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HUME ON DIVINE AMORALITY

I

David Hume's philosophy is notoriously naturalistic. It is an attempt to give an account of man and his world relying only on evidence which can be gleaned from sense observation and introspection. Whatever can be inferred from this evidence is a proper philosophical conclusion.

In view of Hume's well known naturalism, it may come as something of a surprise that he does not urge an atheistic conclusion in his *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*. In fact, none of the characters in the *Dialogues* is an atheist. To the contrary, there is general concensus throughout on the fact of God's *being*. What is at issue is God's nature.[1] Indeed, it is Philo, the character in the *Dialogues* who is generally regarded as expressing Hume's actual views, who insists that God's existence is virtually self-evident.[2]

Despite Hume's apparently staunch theism, religious believers should be fairly warned against embracing him as an intellectual ally. For his theism is so qualified that few, if any, believers would recognize it as a satisfactory account of their convictions. This of course would come as no surprise to Hume, for he made it clear that the sort of belief in God he affirmed had no religious significance.

This comes out near the very end of the *Dialogues* where Philo sums up what he has argued throughout. The whole of natural theology, he says, resolves into a single simple proposition, namely, 'that the cause or causes of order in the universe probably bear some remote analogy to human intelligence'. What is warranted, Philo holds is 'plain, philosophical assent to the proposition, as often as it occurs'.

By 'plain philosophical assent', Hume means something very different from religious belief. This is apparent from the manner in which he empties his proposition of all religious value. In the first place, Hume emphasized, the proposition is extremely modest. It is 'not capable of extension, variation, or more particular explication'. Second, the proposition has no practical consequences. It affords 'no inference that affects human life, or can be the source of any action or forbearance'.

But Hume's proposition lacks religious significance in another respect which is even more fundamental: the analogy on which it rests entails

[1] David Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, ed. Norman Kemp Smith (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1947), pp. 141–2.

[2] *Dialogues*, p. 215; cf. also pp. 202, 214.

nothing about God's moral nature. Hume makes this point when he says the analogy 'cannot be transferred, with any appearance of probability, to the other [i.e. moral] qualities of the mind'.[3]

Bluntly put, Hume's claim is that there is no good reason to infer that the designer of the universe is a morally good being. Rather, as we shall see, he maintained that the more probable conclusion is that God is neither good nor evil. This is a deeply important claim in its own right, but it should be noted that it underlies our two previous points. Hume's proposition of natural theology is modest in content largely because it says nothing about God's moral nature. And moreover, one of the main reasons the proposition is devoid of practical import is because it has no moral substance. For belief in divine goodness is one of the primary warrants for the notion that God should be obeyed, worshipped, and so on. Indeed, this belief is so important for religious practice that most religious persons would probably sooner compromise their belief in God's omnipotence than their belief in God's perfect goodness.

Obviously then, Hume put his finger on a vital nerve when he raised questions about God's goodness. This will be the focus of our concern for the remainder of this paper. First I will spell out in some detail one of Hume's arguments designed to undermine belief in divine goodness. Then I will turn to argue that Hume's view that God is amoral must be rejected, not only on intuitive grounds, but also on Hume's own principles.

II

Hume delivered a number of shrewd blows in his assault on the notion of divine goodness. The heart of his case, of course, centres on the fact of evil in our world. In making his case, he develops three closely related, but distinct, arguments. The first of these, which I will call the inductive argument, is the one I will focus upon.[4]

Hume's inductive argument is based on empirical evidence that our world is filled with distress. He establishes this point by reciting a long litany of human and animal suffering. Human suffering especially is described with great eloquence. In view of the evidence he cited, Hume takes the following premises to be well supported.

(1) In our world, neither men nor animals are happy.
(2) The course of nature does not tend toward human or animal happiness.

[3] All quotations in the preceding three paragraphs, are from *Dialogues*, p. 227. That Hume has in mind moral qualities in the passage just cited is indicated by Smith in his analysis of the *Dialogues* (see p. 122).

[4] Hume also develops what I would call an *a priori* argument, and a probability argument. For his *a priori* argument, see *Dialogues*, pp. 203–5. For the probability argument, see pp. 205–11.

From (2) Hume infers:

(3) The course of nature was not established to serve as a means to human or animal happiness.

Along with these inductively derived premises, Hume introduces an important theological premise which follows from God's infinite power and wisdom.

(4) Since God is infinitely powerful and infinitely wise, He always implements the appropriate means to achieve his desired ends.

Given that God is the designer of nature, it follows that:

(5) Since God did not establish nature to serve as a means to the end of happiness, He does not desire happiness for men or animals.

It is apparent from this where Hume's argument is headed. But to make fully explicit his intended conclusion, we need one more premise. This premise sets forth a stipulation which must be met if God is to be called good in the ordinary sense of the term. For God to be good in the ordinary sense of the term simply means that his goodness must be of essentially the same nature as human moral goodness. Here then is the stipulation.

(6) For God to be good in the ordinary sense of the term, he must desire happiness for men and animals.[5]

With this premise in place, it follows that

(7) God is not good in the ordinary sense of the term.[6]

Of course, for all this argument shows, God could still be good in some manner which is incomprehensible to us. Hume, however, would not be much impressed by such a claim. For if God's goodness is not similar to human moral goodness at least to the extent that God desires human happiness, then we are at a loss to understand what it means for God to be good.

Now the religious believer may try to overturn Hume's conclusion by appealing to eternity. That is, he may argue that this life is incidental to God's overall purpose, and that God's desire for man's happiness will be manifested fully only in the next life. This objection is stated in the *Dialogues* by Demea.

It is rejected, however, by Cleanthes, who insists that such suggestions are 'arbitrary suppositions' which cannot be allowed since they are 'contrary to matter of fact, visible and uncontroverted'.[7] For Hume it was axiomatic that:

[5] For the remainder of this paper, I will ignore, for purposes of simplicity, the issue of animal happiness.

[6] Hume's argument is less formal and less explicit than I have presented it. Premise (6) is only implied by Hume and the conclusion is not stated so forthrightly. However, I think the argument I have presented is quite faithful to Hume (see *Dialogues*, p. 198).

[7] *Dialogues*, p. 199.

(8) A cause can be known only by its known effects.[8]

The afterlife, he would say, is not a known effect. It is not a matter of fact, visible and uncontroverted. Therefore it cannot be taken into account when drawing inferences about the nature of God. Presumably then, Hume would endorse the following.

(9) The visible facts of the world are the only known effects from which we may know the nature of the invisible cause of the world.

As the argument above made clear, Hume thinks the facts about our world offer no support at all for the notion that God is good. Rather, they undermine this claim. And if there are no other relevant facts, as Hume insists, then the prospects for defending divine goodness appear bleak.

This does not, however, lead Hume to believe that God is evil. Rather, his ultimate judgement, as I have indicated, is that the designer of our universe is morally indifferent. He argues for this claim in summary fashion by naming four possibilities concerning the moral nature of the cause or causes of our universe: (1) He could be perfectly good; (2) He could be perfectly evil; (3) He (or they) could be both good and evil; (4) He could be neither good nor evil.

Hume arrives at the conclusion that the Deity is neither good nor evil by a process of elimination. The first two possibilities are ruled out because our world displays a mixture of both good and evil phenomena. The third is rejected because of 'the uniformity and steadiness of the general laws'. Apparently Hume thinks such uniformity should not be expected if there were moral conflict within the deity or deities. This leaves the final possibility, which Hume says 'seems by far the most probable'.[9]

When Hume speaks of probability here, apparently he does not have anything technical in mind, like mathematical probability. Rather, he seems to be using the term in a more ordinary everyday sense. That is, he is using probable to mean something like plausible or likely. This is suggested by the fact that he speaks of probability in terms of what seems true to human reason.[10] What appears plausible or likely to us has the weight of probability on its side. This should be borne in mind in the discussion which follows.

III

Let us turn now to a critical examination of Hume's argument. I want to take as a starting point the notion that the Creator of our world is both

[8] This principle is spelled out in greater detail in *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1977), pp. 93 f.
[9] *Dialogues*, p. 212. [10] cf. *Dialogues*, p. 205.

infinitely powerful and infinitely wise. As we recall, Hume conceded this for the purpose of argument but maintained that these very attributes make God's goodness improbable in view of all the evil in our world.

The first thing I want to claim is that Hume's conclusion that God is amoral is highly improbable (in his sense) if it is granted that God is omnipotent and omniscient. The reason for this is that an amoral God would not be likely to create us with the sort of moral nature we have.

To see this point, let us consider Hume's own account of our moral perceptions. The heart of his view is expressed concisely in the following passage.

> ... the crime of immorality is no particular fact or relation, which can be the object of understanding: But arises entirely from the sentiment of disapprobation, which, *by the structure of human nature*, we unavoidably feel on the apprehension of barbarity or treachery.[11]

As this passage makes clear, Hume thought that our moral judgements are based on feelings of approval or disapproval which we naturally experience in response to given actions. Whatever action or attitude we feel approval for we consider virtuous; and whatever causes us to feel disapproval is vicious. Such moral sentiments are deeply rooted in our very nature. All persons make moral distinctions in that they applaud some actions while condemning others. And what is the basis for this distinction? Virtuous actions are those which promote the happiness of mankind, while vicious actions cause misery.[12] Thus, we are naturally inclined to feel approval for whatever actions tend to produce happiness and to blame those which aim at making people miserable.

What is particularly interesting for our purposes is that Hume goes on, a page after the passage quoted above, to identify God as the ultimate source of our moral nature. Commenting on the contrast between 'taste' as opposed to reason, Hume writes as follows.

> The standard of the other [taste], arising from the internal frame and constitution of animals, is ultimately derived from that Supreme Will, which bestowed on each being its peculiar nature, and arranged the several classes and orders of existence.[13]

So the final explanation for why we have the moral feelings we do is because God has made us in such a way that we naturally respond in certain ways to certain actions and attitudes.

With this in place, I think we can see why Hume's conclusion that God is amoral is utterly implausible. I want to stress, however, that the issue is not whether Hume really believed in God's omnipotence or whether he actually thought God gave us our moral nature. What is at issue is whether it is

[11] *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals* [Hereafter, *Morals*] (Indianapolis, Hackett Publishing Company, 1983), p. 87; my emphasis.
[12] *Morals*, p. 83. [13] *Morals*, p. 88.

plausible to believe the Creator of our world is omniscient and omnipotent, but devoid of moral qualities.

What I want to argue is that if our Creator is not good, the more plausible belief is not that He is amoral, but that He is evil. More exactly, I want to insist that the following intuitive judgement is very likely true, if not obvious.

(10) A God who made us in such a way that we naturally felt approval for whatever promoted human happiness, but did not Himself desire human happiness would be evil.

This judgement will not, of course, be shared by everyone, but perhaps the intuition which underlies it can at least be clarified by considering the following.

If God has made us in such a way that we have strong convictions that human happiness should be promoted, it is natural to believe He also cares about human happiness. It is natural to assume our moral nature, at its best, is a reflection of God's own moral nature. But what if we discovered we were mistaken in this assumption? What if we found out that our moral nature does not in any way reflect a concern on God's part for human happiness? What if God made us as He did merely because He finds it amusing to create creatures who have strong feelings about the value of happiness for themselves and others of their kind?

It seems clear to me that if we were to discover this to be true, we would surely feel betrayed or deceived. We would think ourselves the victims of a cruel illusion. We would be so disconcerted that we would hardly judge God to be merely amoral; rather, we would judge Him to be perverse if not downright evil.

The case against Hume does not, however, depend only on intuitive grounds. Indeed, I think a more formal argument can be mounted from Hume's own principles for a conclusion similar to the one we have already reached, but with a somewhat surprising twist. Let us begin by recalling the following premise from the previous section.

(4) Since God is infinitely powerful and infinitely wise, He always implements the appropriate means to achieve his desired ends.

From this, along with what we have already discussed in this section, we can derive the following.

(11) Since God has made us in such a way that we naturally feel approval for and judge as virtuous actions which promote human happiness, and feel disapproval for and judge as vicious actions which cause human misery, it is his desire that we form these judgements.

It must be emphasized that it does not follow from this that God shares our concern for human happiness. Again, his ultimate aim in creating us so that

we form the moral judgements we do may not be to lead us to moral truth, or to promote our well-being, but merely to amuse Himself. If this is so, God might just as well have created us in such a way that we would have been indifferent to whatever promoted human happiness, or even felt disapproval for it. Perhaps He would have found this equally entertaining. As revolting as these possibilities are, they seem to be at least logically compatible with God's giving us the moral nature we have.

Whatever God's ultimate aim in creating us as he did, it is clear, if Hume is right, that He has in fact made us in such a way that we feel approval for actions which promote human happiness, and feel disapproval for and judge as vicious those which cause human misery. And if God always implements appropriate means to achieve his desired ends, it is clear that He desires us to feel as we do with respect to the causes of human happiness and misery.

Our next premise is a strengthened version of (5) above. While it goes beyond (5), it is warranted because of Hume's view that our world is full of misery.

(12) God made this world in such a way that it is evident that He did not intend to promote human happiness through it, but rather, misery.

Since we have no reason, according to Hume, to believe in an afterlife, we have no reason to believe God ultimately desires our happiness. This is bad enough, but there is another conclusion waiting to be drawn from the preceding premises. Given the notion that our world was intended to promote misery, and the notion that God designed us to feel disapproval for actions which cause misery, it follows that:

(13) God desires us to feel disapproval toward Him for creating this world as He did, or even to judge Him vicious.

The notion that God wants us to judge Him vicious surely comes as something of a surprise, but it seems warranted for those who accept Hume's claims.

Now it may be objected to this conclusion that our natural disapproval for actions which cause human misery does not properly extend to the action of the Creator in structuring our world as He did, but only to particular actions within the world.

However, this objection will not hold if we recall a point made earlier, namely, that if moral attributes are meaningfully to be applied to God, they must retain the ordinary meaning they have when applied to men. Hume insisted that God's goodness must be similar to human goodness in the sense that He desires happiness for his creatures. And if this is so, our judgement about God's goodness will naturally be based on considerations which are similar to considerations which are relevant for judging human goodness.

God's action in structuring the world is a highly relevant consideration for

it is among the most important evidence we have for making judgements about God's concern for human happiness, and thus his moral nature. For according to Hume, the only way we can know anything about God's moral nature is by making inferences from known effects. And the structure of the world is surely a known effect of great significance in this regard. Indeed, this assumption underlies Hume's inductive argument from evil, which I sketched above.

It may be further objected that perhaps God is indifferent to whether or not we infer that He is vicious, even if that inference is reasonable. But this objection is unconvincing for much the same reason the previous one is. If goodness means essentially the same thing when applied to God as it does when applied to man, there is reason to think we will naturally make judgements about God's moral nature when confronted by relevant considerations. It is as reasonable to assume God intends us make these judgements as it is to think He designed us to make certain moral judgements about certain human actions. So the foregoing inference that God wants us to judge Him vicious seems entirely justified on Hume's principles.

There is, moreover, no easy way to avoid the conclusion that God must actually be evil, once we have come this far with Hume. For (22) leads to something of a dilemma: is it the case that God really is vicious and wants it to be known by those who think about the matter? Or is it the case that He is not vicious but wants the conclusion to be drawn, nevertheless? Is God amused by leading philosophers to absurd and frightening conclusions? Either way, we have a God who is perverse, at best.

IV

At any rate, Hume's conclusion that God is amoral seems highly implausible when we take into account our own moral nature. It is an important part of the empirical realm and Hume should have considered it more carefully in drawing inferences about the unseen cause of our world. As I have already suggested, the natural conclusion to draw if we believe that God has purposely created us in such a way that we value human happiness is that He must also value human happiness. And if He does value human happiness, then He is good in the same sense that we are good. If He does not value human happiness, then, as I have argued, He must be evil. Either way, I want to emphasize, God is not amoral.

Now then, if the claim that God is amoral cannot be sustained, an important consequence follows, namely, that belief in God has deep practical implications. As we recall from the first section, it is central to Hume's whole case that the proposition of natural theology does not in any way affect human life or action. The belief that God is good or evil, on the other hand, does clearly affect human life.

There is a long tradition maintaining that belief in a good God who provides moral order in the universe is a powerful reinforcement for moral behaviour. It has not been so often recognized however, that an equally strong argument can be given to support the notion that belief in an evil God would undermine moral commitment. This argument has been recently developed by Robert Adams.

> We are to think of a being who understands human life much better than we do – understands it well enough to create and control it. Among other things, He must surely understand our moral ideas and feelings.... And now we are to suppose that that being does not care to support with His will the moral principles that we believe are true.... I submit that if we really believed there is a God like that, who understands so much and yet disregards some or all of our moral principles, it would be extremely difficult for us to continue to regard those principles with the respect that we believe is due them.[14]

As Adams puts it a bit earlier, belief in such a God would be 'morally intolerable'. It would be not only thoroughly demoralizing but even unthinkable. We could not, without deep distress, seriously entertain the belief that the all-powerful Creator of our universe stands opposed to what we value most. It would be morally devastating to think the highest power in existence does not wish human happiness. Indeed, there is no thought more terrible than that God exists, but He is evil.

The same difficulty, Adams goes on to argue, attends the suggestion that God might be morally slack. While this thought is perhaps not quite as disturbing as the notion that God is out and out evil, it also serves to weaken moral resolve. For if God Himself is morally ambivalent, it is hard to see how lesser beings can hope to do better.

So it seems that the only kind of God we can plausibly believe in is a perfectly good God. It is not only the case that our natural intuitive belief is that if there is a God, He must be good; we are revolted by the thought that there might be an evil God or a God of mixed character.

But is it not still possible, for all I have argued, that there might exist an evil or a morally imperfect God? In response to this, I am inclined to say that it is possible, in roughly the same sense that it is possible that I am a brain in a vat or that all my experiences are caused by an evil demon manipulating my mind. Insofar as these are live options, the belief that God might be evil is a live option. It cannot be conclusively refuted, but on the other hand, it is not the sort of claim anyone really takes seriously, or should take seriously.

[14] 'Moral Arguments for Theistic Belief', in *Rationality and Religious Belief*, ed. Cornelius F. Delaney (Notre Dame, University of Notre Dame Press, 1979), p. 135. It should be noted that Adams' argument is directed against the notion that God is amoral as well as the notion that He might be evil. It is, I think, particularly forceful against the latter claim.

V

It appears then that Hume should have affirmed either outright atheism or a more full blooded theism. Both our intuitions and Hume's own principles lead to the conclusion that if the Creator who gave us our moral nature is not good, then He must be evil. Since the idea of an evil deity is intolerable, Hume should either have denied God's existence or accepted God's goodness. His alternative proposal that the Creator of our universe is amoral is simply untenable.[15]

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[15] I am grateful to Philip Quinn for his helpful comments on an earlier version of this paper.