to abstract existence from perception (PK,5,10,11; TD,106,109f.).¹⁹ Berkeley maintains, therefore, that there is no material substance which is the cause of our ideas, and it is a mistake to suppose that our ideas somehow represent (material) objects of this kind. According to Berkeley, these suppositions, which are the “very root” of scepticism and atheism (PK,86,133), lack any foundation in either sense or reason (PK,18,40; TD,62,90).

Berkeley makes clear that he does not intend his scheme of immaterialism to be a sceptical doctrine. On the contrary, he is careful to insist that the doctrine of matter is the invention of *philosophers*, and that their materialist commitments are no part of “vulgar” belief (PK,35,47,51,54f.,82; TD,113f.,117f.,126,141f.). The world of (common sense) immaterialism, therefore, consists only of Ideas and Spirits. On this scheme, sensible objects or physical things are not hidden behind a veil of appearances, but rather consist of ideas of sense, and these exist only in minds. In respect of substance, therefore, Berkeley is a monist, since the only kind of substance that exists, on his account, is immaterial substance or spirits.

In sum, Berkeley's view is that although immaterialism is at odds with the dualism of “modern philosophy”, it is nevertheless the common sense or vulgar view of the world. There are, moreover, “great advantages” to this scheme (TD,138). In particular, the doctrine of immaterialism eliminates the numerous “disputes and puzzling questions” generated by the hypothesis of matter (PK,96; cp.133f.,156; TD,112f.,138f.). These disputes and puzzles are especially relevant for natural religion, Berkeley maintains, in so far as the important truths that it seeks to vindicate have been discredited because they have been defended by means of the doctrine of materialism.²⁰ Berkeley's fundamental contention is, then, that the materialist hypothesis leads us “into the deepest and most deplorable skepticism”, and it serves the purposes only of “Atheism and Irreligion” (PK,86f.,92,101; TD,97,98,141f.). This is not the case with immaterialism.²¹ The principles of immaterialism, Berkeley maintains, are not only consistent with common sense, they constitute the most secure foundation for natural religion and prove beyond all doubt the being and attributes of God.

Berkeley is, of course, well aware that he is liable to be accused of embracing sceptical principles of a kind that will prove “dangerous” to religion (TD,125–6). Indeed, this objection is important enough to him that he addresses it in his final remarks in the *Dialogues*. In this context Hylas says that, initially, he had taken Philonous to

¹⁹ Berkeley's argument is essentially an inversion of Hobbes's argument against the existence of *immaterial* substance. See Winkler 1989, 189.

²⁰ Among the difficulties that he has especially in view are: (1) how we explain the (causal) interaction between mind and matter?; (2) how we can know that ideas represent objects as they really are – or even if these (represented) objects exist?; (3) how we explain the creation of matter by God?; and (4) is it possible that a material being can think? Each of these are problems or difficulties that tend, in various ways, Berkeley maintains, to cast doubt on the existence and attributes of God, and derogate from his immediate activity and presence in the world.

²¹ See esp. PR,149: “It is therefore plain [...]”.

be advancing sceptical principles of the kind that the Academics and Cartesians had advanced. Hylas has come to realize, however, that this view was mistaken and Philonous's "conclusions are directly opposite to theirs" (TD,143).²² The general point here is that Berkeley firmly rejects the suggestion that he is a sceptic who denies any difference between "real things" and mere dreams, chimeras, or "illusions of the fancy" (PK,34f.,40ff.3; TD,117f.,126f.). This claim is essential for his defense of natural religion and his effort to insulate it from all sceptical doubts. (PK, 109,146). Plainly Berkeley does not want to be read as suggesting that creation itself, considered as the immediate and most obvious evidence of God's being and attributes, is merely a "dream" or "illusion" (TD,96f.; cp. PK, 109,146).²³ Despite his efforts to avoid these charges, however, this was precisely how Berkeley's early critics – including several prominent and influential Scottish Newtonians – responded to his work.²⁴

It is crucial to Berkeley's entire position that he establish that immaterialism is not opposed to common sense, but consistent with it. More specifically, Berkeley is aware that in respect of the doctrine of immaterialism, he must show that God is no deceiver (TD,125). This was an awkward issue for him to handle. In the *Principles*, for example, Berkeley acknowledges that we have some natural tendency to believe in the existence of matter, and he undertakes to *explain* the materialist "prejudice". (PK,54f.; cp. 73f.,149) In the *Dialogues*, however, he is more careful to insist that the immaterialist doctrine is consistent with common sense or the vulgar view (TD,113f.,126,141f.).²⁵ This claim is crucial if he is to avoid the sort of objections that Descartes, Malebranche, Bayle and others drew attention to: namely, given our natural inclination to believe in matter, it follows that God must be a deceiver. The combination of claims that must be avoided, therefore, is that (i) the material world has no existence (i.e. independent, external existence) and (ii) we are constrained by our nature to believe that it exists. On the assumption that God exists, this leads to the conclusion that God is a deceiver.²⁶ However, given that the major parties involved in the debate (e.g. Descartes, Malebranche, Locke and Berkeley) are all agreed that God *cannot* be a deceiver, the only alternative is to conclude that God does not exist. Clearly, then, none of the principals involved in the debate – including Berkeley – would welcome *this* combination of claims.

²² Philonous's final remarks in the *Dialogues* are: "[...] the same principles which at first view lead to scepticism, pursued to a certain point, bring men back to common sense" (TD,143).

²³ Cp. Locke's remarks at *Essay*, 563 [IV,iv,2]: "[...] if our knowledge of our Ideas terminate in them, and reach no further [...]".

²⁴ I discuss Berkeley's Scottish critics below. See also the reference to Henry Grove's work in note 41 below.

²⁵ See Winkler 1989, 305.

²⁶ Cp. Bayle 1965, art. "Zeno", Note H, 376, who discusses the possibility and implications of God being a deceiver.

II. Body, Belief, and Hume's Sceptical Naturalism

Hume's discussion "Of scepticism with regard to the senses" opens with the claim that the issue that interests him is what *causes* us to *believe* in the existence of body (T,1.4.2.1/ 187 – my emphasis). There is, says Hume, no point in asking if there is body or not, since this is something that we all believe (even the professed sceptic). To believe in body is, for Hume, to believe that objects continue to exist, distinct from the mind, even when they are not perceived (T,1.4.2.2/ 188). The source of this belief in the continued and distinct existence of objects must either be the senses, reason or imagination. Hume points out that the senses, since they present nothing to the mind but its own perceptions, can "never give us the least intimation of any thing beyond" (T,1.4.2.4,11; cp.1.2.6.4/ 189,191f.; cp.67f.). Nor can reason be the source of this opinion. In the first place, "whatever convincing arguments philosophers may fancy they can produce", it is obvious that these arguments are known to very few (T,1.4.2.14/ 193). More importantly, even if we distinguish between our perceptions and objects (as philosophers do), all that is ever present to the mind are our perceptions, and so we cannot draw any inference from perceptions to objects. It is impossible, therefore, to form any conclusion concerning the existence of objects on this basis (T,1.4.2.14,47/ 193,212).

Having argued that our belief in body is due to neither the senses nor reason, Hume proceeds to show how the notion of distinct and continued existence arises from a "concurrence" between the qualities of some of our impressions and certain "trivial" qualities of the imagination (T,1.4.2.15,56/ 194,217). The details and complexities of this account need not concern us here.²⁷ What is important, however, is the way in which some of our impressions influence the imagination and lead us into the "vulgar" belief in body (T,1.4.2.12f./ 192f.). The vulgar, says Hume, "confound perceptions and objects, and attribute a distinct continu'd existence to the very things they feel or see" (T,1.4.2.14/ 193). Hume maintains that this is the view of "almost all mankind, and even philosophers themselves, for the greatest part of their lives" (T,1.4.2.38/

²⁷ The qualities of our impressions (of sense) that concern Hume are constancy and coherence (T,1.4.2.18f./ 194f.); and the "trivial" quality of the imagination that is most relevant is the tendency to confuse a series of resembling perceptions with an identical object (T,205n). Much of the scholarly literature on Hume's arguments is focused on these aspects his discussion, at the expense of a wider consideration of the theological implications of his position.

206f.). On this view of things, “our perceptions are our only objects, and continue to exist even when they are not perceiv’d” (T,1.4.2.48/ 213). These objects are, therefore, “neither to be annihilated by our absence, nor to be brought into existence by our presence” (T,1.4.2.38/ 207). What is fundamental to the vulgar view, as opposed to the view of the “modern philosophers” (T,1.4.2.13/ 192), is that it involves the (“fictional”) belief that our perceptions themselves have a continued and distinct existence (T,1.4.2.14,29,36,43/ 193,200f.,205,209).

A “very little reflection and philosophy”, Hume says, will expose the “fallacy” of the vulgar view (T,1.4.2.44/ 210). Hume suggests a “few experiments” by which we may “quickly perceive, that the doctrine of independent existence of our sensible perceptions is contrary to the plainest experience” (T,1.4.2.45/ 210f.). From this evidence philosophers conclude that “every thing, which appears to the mind, is nothing but a perception, and is interrupted, and dependent on the mind” (T,1.4.2.14/ 193). For this reason they distinguish between perceptions and objects, and take the former “to be interrupted, and perishing, and different at every different return; the latter to be uninterrupted, and to preserve a continu’d existence and identity” (T,1.4.2.46/ 211). Hume describes the “new system” of philosophers as the “hypothesis [...] of double existence” (T,1.4.2.52/ 215). It is, he says, the “monstrous offspring” of the opposing principles of the imagination and reason, “which are both at once embrac’d by the mind, and which are unable mutually to destroy each other” (T,1.4.2.52/ 215).

The philosophical hypothesis of “double existence”, while it sets the mind at ease, has “no primary recommendation, either to reason or the imagination” (T,1.4.2.46/ 211f.). On the one hand, even the philosopher, in a relaxed state of mind, lapses back into the vulgar view, as conditioned by the imagination (T,1.4.2.51,53/ 214,216). On the other hand, when we reflect on these considerations, and apply our philosophical principles, we will find ourselves losing all confidence in our senses (T,1.4.2.56/ 217f.). Hume is clear, however, that this sceptical disposition cannot be maintained for long. Although reason alone would lead us to abandon our belief in continued and distinct existence, this view is embraced only by “a few extravagant sceptics; who after all maintain’d that opinion in words only, and were never able to bring themselves sincerely to believe it” (T,1.4.2.50; cp. 1.4.2.1/ 214; cp. 187).

It is, then, a mistake to suggest that any *single* view represents Hume’s (final) position on this subject. On the contrary, Hume’s point is that our beliefs about external existence are essentially *dynamic* (i.e. subject to change), depending on the relative influence of reason and the ima-

gination over us. All of us, in so far as we reflect of this issue, will oscillate between “the intense view” that leads to scepticism, and the “relaxed view”, which is the view of the “vulgar” (cp. T,1.4.7.8,9/ 268f.). The philosophical hypothesis of “double existence” is an “intermediate state” that puts us “at ease”; but Hume makes clear that this view is no more reasonable, than it is natural or steady in its influence (T,1.4.2.49,52/ 213,215f.). Hume’s general aim, therefore, is not so much to “accept” or “reject” any specific position in preference its alternatives, but rather to *explain* the principles operating in the human mind that lead us (inevitably) to move from one position to another as our situation changes.²⁸

Hume’s analysis suggests that the materialist hypothesis may take the form of either the vulgar view or the philosophical hypothesis of “double existence”, both of which are subject to “contradictions and difficulties” (T,1.4.5.1/ 232). The vulgar view is easily discredited by only a “few experiments”, and so we are driven to the doctrine of double existence. This view, however, “contains all the difficulties of the vulgar system, with some others, that are peculiar to itself” (T,1.4.2.46/ 211). Despite all this, we are incapable of rejecting the opinion of continued and distinct existence in the manner of the extravagant sceptic. Philosophy leaves us, therefore, marooned in an “intermediate situation” (T,1.4.2.52/ 216), slipping back into the vulgar view when we relax, and (momentarily) losing all confidence in our senses when the philosophical difficulties of our suppositions about body are pressed upon us.

One of the most contested questions regarding Hume’s views on the existence of the material world is whether or not he should be understood as “a sceptic” on this subject. Closely related to this, is the question of whether or not Hume is simply advancing and extending Berkeley’s arguments, or suggesting an (constructive, positive) alternative.²⁹

²⁸ Wright 1983 is among those who claim that Hume “clearly subscribed to a representative theory of knowledge” (19, 50f., 88f.) For a defence of the contrary view see, e.g., Dicker 1998, 159f., 167, 176, 178; who argues that the doctrine of double-existence is a philosophical theory that “Hume strongly rejects”. There is some resemblance between the “dynamic” interpretation that I describe and what Fogelin calls Hume’s “radical perspectivism” (1998, 161f.). Fogelin, however, does not comment on the relevance of problems of natural religion for the position that Hume takes up.

²⁹ See the references given in note 2 above. Hume does not mention Berkeley by name in the context of 1.4.2 of the *Treatise*, but his reference to “a few extravagant sceptics” at T,1.4.2.50/ 214 certainly includes him.

Hume's own assessment of Berkeley, and his position on the question of scepticism, is tersely, but clearly, stated in the first *Enquiry*. Berkeley's arguments, he says:

[...] form the best lessons of scepticism, which are to be found either among the ancient or modern philosophers, Bayle not excepted. He professes, however, in his title-page (and undoubtedly with great truth) to have composed his book against the sceptics as well as against the atheists and free-thinkers. But that all his arguments, though otherwise intended, are, in reality, merely sceptical, appears from this, *that they admit of no answer and produce no conviction*. Their only effect is to cause that momentary amazement and irresolution and confusion, which is the result of scepticism. (EU,12.15n32/ 155n – my emphasis)

In this passage Hume makes plain that his position on the subject of the existence of the material world comes down to two fundamental theses, which are derived from the opposing and irreconcilable principles of reason and the imagination. The first, which I will call the “sceptical thesis”, is that the sceptic's arguments “admit of no answer”. This thesis needs careful formulation in respect of Hume's understanding of exactly what “admits of no answer”.

There are two different sceptical claims that are involved here that should be distinguished. The first maintains only that our natural belief in body lacks any evidential support. Hume argues for this sceptical claim by way of showing that neither reason nor the senses can *justify* our belief that the material world exists. By itself, however, this is not to claim that our natural belief in body is *false*. The second, stronger, claim is that our natural belief in body is “*contrary* to reason” (EU,12.16/ 155), since it involves “false suppositions” and “gross illusion” (T,1.4.2.56/ 217; and cp. T,1.4.2.29,43,48/ 200f,209,213). The “gross illusion” that Hume is specifically concerned with is that “our resembling perceptions are numerically the same”, which leads us into “the opinion that these perceptions are uninterrupted, and still existent, even when they are not present to the senses” (T,1.4.2.56/ 217). It is clear that Hume accepts the stronger sceptical thesis as it applies to the vulgar system, since he argues explicitly that it is false.

Hume maintains that the philosophical system of double existence is a “hypothesis” that has “no primary recommendation to reason” (T,1.4.2.46/ 211), and that we arrive at it only “by passing thro' the common hypothesis of identity and the continuance of our interrupted perceptions” (T,1.4.2.46,48/ 211,213). Beyond this, he also argues that the philosophical system contains not only “all the difficulties of the vulgar system”, but also “some others that are peculiar to itself” (T,1.4.2.46,1.4.v.1/ 211,232). More specifically, the philosophical system

requires that we create “a new fiction” by “feigning” a double existence of perceptions and objects, and then supposing that the former resemble the latter (T,1.4.2.52f./ 215f.). Nevertheless, we cannot conclude that the philosophical system is false simply on the ground that the vulgar system is false and that we are unable justify our belief in the philosophical system. In the section “Of the modern philosophy” (1.4.4) Hume presents a further argument against the philosophical system. The particular argument that he advances follows Berkeley's general line of reasoning closely (see esp. Berkeley, PK,9f.). As interpreted by the “modern philosophy”, Hume observes, the philosophical system depends on a fundamental distinction between primary and secondary qualities (T,1.4.4.3/ 226; cp. Locke, *Essay*, 134f.), but this distinction is subject to a “decisive” objection (T,1.4.4.6/ 227). Material objects or bodies, according to this account, must be understood in terms of their (real) primary qualities (T,1.4.4.5/ 227).³⁰ However, any object that we can conceive of as having primary qualities, Hume maintains, must also possess secondary qualities. That is, if we entirely remove the secondary qualities from an object we in effect “utterly annihilate” it or reduce it to “nothing” (T,1.4.4.6,10/ 228,229). The efforts of modern philosophers to represent material objects as possessing only primary qualities and no secondary qualities leaves only an absurd and unintelligible “abstraction” (EU,12.15/ 154).³¹ Hume returns to this point in the *Enquiry*:

Bereave matter of all its intelligible qualities, both primary and secondary, you in a manner annihilate it, and leave only a certain unknown, inexplicable *something*, as the cause of our perceptions; a notion so imperfect, that no sceptic will think it worth while to contend against it. (EU,12.16/ 155 – Hume's emphasis)

³⁰ It has been argued by Garrett that Hume “does not ever assert the *truth* of the modern philosopher's conclusions about the unreality of secondary qualities. Instead he restricts himself to reporting it as *their* conclusion [...]” (1997, 218). See, however, Hume's remarks at T,3.1.1.26/ 469 where he states that the modern philosophy's “discovery” that secondary qualities “are not qualities in objects but perceptions in the mind” should be “regarded as a considerable advancement of the speculative sciences”.

³¹ In this context Hume suggests the analogy that we can no more conceive of an extension that is neither tangible nor visible than we can conceive of a triangle that has no particular length or proportion (EU,12.15/ 154f.; cp. Berkeley, PK, Intro. 15,16). In his earlier discussion of abstract ideas in the *Treatise* Hume maintains that “'tis utterly absurd to suppose a triangle really existent, which has no precise proportion of sides and angles” (T,1.1.7.6/ 19). The implication of this is that objects that are extended but lacking all qualities of sight and feeling are no more possible in reality than triangles that lack any precise proportion of sides and angles.

The modern philosophy, therefore, because it removes secondary qualities from material objects, reduces these objects to nothing. In sum, it is Hume's view that the vulgar view is false, and the philosophical view, in an effort to avoid "all the difficulties of the vulgar system", collapses into an account of bodies that, if not actually false, is nevertheless meaningless and absurd, and leaves us in the same position as "the most extravagant scepticism" (T,1.4.4.6/ 228f.).³²

The second thesis, which I will call the "naturalist thesis", holds that sceptical arguments "produce no conviction". More specifically, Hume rejects Berkeley's claim that immaterialism is the common sense view of the ordinary person. On the contrary, it is the "vulgar system" – which takes our immediate objects of perception to have continued and distinct existence – that constitutes the "common sense" view of the ordinary person (T,1.4.2.48/ 213). The vulgar view is, indeed, one that we are constrained to believe and about which we have no choice (T,1.4.2.1/ 187). According to Hume, *all* of us are prone to the vulgar view most of the time, and this includes not only philosophers, but even "extravagant sceptics" (T, 1.4.2.1,36,38,50f./ 187,205,206,214). Given that the vulgar view is one that involves fallacy and illusion, the naturalist thesis implies that we are all constrained to believe in body even though "a very little reflection and philosophy is sufficient to make us perceive the *fallacy* of that opinion" (T,1.4.2.49/ 210 – my emphasis).

³² Hume never explicitly asserts that the philosophical system is "false". (Garrett 1997, 214, 220, makes this point; but cp. Noonan 1999, 184–6, and also Dicker 1998, 176.) However, since he does claim that this doctrine either involves an unintelligible and meaningless abstraction or commits us to absurdity and contradiction, his position goes well beyond weak scepticism. While Hume's position regarding the philosophical system brings him close to Berkeley's view, his attitude to vulgar belief in body is quite different from this. In particular, Hume is careful to avoid suggesting that that vulgar belief in body is in any way "unintelligible" or "absurd". On the contrary, he specifically argues that our belief in the continu'd existence of sensible objects or perceptions, although false, "involves no contradiction" (T,1.4.2.39f./ 206f.). Clearly, then, unlike Berkeley, Hume holds that our original, natural belief in body is neither absurd and incoherent, nor the product of philosophical speculation (T,1.4.2.14,31/ 193,202). For further discussion relating to this point of contrast see, e.g., Fogelin 1985, 76f.; Raynor 1990.

III. *The Irreligious Significance of Hume's Two Theses*

Hume's commitment to *both* the sceptical and naturalist theses has puzzled many commentators. Fogelin claims, for example, that Hume fails to explain why (natural) "belief in this palpable falsehood [...] should be esteemed of great importance"³³. The answer to this question, I suggest, lies with the way that the two theses are relevant to problems of natural religion. Consider, first, the implications of the sceptical thesis for the various systems of natural religion. Clearly not all proofs for the existence of God depend on (our knowledge of) the existence of the material world.³⁴ However, the systems of natural theology that were most influential in the context of early eighteenth century British philosophy are generally of this kind. Strictly speaking, this is not true of Locke's version of the cosmological argument, as presented in the fourth Book of his *Essay*.³⁵ Locke maintains that our knowledge of God depends on knowledge of our own existence, and that both of these are more certain than knowledge of the existence of the material world (*Essay*, 619f., 631). Nevertheless, Locke goes on to argue that we can use our knowledge of the material world to reason about God's being and attributes (*Essay*, 621f.). This is possible since we have "the greatest assurance we are capable of concerning the Existence of material Beings" (*Essay*, 631). In general, on Locke's account, the material world – God's "first great piece of Workmanship, the Creation" (*Essay*, 628) – is an entirely secure foundation on which to advance our knowledge of God's being and attributes.

The threat that sceptical arguments regarding the existence of the material world pose for established systems of natural religion is especially obvious when we turn to the principal arguments associated with the leading Newtonian thinkers at this time. Without doubt, the most influential of these was Samuel Clarke, who was the most famous of the Boyle Lecturers.³⁶ Clarke's philosophy is, moreover, of central

³³ Fogelin 1985, 78f. Fogelin's remarks in this context are specifically concerned with Hume's account of the "vulgar" belief in body.

³⁴ Descartes, for example, argued in the opposite direction – i.e. God to world, not world to God. Elsewhere in the *Treatise* and *Enquiry* Hume provides reason for rejecting the "metaphysical" proofs advanced by Descartes (see, e.g., T, 1.3.7.2f./94f. and EU, 12.28f./164f. on God and existence).

³⁵ Locke's version of the cosmological argument is structurally very similar to Clarke's famous "argument a priori", discussed below.

³⁶ On the importance and influence of Newtonian theology in Britain during the early eighteenth century see Hurlbutt 1985. On the particular influence and reputation of Clarke at this time, see Ferguson 1974.

importance to Hume's concerns and interests throughout the *Treatise*, where it is the object of systematic refutation and sceptical criticism.³⁷ For our present purposes, the significant point is that the entire edifice of Clarke's celebrated "argument a priori", as presented in his *Demonstration of the Being and Attributes of God*, rests on an unquestioned belief that we know that the material world exists.³⁸ Nowhere in any of his writings, however, does Clarke take seriously "the Question Whether the World exists or no".

There always remains a *bare Possibility*, that the Supreme Being may have so framed my Mind, as that I shall always necessarily be deceived in every one of my Perceptions as in a Dream, though possibly there be no material World, nor any other Creature whatsoever, existing besides myself. [...] And yet no Man in his Senses argues from thence, that *Experience* is no Proof to us of the *Existence of Things*.³⁹

Nearly all the key steps in Clarke's chain of reasoning in the *Demonstration* simply presuppose our knowledge of the existence of matter and its properties (e.g. its *vis inertiae*). His general attitude to Berkeley's philosophy was that it leads to "the total subversion of all knowledge as well as of all religion; of all that Sir I. Newton, Mr. Locke, he himself, and many others, had been endeavouring to bring into some reputation"⁴⁰. Although Clarke took this severe view of Berkeley's philosophy, he was nevertheless unable and/ or unwilling to answer it. This task was left to his followers.⁴¹

³⁷ I examine Clarke's importance to Hume's philosophy in the *Treatise* in the papers cited in note 5 above. My view on this issue contrasts sharply with Wright's claim that Hume did not begin to "seriously consider" the relationship of his ideas to the Newtonian philosophy of his day until after he completed the *Treatise* (1983, 7). Consistent with this claim, Wright makes little or no use of Newtonian natural religion when trying to account for Hume's intentions in the *Treatise*.

³⁸ Samuel Clarke, *The Works*, 4 vols. (1738; reprinted New York/London 1978), esp. II, 524–27 (props. I–III). Clarke's argument a priori is a version of the cosmological argument. It aims to demonstrate the (necessary) existence of God on the basis of our knowledge of the existence of (contingent) beings in this world – which includes the material world itself. The fundamental principle involved is that something cannot come into existence from nothing, absolutely without cause. Hume discusses Clarke's argument a priori as it relates to the *Treatise* in the *Letter* (1745), esp. 23f., 27f. See also Part IX of the *Dialogues*, where "Demea" advances a version of Clarke's argument.

³⁹ Clarke, *Works*, IV, 726 – Clarke's emphasis.

⁴⁰ Quoted by Clarke's friend Bishop Hoadley, in a letter to Lady Sundon, cited in Ferguson 1974, 249f.

⁴¹ The followers include, most notably, Andrew Baxter (discussed below). Another relevant figure, however, is Henry Grove, who was a critic of Arthur Collier's *Cl-*

The other major branch of Newtonian theology, the argument a posteriori, is plainly even more vulnerable to sceptical doubts concerning our knowledge of the existence of the material world. Advocates of this approach include a number of prominent and influential figures of the time, including John Ray, Thomas Burnet, George Cheyne, William Derham, William Whiston, and John Keill, as well as the distinguished Scottish Newtonian Colin Maclaurin.⁴² The argument a posteriori, as Clarke acknowledges in correspondence arising out of his *Demonstration*, is the “most generally useful Argument, most easy to be understood, and in some degree suited to all Capacities”⁴³. The suggestion, as advanced by Hume's sceptical thesis, that belief in the existence of the material world involves “fallacy” and “illusion”, can serve only to undermine and discredit the foundations of all reasoning of this kind. This was obvious, not only to Newtonian theologians and philosophers at this time, but also to Berkeley (who was careful to disown any suggestion of “scepticism”), as well as to Hume, whose remarks in the *Enquiry* (EU, 12.13/ 153) make clear that he was well aware that sceptical difficulties of this sort pose a threat to these familiar proofs of God's existence and attributes.

There are two points that it is important to note, in relation to the threat that Hume's sceptical thesis presents for these influential (Newtonian) arguments of natural religion. First, the weak version of the sceptical thesis – which claims only that our belief in the existence of the material world lacks justificatory support, but not that this belief is false – will suffice to discredit the ambitions of both the argument a

vis Universalis (1713), which defends a version of the immaterialist philosophy. See Grove's Preface to *A Demonstration of the Soul's Immateriality* (1718). Grove was an influential dissenter and a defender of Clarke's Newtonian philosophy. He was also, later in life, a notable admirer of Baxter's philosophy.

⁴² A useful general account of the design argument as developed by these figures is provided in Hurlbutt 1985, 34f. See, in particular, Cheyne's remark that “the Existence of Matter, is a plain Demonstration of the Existence of a Deity [...]”: *Philosophical Principles of Natural Religion* (London, 1705), III, 79. Throughout this influential work of Newtonian theology Cheyne advances a variety of proofs for God's existence that presuppose the existence of matter. (On the resemblance between the views of Cheyne and Maclaurin to those of Cleanthes in Hume's *Dialogues* see Hurlbutt 1985, 141f.)

⁴³ Clarke, *Works*, II, 756. Cp. Maclaurin, *An Account of Sir Isaac Newton's Philosophical Discoveries* (1748), who says: “The plain argument for the existence of the Deity, obvious to all and carrying irresistible conviction with it, is from the evident contrivance and fitness of things for one another, which we meet with throughout all parts of the universe [...]” (381). (See below on Maclaurin's critical comments on Berkeley's immaterialism.)

priori and the argument a posteriori. This degree of scepticism is enough to cast doubt on any confidence that we have in arguments that seek to move from our (supposed) *knowledge* of the material world to knowledge of God. Second, Hume's naturalist thesis cannot serve as an appropriate foundation for the theological arguments, nor can it insulate them effectively from sceptical challenge. The aim of these arguments, after all, is to show that our beliefs about God's being and attributes are *reasonable*, if not demonstrably certain. If the chain of reasoning involved depends on a belief that lacks (any) rational support, and actually involves "contradictions and difficulties" (T,1.4.5.1/232), then clearly the arguments in question are discredited. It follows from this that whether we continue to *believe* in the existence of the material world or not, arguments that proceed from this belief have no credentials from the point of view of reason.⁴⁴

What, then, is the general significance of Hume's naturalist thesis for the arguments of natural religion under consideration? The naturalist thesis suggests that we are constrained by our nature to believe in the existence of matter (i.e. primarily in the form of the vulgar system, but also the philosophical system which derives from it). As we have already noted, the major philosophers and theologians of this period are uniformly careful to avoid any suggestion that our natural beliefs are systematically deceptive. More specifically, Descartes, Malebranche, Locke and Berkeley, in their different ways, all avoid the suggestion that we are naturally deceived about the existence of the material world. (Descartes and Locke by claiming that the belief is clearly true; Berkeley by claiming that the belief is a meaningless abstraction and contrary to our 'common sense' beliefs; and Malebranche by suggesting that while this belief is probably true, we are nevertheless capable of suspending judgment with respect to it.) In contrast with this, Hume's naturalist thesis, combined with the (strong) sceptical thesis, leads directly to the conclusion that we are *systematically deceived* by the (natural) operation of the imagination. It follows from this, as Hume explicitly indicates in the *Enquiry*, that – unless God is a deceiver (which is absurd) – he cannot be "concerned in this matter" (EU,12.13/ 153). When Hume's argument is read in this way, it leads to the conclusion that God does not exist.

⁴⁴ The Newtonians' strong hostility to Berkeley's philosophy, as I have explained, was largely rooted in these theological concerns. However, this general objection was not articulated in detail until Baxter published his *Enquiry into the Nature of the Human Soul* in 1733.

The argument that Hume is advancing depends on concealed or assumed premises. When made explicit, however, it has the following structure:

1. We naturally and inescapably believe in the existence of body (i.e. usually and primarily in the vulgar form).
2. Our belief in the existence of body is false and based on illusion (i.e. we are deceived about this).
3. If God exists, and we are naturally deceived about the existence of body, then God is a deceiver.
4. God cannot be a deceiver.
5. If we are deceived in our natural belief about body, then God does not exist. /
6. Therefore, God does not exist.

This argument begins with the naturalist thesis [1], and the strong form of the sceptical thesis [2]. These claims, as I have explained are central to Hume's discussion in the *Treatise*, and reaffirmed in the *Enquiry*. Premises [3] and [4] are not given in the *Treatise*, but are noted in the *Enquiry* (EU, 12.13/ 153). Premise [5] is not stated explicitly, but follows directly from [3] and [4]. The conclusion [6] is not drawn openly in either the *Treatise* or the *Enquiry*, but it follows directly from [1], [2] and [5].

Since not all the premises of this argument are explicitly stated, it is evident that it takes a concealed or hidden form in both the *Treatise* and the *Enquiry* – although the *Enquiry* discussion alludes to it more openly. The character of this argument is obviously very different from the other irreligious argument we have described. The first irreligious argument – let us call it the “sceptical challenge” – relies on the *weak* version of the sceptical thesis and aims only to discredit those proofs of God's existence that proceed from our (assumed) knowledge of the existence of matter. In contrast with this, the second irreligious argument – let us call it the “deception challenge” – depends on the combination of the stronger sceptical thesis and the naturalistic thesis, and its aim is to prove that God does not exist. The proof in question relies, as we have noted, on the assumption that God cannot be a deceiver. Whereas the sceptical challenge is more or less evident in both the *Treatise* and the *Enquiry*, the deceiver challenge takes some probing to uncover, because it is concealed or hidden.

Critics will argue, of course, that neither the sceptical nor the deception challenge can be convincingly attributed to Hume. Let me begin,

therefore, with the sceptical challenge and the sorts of objections that may be raised against it. It may be argued that Hume's sceptical doubts about the existence of the material world are taken from Berkeley, and plainly Berkeley's aim was not to discredit natural religion – as Hume points out himself (EU, 12.5n32/ 155n). How then, says the critic, can it be claimed that Hume's position is irreligious but not Berkeley's? Several points should be noted here. First, Berkeley, as Hume notes in the same context, is careful to *deny* that his position is sceptical. Berkeley is particularly anxious to refute the suggestion that his immaterialist doctrine lends itself to the ends of "scepticism and atheism", and for this reason he insists that he does not deny the existence of anything that common sense or natural belief suggest to us. The immaterialist doctrine, he argues, not only does not discredit natural religion, it serves as its only secure foundation. In contrast with this, Hume shows no inclination to dissociate himself from the sceptical content of his claim (in either the weak or strong form), and he makes no effort to show how his position can be reconciled with the aims of natural religion. There is, in other words, no alternative system of natural religion on offer – we are left only with the sceptical critique of those systems that presuppose our knowledge of the material world (most notably, the Newtonian systems). Beyond this, any thinker who was familiar with the early reception of Berkeley's philosophy of immaterialism would be well aware that his critics argued that the sceptical doctrine involved could be put to use for irreligious ends. There is, as I will show in more detail below, every reason to believe that Hume was familiar with this line of criticism against Berkeley's doctrine. Hume shows little or no concern to distance himself from these implications. Finally, related to this, it should also be noted that Hume's early critics were careful to contrast Berkeley's unintended scepticism and its irreligious consequences, with what they took to be Hume's *intentional* use of sceptical arguments for irreligious or "atheistic" ends.⁴⁵ All this, as I will explain in more detail below, is consistent with the general pattern of argument throughout the *Treatise*.

⁴⁵ James Beattie, *An Essay on the Nature and Immutability of Truth* (Edinburgh, 1770), 297f., 415, 494; and Thomas Reid, *Inquiry Into the Human Mind*, I,v and vi. Both Beattie and Reid stress the sceptical nature of Berkeley's doctrine, but also point out that Berkeley's intentions were not sceptical, much less hostile to religion. In contrast with this, they make clear that Hume did not share Berkeley's general aversion to scepticism, and that he was happy to use Berkeley's doctrine for ends that were contrary to what Berkeley had in mind. This theme is especially apparent in Beattie, who stresses it throughout his *Essay*.

Let us turn now to the deception challenge, which presents the irreligious interpretation with more serious difficulties. The obvious problem, in this case, is that the argument in question is not made explicit, in either the *Treatise* or the *Enquiry*. By the very nature of the case, therefore, we need to show that it is reasonable to assume that Hume was aware of the relevant hidden or “tacit” premises, and that he could assume that his readers were as well. I believe that the evidence for this is strong. In the first place, Hume does draw explicit attention to the relevant premises concerning God and deception (i.e. [3] and [4] above) in the *Enquiry*. It seems highly unlikely that when he published the *Treatise* he was not aware of these claims or of their obvious significance for his discussion of our natural belief in the existence of matter. On the contrary, for this to be true, Hume would have to have failed to register the central arguments and debates of this problem as it appears in the work of Descartes, Malebranche, Bayle and Berkeley. It was works by these specific thinkers, however, to whom Hume referred his friend Michael Ramsay, so Ramsay could “easily comprehend the metaphysical parts of [Hume’s] Reasoning” (see note 7). The whole debate about the existence of the material world, as we have noted, was firmly embedded in worries about whether or not God was a deceiver. Hume’s contemporary audience, therefore, would read his discussion with this context and framework clearly in mind. From this perspective, the position that Hume carves out, although it does not explicitly articulate each step of the deception challenge, nevertheless leads the reader in exactly this direction. Suffice it to say, that if all this was unintentional on Hume’s part, it is a remarkable coincidence, given his obvious reputation and credentials as a hostile critic of all systems of natural religion.

Another line of criticism against the suggestion that Hume is advancing the deception challenge is based on the way that the sceptical and naturalist theses (i.e. [1] and [2] above) have been interpreted and applied. The deception challenge, as I have interpreted it, depends on the strong sceptical thesis [2] and the naturalist thesis [1]. It may be argued, however, that while Hume is obviously committed to the strong sceptical thesis as it applies to the “vulgar system”, it is not obvious that he believes that the philosophical system of double-existence is actually false. It is possible to hold this view and still accept that Hume is committed to the weak sceptical claim as applied to the “philosophical system” (i.e. the doctrine of double existence cannot be justified, but has not been shown to be false). I have argued that the text does not support this view, in so far as Hume’s criticisms of the philosophical system go well beyond the confines of weak scepticism (i.e. if not false, it is unin-

telligible). Nevertheless, for the sake of argument, let us grant that Hume is not committed to the view that the strong sceptical thesis can be applied to the philosophical system. Will this concession discredit our effort to attribute the *deception* challenge to him?

The first thing to be said in reply to this line of criticism is to remind ourselves that it is Hume's view that the philosophical system has no "primary recommendation to either reason or the imagination" (T,1.4.2.46/ 211). While we may embrace the philosophical system to "set ourselves at ease" (T,1.4.2.52/ 215), this disposition of the mind has no lasting or reliable influence over any person and is rarely found among ordinary people who are unexposed to philosophy (i.e. the "vulgar"). It is the vulgar system that is natural to all human beings and it is this disposition of mind that governs all people most of the time and most people all of the time – even though it is easy to show that it is false (T,1.4.2.44/ 210). It follows from this that, even if Hume is not committed to the view that the philosophical system is false or meaningless, he remains committed to the view that we are all naturally disposed to believe in the existence of body in the manner of the *vulgar*, and that we are (systematically) deceived about *this*. The deception challenge, therefore, survives in this form.

The interpretation of the naturalist thesis that has been suggested may also be criticized. It may be argued, for example, that although Hume is committed to the view that we have a natural tendency to believe in body, this belief is not inescapable or irresistible. Near the end of 1.4.2, the critic points out, Hume confesses that he is "at the present of quite a contrary sentiment" and is "inclin'd to repose no faith at all in [his] senses" (T,1.4.2.56/ 217). Similarly, in both the *Treatise* and the *Enquiry* he makes it clear that the "slighest philosophy" reveals the "fallacy" of the vulgar view (T,1.4.2.44/ 210; EU,12.9/ 152). Contrary to the interpretation suggested, therefore, deception of this kind is not inescapable or irresistible.

In reply to this, the first thing to note is that at T,1.4.2.56/ 217 Hume emphasizes the point that his sceptical disposition is confined to the *present* moment. This is consistent with his observation in the *Enquiry* that sceptical reflections about the existence of body may cause us "momentary amazement and irresolution and confusion" (EU,12.15n32/ 155n), but we cannot *continue* in this state (i.e. we inevitably fall back into the natural deception of our senses). This is a point that Hume repeatedly and strongly emphasizes throughout 1.4.2. The section begins with Hume pointing out that in regard to the sceptic's doubts about the existence of body, "nature has not left this to his choice" (T,1.4.2.1/

187). Whatever doubts may be presented, the sceptic still continues to believe in body. When extravagant sceptics have denied the continued and distinct existence of objects, Hume says, they maintain this “opinion in words only, and *were never able to bring themselves sincerely to believe it*” (T,1.4.2.50/ 214 – my emphasis). Although “intense reflection” on this subject may induce some degree of doubt at the “present moment”, an hour later even the sceptic, Hume argues, “will be persuaded that there is both an external and internal world” (T,1.4.2.57/ 218).

Clearly, then, according to Hume, our belief in an independent and continued existence is an opinion that “has taken such deep root in the imagination, that ‘tis impossible ever to eradicate it, nor will any strain’d metaphysical conclusion of the dependence of our perceptions be sufficient for that purpose” (T,1.4.2.51/ 214). The most that philosophical reflections can do to dislodge our natural, vulgar belief in body is to move us to frame the “monstrous” philosophical hypothesis of double existence (T, 1.4.2.52/ 215). Nevertheless, as Hume insists, “almost all mankind, and even philosophers themselves, for the greatest part of their lives” continue to embrace vulgar belief in body (T,1.4.2.38/ 206; and cp. T,1.4.2.36/ 205).

Another advantage of the philosophical system is its similarity to the vulgar one; by which means we can humour our reason for a moment, when it becomes troublesome and solicitous; and yet upon its least negligence or inattention, can easily return to our vulgar and natural notions. Accordingly we find that philosophers neglect not this advantage; but immediately upon leaving their closets, mingle with the rest of mankind in those exploded opinions, that perceptions are our only objects, and continue identically and uninterruptedly the same in all their interrupted appearances. (T,1.4.2.53/ 216)⁴⁶

For all of us, including the philosopher, no less than “all the unthinking and unphilosophical part of mankind” (T,1.4.2.36/ 205), vulgar belief in body is our normal and natural condition. By means of intense philosophical reflections we may temporarily inhibit or alter this “blind and powerful instinct of nature” (EU,12.8/ 151). Nevertheless, we all return to it as soon as these (passing) reflections are over. A false and deceptive belief in the continued and distinct existence of sensible perceptions is, therefore, an inescapable feature of the human condition.⁴⁷

⁴⁶ Cp. Hume’s related remarks at T,1.4.7.9f./ 269.

⁴⁷ Hume’s way of formulating the deception challenge is really just a variant of a point that a careful reader will find in Bayle. Bayle notes that the only proof that we have that bodies exist is “based on the contention that God would be deceiving me if he implanted in my mind the ideas that I have of bodies without there

Hume's arguments in 1.4.2 are finely crafted and positioned to frame both the sceptical and deception challenges. The sceptical challenge can be framed relying only on the weak sceptical thesis. That is to say, even if we do not attribute the strong sceptical thesis to Hume, he is still committed to the sceptical challenge as described. Similarly, the deception challenge relies only on the strong sceptical thesis as applied to vulgar belief in body. I have made the case – consistent with the views of other commentators – that the strong sceptical thesis also applies to the philosophical system. Nevertheless, since vulgar belief in body is, according to Hume's account, inescapable for all of us (including philosophers and sceptics), the deception challenge does not *depend* on being able to extend the strong sceptical thesis to the philosophical system.⁴⁸

IV. Berkeley, Baxter and Hume's Scottish Context

When we examine the sceptical and deception challenge from the perspective of the relevant background debates, the evidence for the irreligious interpretation of Hume's arguments is strong. There are, however, two further sets of considerations that lend additional support to the irreligious interpretation. The first concerns Hume's familiarity with the early reception of Berkeley's philosophy in Scotland.

Although the early impact of Berkeley's immaterialist doctrine was not great in England, it attracted considerable interest in Scotland.⁴⁹ The members of the "Ran-kenian Club", for example, had a strong interest in Berkeley's philosophy, and had a

actually being any. But this proof is very weak: it *proves too much*. Ever since the beginning of the world, all mankind except perhaps one out of two hundred millions, has firmly believed that bodies are coloured, and this is an error. I ask, does God deceive mankind with regard to colours? If he deceives them about this, what prevents him from doing so with regard to extension? The second deception would not be less innocent, nor less compatible with the nature of a supremely perfect being than the first deception is". (Bayle 1965, art. "Pyrrho", note B (198) – my emphasis.) Hume simply applies this general line of reasoning to vulgar belief in body. The point that is especially significant, however, is that Hume is careful to argue that all of us – including the philosopher and the (professed) sceptic – are subject to the deceptive (vulgar) belief in body. There is no escape from this form of deception even for those who are capable of the sort of philosophical reflection that can expose it.

⁴⁸ Hume's deception challenge is obviously of some relevance to his discussion of the problem of evil in the *Dialogues* (X,XI). More specifically, the "Epicurean" challenge concerning God's existence proceeds by way of reviewing the evidence of unnecessary and avoidable evil in this world, this being evidence against God's moral attributes. Any evidence that human beings are systematically and inescapably deceived in their beliefs serves much the same purpose.

⁴⁹ Bracken 1965, 31 f.

correspondence with him during the 1720's.⁵⁰ The most prominent and distinguished of the Rankenians was Maclaurin, who is tersely critical of Berkeley's "system" in his *Account*.⁵¹ The first extended criticism of Berkeley's philosophy in English, however, came from Andrew Baxter, a Scottish philosopher who was not a Rankenian.⁵²

Baxter was by no means a minor figure in this context. He was, on the contrary, an influential and widely admired defender of Clarke's Newtonian philosophy, and he was known as a leading champion of the argument a priori.⁵³ Included among Baxter's admirers was William Warburton, a friend of Baxter's and a notoriously hostile critic of Hume's.⁵⁴ It is also significant that Baxter and Hume were near neighbours in the Borders area of Scotland during the 1720's and early 1730's (i.e. at the time the project of the *Treatise* began to take shape).⁵⁵ Moreover, Baxter and Hume had indirect, if not direct, contact through Lord Kames (Henry Home). During this period Hume resided with his family at Chirnside, and he was especially close to Kames, who lived only a few miles away at Duns, where Baxter also resided.⁵⁶ Given their shared philosophical interests, Hume would likely have been aware that in 1723 Kames and Baxter corresponded on issues relating to the Newtonian philosophy, and that their correspondence rapidly degenerated into an acrimonious exchange involving sharp disagreement on the *vis inertiae* of matter – a doctrine that was fundamental to Baxter's effort to defend the Clarkean philosophy.⁵⁷ In any case, since Baxter's *Enquiry into the Nature of the Human Soul* was well received when it

⁵⁰ Davie 1994 and M.A. Stewart 1985, 25f. Mossner (1980, 40f.) points out that some members of the Rankenian Club (e.g. Maclaurin) likely taught Hume when he was an Edinburgh University undergraduate.

⁵¹ Maclaurin, *Account*, 95,97–9. Maclaurin's views on the existence of matter are confidently Lockean. He dismisses Berkeley's immaterialism as "futile" and "extravagant". One of Maclaurin's principal aims in this work is to provide a "secure foundation for natural religion", based on the design argument. See his remarks at *Account*, 3,22f.,381,386.

⁵² Bracken 1965, chp.5; Davie 1994; and also Popkin 1980a and 1980b. There are also a number of brief observations made on Baxter's philosophy in Yolton 1983. Although Baxter's work has not been entirely ignored by contemporary commentators, and both Davie and Popkin make some suggestions about Baxter's place in the background of Hume's philosophical work, none of these commentators examines the specific relevance of Baxter to Hume's discussion of the material world, much less to the role that natural religion plays here.

⁵³ The extent of Baxter's reputation as a prominent and strict defender of Clarke's a priori argument is apparent in, e.g., the article (by Andrew Kippis) on Clarke in the *Biographia Britannica*, 2nd ed. (London, 1784), III,608.

⁵⁴ Warburton praises Baxter's philosophy in several of his philosophical works, including the influential *The Divine Legation of Moses* (1738). Warburton generally praises Baxter in close association with Clarke.

⁵⁵ Hume began work on the *Treatise* in the late 1720's, and this project was well under way when he left for France in 1734. On this see Mossner 1980, 73f.

⁵⁶ Mossner 1980, 54f.; and see also Ian Ross 1972, chp.5. Kames served, says Ross, as "something of a father-figure" to Hume (75).

⁵⁷ Mossner 1980, 57f.; Ross 1972, 63f.

first appeared in 1733, it is not credible that Baxter's work did not command Hume's (critical) attention.⁵⁸ It follows from this that no serious consideration of Hume's discussion of the material world can afford to ignore Baxter's extended criticism of Berkeley's immaterialism in *Human Soul*.⁵⁹

The questions that need to be asked, therefore, are these: (i) What is the nature of the specific criticisms that Baxter puts forward against Berkeley?; and (ii) Do these criticisms shed any light on the (irreligious) interpretation of Hume's sceptical and naturalist theses? Baxter devotes an entire chapter of *Human Soul* to criticism of Berkeley's immaterialism. This is necessary, he says, because Berkeley's scheme entirely discredits Baxter's alternative (Newtonian/ Clarkean) effort to demonstrably "confute atheism" (EHS, 2.1). All the arguments that Baxter has offered "for the Being of a God [...] are drawn from the consideration of this *impossible thing*; viz. from the *inertiae* of matter, the *motion* of matter, the *cohesion* of matter, &c [...]" (EHS, 7.1). Baxter goes on to observe that his own arguments "amount to nothing, if there be nothing but ideas instead of the objects of our ideas [...]. Thus there must either be no truth in what I have said, or in what this *Author* [Berkeley] advances; for *two such opposite accounts of nature* cannot both be true [...]" (EHS, 7.1 – Baxter's emphasis). It is Baxter's general view that Berkeley's scheme constitutes the "wildest and most unbounded scepticism", and that it no more serves "as antidote to atheism" than "putting out the eyes is the best cure for dimness of sight" (EHS, 7.11).

Baxter launches a number of arguments against Berkeley, but there are two that are particularly relevant to the irreligious interpretation of Hume's sceptical and naturalist theses. (1) As the remarks already cited suggest, Baxter believes that Berkeley's arguments destroy the very foundations of the argument a priori, as developed by Baxter in *Human Soul* and by Clarke in the *Demonstration*.⁶⁰ He also maintains that immaterialism destroys the argument from design (a posteriori).

I might also mention the direct tendency of this improvement to *Atheism*. Men will hardly allow the exciting illusory ideas in our minds, of *beauty* and *order*, which no where really exist, such a proof of the power and wisdom of God, as an

⁵⁸ Baxter, *An Enquiry into the Nature of the Human Soul* (London 1733). Subsequent editions of Baxter's *Human Soul* appeared in 1737 and 1745. References are to the section numbers of the first edition of 1733 [EHS]. Selections from the section of Baxter's *Human Soul* that concerns Berkeley's "scheme", along with commentary, are presented in C.J. McCracken/I.C. Tipton 2000, chp. 15. For more on Baxter and his other writings see McCosh 1875, 42f.

⁵⁹ In Russell 1997b I argue that Baxter's *Human Soul* was an important source of the attacks made against Hume's philosophy when he applied for the Chair of Moral Philosophy at Edinburgh University in 1745. It is worth noting, therefore, that even if Hume never read Baxter – which is highly unlikely – his contemporaries were clearly familiar with *Human Soul*, and criticized Hume's philosophy in light of it.

⁶⁰ Baxter's effort to demonstrably refute "atheism" is modelled after Clarke's project in the *Demonstration*. See, e.g., *Human Soul*, 2.5 (note K), 2.25, 2.27; 7.9. (See note 38 above.)

actually existing frame of material nature, where the *grandeur*, *harmony*, and *proportion* is permanent and real, existing from without, as well when we turn our thoughts *from*, as *to it*. And indeed it is not; for take away the existence of the material Universe, and all the surprising scene of Providence discovered above [...] ends in a dream and chimera. (EHS, 7.22 – Baxter's emphasis)⁶¹

According to Baxter, therefore, the principles of immaterialism destroy the whole frame and fabric of (Newtonian) theology, and this serves the purpose only of sceptics and atheists.

(2) Baxter maintains that “knowledge of the existence of external material objects, by sense, is *certain knowledge*, and the evidence as great, as possibility, and the nature of things can admit of [...]” (EHS, 7.23 – Baxter's emphasis). In the same passage, he argues that the existence of matter “should be known from the *effects* it produces, or the *perceptions* it excites in us, and the *perfections* of that Being, who constituted it and our nature such, that it should act, and we perceive it acting” (EHS, 7.23)⁶². Baxter points out that this general argument – that we “cannot possibly be deceived in concluding that material substance really exists without the mind” – has the authority of Clarke in support of it (EHS, 7.9). For the details of Clarke's argument, however, Baxter refers the reader (EHS, 7.9 note L) to an article on “body” in *Chambers' Cyclopaedia*. The relevant passage reads:

[Clarke] adds, that all the Proof we have of [the Existence of a *corporeal World*] is this; That God would not create us such, as that all the Judgments we make about *Things* existing without us, must necessarily be false. If there be no External *Bodies*, it follows, that 'tis God who represents the *Appearances* of *Bodies* to us; and that he does it in such a manner as to deceive us. Some think this has the Force of a Demonstration: 'Tis evident God can't deceive us; 'tis evident he does deceive and delude us every Moment, if there be no *Bodies*; 'tis evident therefore, there must be *Bodies*.⁶³

If we “refuse the reason which Dr. Clarke assigned for believing the existence of *external objects*, and a *material world*”, says Baxter, “there is in truth no stopping till a man has denied every thing that exists without his own mind, except it be perhaps the existence of some *delusory* Being who constantly cheats and imposes upon him” (EHS, 7.11).⁶⁴ In respect of this criticism the crucial claim that divides Clarke and

⁶¹ Berkeley, of course, as we have noted, insists that it is a plain mistake to suppose that his immaterialism “derogates in the least from the reality of things” (PK,33,91; TD,113f.).

⁶² Baxter's claim that matter is capable of causing our perceptions is, as Bracken (1965, 78f.) notes, at odds with his view that matter is inactive.

⁶³ *Chambers' Cyclopaedia* (London 1728). The relevant passage is reprinted in Bracken 1965, 115.

⁶⁴ Baxter's specific criticism that Berkeley's philosophy would make God a deceiver is mentioned and discussed by Issac Watts, an influential contemporary, in his *Philosophical Essays on Various Subjects*, 3rd ed. (London, 1742), 84 (III,vii). Watts says: “It is most highly probable, if not sufficiently evident, that [real ob-

Baxter, on one side, and Berkeley on the other, is whether it is true or not that human beings *naturally* believe in the existence of bodies (EHS, 7.22). If Clarke and Baxter are correct in thinking that belief in matter is a natural belief, then we are *deceived* if there is no material world.⁶⁵

Baxter and Hume were not the only philosophers active in the Borders area at this time to take a lively interest in Berkeley's philosophy. This interest was also shared by Hume's friend and mentor (and Baxter's critic) Lord Kames.⁶⁶ Kames is a defender of the argument a posteriori and, like Maclaurin, he relies on a Lockean ontology of double-existence to support it.⁶⁷ In his essay "Of our Knowledge of the Deity" he says:

The Deity has not left his existence to be gathered from slippery and far-fetched arguments. We have but to open our eyes, to receive impressions of him from every thing we perceive. *We discover his being and attributes, in the same manner that we discover external objects. We have but to appeal to our own perceptions; and none but those, who are so stubbornly hypothetical, as to deny the existence of matter, against the evidence of their senses, can, seriously and deliberately, deny the existence of the Deity.*⁶⁸

In another essay, titled "Of the Authority of our Senses", he describes the significance of Berkeley's doctrine for his own line of theological reasoning.

jects] do exist without us ... we cannot suppose that God has so formed our natures, that two senses [i.e. touch and sight] should join to deceive us, when we have no way left to undeceive ourselves". Watts goes on to observe that while some "ingenious men" have argued that "the world of bodies in which we dwell ... must be a mere chimerical and fantastic universe", he can "hardly think that any man ever believed it: A late author of the *Enquiry into the Nature of the Human Soul* has refuted this opinion".

⁶⁵ In this paper I will not discuss another, distinct criticism that Baxter levels against Berkeley: namely, that his scepticism about the existence of material substance leads on to a general scepticism about the existence of *immaterial* substance, and hence to "atheism" (EHS, 7.8, 7.14). Suffice it to note, however, that Hume's discussion of immaterial substance in the sections that follow 1.4.2 develop the very sort of "sceptical" argument that Baxter warns against.

⁶⁶ William Dudgeon is another philosopher who lived in the Borders area and was active during the 1730's. Dudgeon was a freethinking opponent of Baxter and Warburton, and he was also the first Scottish philosopher to endorse immaterialist principles, which he used to support a "pantheistic" philosophical system. Hume's use of immaterialist philosophy for irreligious purposes has, therefore, a precedent in the work of one of his near neighbours at the time that the *Treatise* was being planned and written. On Dudgeon's "pantheistic immaterialism" see David Berman 1994. For more detail on Dudgeon's relevance to Hume's *Treatise* see Russell 1997b.

⁶⁷ Lord Kames, *Essays on the Principles of Morality and Natural Religion* (Edinburgh, 1751).

⁶⁸ Kames, *Essays*, 328f. – my emphasis.

It is reported, that doctor Berkeley, the author of the abovementioned treatise [*Principles*], was moved to adopt this whimsical opinion, to get free of some arguments, urged by materialists against the existence of the Deity. If so, he has been unhappy in his experiment; for this doctrine, if it should not lead to universal scepticism, affords at least, *a shrewd argument in favours of Atheism*. If I can only be conscious of what passes in my own mind, and *if I cannot trust my senses*, when they give me notice of external and independent existences; it follows, that I am the only being in the world; at least, that I can have no evidence from my senses, of any other being, body or spirit. This is certainly an unwary concession; because *it deprives us of our principal, or only, inlet to the knowledge of the Deity*.⁶⁹

The particular feature of Berkeley's philosophy that Kames objects to, in this context, is that it serves only to discredit trust in our senses in respect of the external world, which is the foundation of our most reliable and accessible knowledge of God's being and attributes.⁷⁰ To this extent, Kames is concerned more with the way that Berkeley's philosophy can be used to formulate the sceptical challenge than he is with any threat coming from the deception challenge. Nevertheless, the concluding paragraph of Kames's essay deals with the specific issue of deception and denies that we are in any way deceived about "the reality of external objects"⁷¹.

Kames's general perspective on Berkeley's immaterialist doctrine is not unlike the view that Baxter advanced almost two decades earlier. Both Baxter and Kames, not only had a strong interest in Berkeley's philosophy, they were clear that it could be used as a "shrewd argument in favours of atheism". Since Hume was a near neighbour of both these thinkers, and an intimate friend of Kames, it is only reasonable to view the sceptical and naturalist theses that he advances in this light. From the perspective of the discussions that Baxter and Kames provide, the irreligious significance of both Hume's sceptical and naturalist theses is evident.

Although Kames's *Essay* was not published until after Hume's *Treatise* and first *Enquiry* were published, Baxter's *Human Soul* was published in 1733, when Hume was still living in Scotland and in the early stages of writing the *Treatise* (i.e. more than five years before the *Treatise* was published). Baxter's work, as we noted, en-

⁶⁹ Kames, *Essays*, 241 – my emphasis.

⁷⁰ Kames, *Essays*, 328f., 335f., 386f.

⁷¹ Although Kames is less concerned with the deception challenge than the sceptical challenge in his essay on "the authority our senses", he considers the issue of deception at greater length in the preceding essay on "liberty and necessity". According to Kames, human beings experience a "deceitful" feeling of liberty, which nevertheless serves "good purposes" (*Essays*, 181f., 202f.). Among the objections that he considers in some detail is that this "seems to represent the Deity, as acting deceitfully by his creatures", and forces them "to act upon a false hypothesis" (*Essays*, 211f., 235n). Kames tries to explain away the apparent contradiction in his philosophy by arguing that some senses have the "discovery of truth" as their end, while others "aim to make us happy and virtuous". Critics like Beattie were not convinced and argued that God cannot be a deceiver in respect of either our belief in matter or our feeling of liberty (*Essay*, 74, 373f.).

joyed considerable influence and reputation in both England and Scotland during the 1730's and 1740's, and it was directly concerned with the same set issues that concern Hume in the *Treatise*.⁷² In order for Hume not to have understood the irreligious significance of his own sceptical and naturalist theses in the *Treatise* one or other of the following suppositions must be true: either (a) Hume did not read Baxter's *Human Soul* or (b) Hume read Baxter's book but failed to understand the plain meaning of his arguments. Both these suppositions are highly improbable. In response to this, it may be suggested that (c) Hume read Baxter's work but was not persuaded that his own position had any of the specific irreligious consequences that Baxter describes. If this was the case then Hume makes no effort to show that he can avoid objections of this kind – a striking omission, in the circumstances, for someone with no irreligious intent. Beyond all this, as already explained, Hume did not have to read Baxter's book in order to be aware of these concerns, since any one familiar with the central themes in the works of Descartes, Malebranche, Locke, Berkeley and Bayle, and the debate surrounding them, would be in a position to identify the irreligious significance of the principles that Hume defends. I conclude, therefore, that we have strong grounds for believing that Hume was aware of the irreligious significance of the arguments that he advanced on this subject.

V. *The Material World in Hume's Philosophy*

Any adequate interpretation of Hume's intentions in 1.4.2 must make some effort to explain how Hume's intentions in this section relate to his more general aims and objectives in the *Treatise*. On the face of it, the irreligious interpretation of 1.4.2 presents us with a problem. That is to say, as I have already indicated, it is widely assumed by commentators on Hume's philosophy that the *Treatise* has little or no substan-

⁷² Essays written at Edinburgh University for Professor John Stevenson's logic class in the late 1730s show that these students were reading Berkeley and using Baxter's *Human Soul* to criticize his immaterialist doctrine. Another essay written by a student in 1740 shows sign of influence from Hume's *Treatise*. The same essay provides evidence that "Hume was being read in Edinburgh as a Berkeleyan" (Stewart 1985, 39f.; and cp. Davie 1994, 30f.). What this shows is that before the *Treatise* was even published, Hume's Scottish contemporaries were discussing Berkeley's doctrine with a view to Baxter's criticisms. Moreover, since Hume was being read in Scotland as a (sceptical) follower of Berkeley immediately after the *Treatise* was published, the irreligious significance of his arguments would have been particularly obvious to this audience. This is, of course, entirely consistent with the fact that by 1745 Hume's had a well-established reputation in Scotland as "a sceptic and atheist". On this see *A Letter from a Gentleman to his friend in Edinburgh*, *passim*. See also Mossner 1980, chp.12; and Russell 1997b.

tial interest in problems of religion.⁷³ From this perspective, the irreligious account of Hume's motivation in his discussion of the material world is anomalous, and appears inconsistent with his concerns elsewhere in the *Treatise*. Contrary to this view, I would argue that it is a serious mistake to suppose that the *Treatise* is not much concerned with problems of religion. More specifically, the irreligious character of the arguments in 1.4.2 is entirely consistent with Hume's "atheistic" or irreligious aims and objectives throughout the *Treatise*. In the present context it is not possible to provide a detailed account of the irreligious interpretation considered as a general interpretation of Hume's intentions. Nevertheless, a summary account will enable us to locate 1.4.2 in this general framework.

There are two dimensions of the irreligious interpretations of Hume's intentions in the *Treatise*. First, the constructive or positive side of Hume's objectives in the *Treatise* – the "science of man" – must be interpreted in terms of his objective to establish a plausible, scientifically grounded, secular morality. The model for this project is Hobbes's similar project in *The Elements of Law* and *Leviathan*.⁷⁴ The destructive or critical side of the philosophy of the *Treatise* is simply the other side of the same anti-Christian coin. That is to say, in order to clear the ground to build the edifice of a secular morality, Hume had to undertake a sceptical attack on those theological doctrines and principles that threatened such a project. Among the more obvious targets of this set of sceptical arguments are the various Newtonian philosophers who had set out to defend the Christian religion and refute the atheistic philosophy of Hobbes, Spinoza and their freethinking followers. The most prominent and influential of these thinkers, at the time that Hume was writing the *Treatise*, was Samuel Clarke.⁷⁵

⁷³ The usual picture of Hume's interest in religion, as it relates to the *Treatise*, is that Hume originally planned to include some substantial discussion of religious topics (e.g. miracles), but "castrated" his work to "give as little offence as possible". (See Mossner 1980, 111 f. who cites Hume's letter of December 2, 1737 to Kames; and cp. Gaskin 1988, 1 f.)

⁷⁴ For the details on this see Russell 1985. This account contrasts with the more familiar claim that the *Treatise* was inspired primarily by Newton, and that this was the relevant model for his project. See, e.g., Stroud 1977, chp. 1.

⁷⁵ The subtitle of Clarke's *Demonstration* is "More Particularly in Answer to Mr. Hobbs, Spinoza and their Followers". In general, the Boyle Lecturers regarded Hobbes and Spinoza as the most obvious and prominent representatives of "modern atheism". Berkeley took much the same view (TD,98), and regarded the doctrine of materialism as the essence of their "scepticism and atheism" (PK,92). However, as already mentioned (note 65), Baxter emphasized the point that Berkeley's "scepticism" about material substance could be generalized to immaterial substance – with obvious consequences for religion (i.e. "atheism"). Hume's own *philosophical* position, of course, is neither "materialist" nor "immaterialist", but rather that of a substance *sceptic* (T,1.4.5.1 f./ 232 f.; and cp. T,1.2.5.26/ 64; T,1.2.6.8/ 67 f.).

The philosophy of Clarke, along with his Scottish disciple Baxter, is especially important for understanding Hume's systematic sceptical assault on the (dogmatic) arguments of the Christian theology and metaphysics. Hume's views on a wide range of topics – including space and time, causation and the cosmological argument, personal identity and the soul, free will, morals and miracles – present a linked set of refutations targeted against the Clarkean philosophy. Hume's sceptical critique of the doctrine of matter, although it is by no means exclusively directed against Clarke and his Newtonian associates, should nevertheless be viewed as belonging to this general pattern of argumentation and polemics. By attacking the (Newtonian) doctrine of matter, Hume strikes a blow against the very *foundation* of the entire system of the theology and metaphysics that Clarke and his colleagues aimed to build upon. (Baxter's critical remarks on Berkeley state this point explicitly.) From Hume's point of view, Berkeley's arguments for immaterialism provided him with the perfect (orthodox) foil to use for his own (unorthodox) ends. Indeed, this pattern of using one dogmatic defender of the Christian religion to refute another is a sceptical methodology that Hume relies upon throughout the *Treatise* on a wide range of subjects.

Clearly, then, Hume's irreligious intentions in 1.4.2 are entirely consistent with his more general irreligious aims and objectives in the *Treatise*. However, the significance of his irreligious arguments relating to the material world reaches beyond the *Treatise*. In the *Treatise* Hume does not attempt a direct, frontal assault on the argument from design (i.e. the argument a posteriori).⁷⁶ He left this task until he published Section XI of the first *Enquiry*, followed by the more detailed critique in his *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*. The criticism in these works turns primarily on the use of analogy by defenders of the design argument (e.g. EU,11.26,27,30/144,146,148; and D,142,203,216; but cp. T,1.3.12.25/142). The line of criticism that Hume advances in these works does not rely on any direct questioning of our knowledge of the existence of the material world. It is surprising, nevertheless, to find that commentators, most of whom have long recognized Hume's (strong) sceptical arguments on the subject of the material world, have not taken note of the evident relevance of all this to his sceptical critique of the design argument.⁷⁷ Hume's own contemporaries, who were familiar with the hostile reaction that Berkeley's "scepticism" had received from Newtonian critics, were not so blind to these links. On the contrary,

⁷⁶ There was, nevertheless, a direct, frontal assault on the argument a priori, as the early responses to the *Treatise* make clear. See, e.g., Hume's own comments on this subject in the *Letter from a Gentleman*, 23f. The "castration" of the *Treatise* already mentioned (note 73) might have included some discussion of the design argument, which later appeared as Section XI of the first *Enquiry*. As I have explained, Hume's attack on the doctrine of matter serves to discredit *both* the argument a priori and a posteriori.

⁷⁷ The obvious problem here is that when discussing Hume's philosophy of religion, the focus is almost always on the first *Enquiry* and the *Dialogues*. Commentators begin from the premise that the *Treatise* has little bearing on issues of religion, so they are not looking for these kinds of connection or points of significance.

from their perspective, Hume's use of Berkeley, to embarrass all systems of natural religion that depend our knowledge of the material world, was nothing less than "a shrewd argument in favours of atheism"⁷⁸.

I have argued that Hume's discussion of our belief in the material world in the *Treatise* has irreligious motivation and significance. He employs his sceptical and naturalist theses to launch the sceptical and deception challenges against a large set of defenders of the Christian religion – but primarily against the established Newtonian orthodoxy at this time. The weak form of the sceptical thesis, which claims only that we lack any justification for our belief in the material world, suffices, by itself, to undermine both the arguments a priori and a posteriori, as advanced and defended by many prominent thinkers, such as Clarke, Cheyne, Baxter and Maclaurin. Beyond this, the combination of Hume's strong sceptical thesis, which claims that (vulgar) belief in the existence of body is false, and his naturalist thesis, which claims that this belief is nevertheless inescapable for all human beings, lays the foundation for an argument that either God is a deceiver or He does not exist. This was an implication that all the leading parties in this debate – including Descartes, Malebranche, Berkeley, Locke, Clarke and Baxter – were careful to avoid in their own work. Hume embraces the natural deception of the senses without any apology or evasion, and he leaves it to his audience to draw their own conclusion.

On any interpretation, Hume's sceptical and naturalistic arguments generate awkward problems for defenders of theological orthodoxy. No plausible interpretation of Hume's intentions on this subject can simply turn its back on the relevance of problems of natural religion to the debate about the material world as Hume and his contemporaries understood it. At the very least, therefore, those who reject the irreligious interpretation that has been advanced are obliged to provide us with some alternative account of the theological significance of Hume's discussion of the material world. As things stand, the irreligious interpretation not only succeeds in fully integrating Hume's arguments with the relevant debates and controversies he was concerned with, but also suc-

⁷⁸ The phrase is Kames's, as cited above. While Kames does not explicitly refer to (his friend) Hume in this context, Beattie does make this point explicitly. In his *Essay* Beattie refers to Berkeley and Hume as claiming that "the external material world does not exist", and then, paraphrasing Hume's remarks in the *Enquiry*, notes that "if the external world be once called in doubt as to its existence, we shall be at a loss to find arguments by which we may prove the being of God, or any of his attributes [...]" (164f.).

ceeds in integrating his views on this subject with his more general irreligious or “atheistic” aims and objectives throughout the *Treatise* and his philosophical work as a whole.

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