

Hume on “Genuine,” “True,” and “Rational” Religion

(Originally published in *Eighteenth Century Thought* 4 [2009]: 171–201)

Lorne Falkenstein
Philosophy Department
Western University, London, Canada

Abstract

Hume appears to have sometimes taken religion to be founded on reason, at other times to have taken it to be founded on faith, and at yet other times to be based on authority. All of these views can be found in the different pieces collected together in the second volume of his *Essays and Treatises on Several Subjects*. By means of an analysis of what Hume meant by “genuine religion,” “true religion,” and “rational religion,” I uncover a consistent, sincere view that Hume sustained throughout his published works. This view is atheistic.

- I. Introduction
- II. [Faith and authority in the first *Enquiry*](#)
- III. [Religion and philosophy in the first *Enquiry*](#)
- IV. [Reason in the first *Enquiry* and the *Natural History*](#)
- V. [Hume’s definition of religion](#)
- VI. [“Genuine theism” vs. polytheism and demonism](#)
- VII. [True and false religion](#)
- VIII. [Rational and irrational religion](#)
- IX. [Conclusions](#)
[Acknowledgements](#)

On first reading Hume nothing, indeed, is more difficult to harmonize with his other doctrines than this repeated assertion that true religion is a species of philosophy. We are left asking how on his teaching religion can be true, or, even if true, how it can be a philosophy, least of all his own philosophy.

— Norman Kemp Smith¹

I. Introduction

Today, when we read either of Hume’s *Enquiries*, we tend to read them in the format in which they were first published, as separately bound volumes. However, from 1758, the year after Hume’s *Dissertation on the passions* and *Natural history of religion* were first published in *Four Dissertations*, until 1777, when the last edition of his works to have been personally supervised by Hume posthumously appeared, the *Enquiries* were most often bound together with the *Dissertation* and the *Natural History* to constitute a second volume of Hume’s *Essays and Treatises on Several Subjects*.² The fact that Hume so often [172] bound these works

¹ In David Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, ed. Norman Kemp Smith (1947; rpt. Indianapolis: Bobbs–Merrill, 1947), 20.

² For further details, see Tom L. Beauchamp’s description of the contents of the various editions of the *Essays and Treatises* in David Hume, *An Enquiry [172] concerning Human Understanding*, critical edition (Oxford: Clarendon Press,

together and so often edited and re-edited them suggests that he would have been concerned to eliminate any obvious inconsistencies,³ and would have thought carefully about how what is said in one work might influence the understanding of what is said in the others, particularly on topics that are examined in more than one of them.

Religion is one such topic. But when one turns to consider what Hume had to say about religion in the two works principally devoted to it in volume II, the first *Enquiry* and the *Natural History*, it is hard to find the consistency one might expect, at least on an initial view.⁴ In what

2000), xlv–lvii; and David Hume, *An Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals*, critical edition (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), xlii–liii. Hume produced eight editions between these years, those of 1758, 1760, 1764, 1767, 1768, 1770, 1772, and 1777. The edition of 1758 bound the *Enquiries*, the *Dissertation*, and the *Natural History* together with Hume's other essays. Those of 1760 and 1770 were four volume works that bound *Enquiry concerning Human Understanding* and the *Dissertation on the Passions* together in a third volume, and the *Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals* and *Natural History of Religion* together in a fourth volume. The remaining five editions bound the *Enquiries*, the *Dissertation*, and the *Natural History* together in a second volume.

³ I say *obvious* inconsistencies because eliminating *all* the inconsistencies that an astute (or uncharitable) critic might ferret out is more than can reasonably be expected.

⁴ Hume's posthumously published *Dialogues on Natural Religion* present similar challenges. As a consequence, his true views on religion have been a subject of ongoing debate. At risk of overlooking important nuances, those who have participated in this debate may be divided into two camps: those who consider Hume's writings on religion to have been atheistic, and those who consider them to have been theistic. Those in the former camp have dealt with Hume's occasional endorsement of theistic arguments or versions of theism either by claiming that they were insincere (for a study of early proponents of this view, together with a passing suggestion that their readings ought to be preferred, see James Fieser, "Hume's Concealed Attack on Religion and his Early Critics," *Journal of Philosophical Research*, 20 [1995]: 431–49; for more direct attempts to justify the interpretation of Hume along these lines see, among others, Christopher J. Wheatley, "Polemical Aspects of Hume's *Natural History of Religion*," *Eighteenth Century Studies* 19 [1986]: 502–514; and Lorne Falkenstein, "Hume's Project in the *Natural History of Religion*," *Religious Studies* 39 [2003]: 1–21), ironic (see, classically, John Valdimir Price, *The Ironic Hume* [Austin: University of Texas Press, (1965)]), or merely "polite" (this is suggested by, among others, David O'Connor, *Hume on Religion* [London: Routledge, 2001], 195; and Kemp Smith, "Introduction" to Hume, *Dialogues*, 38–42), or by claiming that such religious belief as they support is vapid (see, for instance, O'Connor, *Hume on Religion*, 197–201; J.C.A. Gaskin, *Hume's Philosophy of Religion*. 2nd ed. [London: Macmillan, 1988] or Kemp Smith, "Introduction" to Hume, *Dialogues*, 19–24 — again among many others). Those in the latter camp have argued that his attacks on theistic arguments, like his attacks on belief in an external world, are only intended to undermine rational certainty while remaining impotent to challenge [173] what is really a natural belief (see, for instance, Beryl Logan, *A Religion Without Talking: Religious Belief and Natural Belief in Hume's Philosophy of Religion* [New York: Peter Lang, 1993]; Stanley Tweyman, *Scepticism and Belief in Hume's 'Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion'* [Dordrecht: Nijhoff: 1986]; Donald Livingston, "Hume's Conception of True Religion," in *Hume's Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Anthony Flew, Donald Livingston, George I. Mavrodes, and David Fate Norton [Winston–Salem, NC: Wake Forest University Press, 1986] 33–73; and Charles Hendel, *Studies in the Philosophy of David Hume* [1925; rpt. Indianapolis: Bobbs–Merrill, 1963], 267–309) and have claimed that those of his remarks that are critical of religion are directed just at corrupt forms of religious belief rather than at "genuine," "true," or "philosophical" religion (see Livingston and Timothy M. Costelloe, "Hume on Belief and the Demise of Religion," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 55 [2004]: 171–85). In this paper, I side with the former camp. But I make a rather different case for this position. While I allow that Hume may occasionally have made insincere remarks, I show that most of what he said about religion can be understood in such a way as to express a single, consistent view, sustained throughout the works published during his lifetime. That view is that there is no legitimate basis for truly or genuinely religious belief, however vapid, either in reason or in nature. I draw this view from textual evidence for Hume's understanding of the notions of "genuine," "true," and "rational" religion, but I also rest it on a hypothesis: that, *pace* Price and those who have followed in his footsteps, Hume's pronouncements on religion are generally sincere. The only defence I offer for this hypothesis is the plausibility and attractiveness of the account of Hume's view on religion that follows from it — something that I leave to the reader to judge. I do not extend my account to Hume's *Dialogues*. In part this is to save space. But I also mean to offer a counterpoint to what has all too often been a tendency to draw Hume's philosophy of religion almost exclusively from the *Dialogues* (see, for instance, O'Connor, *Hume on Religion*, culminating in the claim on 193). As I argue in what follows, there is much in Hume's *Dialogues* that is foreshadowed in the collected works of Volume II of *Essays and Treatises*, and the argumentative structure of the two books is surprisingly similar. Resolving the apparent paradoxes of volume II will provide the interested reader with a key to resolving those of the *Dialogues* as well, and with a way to identifying a sincere (non-ironic) intent even in that work. An alternative argument for Hume's sincerity has been given by M. Jamie Ferreira, "Religion's 'Foundation in Reason': the Common Sense of Hume's *Natural History*," *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 24: [1994]: 565–81. For a very different and far more pessimistic take on the entire debate see James A. Harris, "Hume's Use of the Rhetoric of

follows, I sketch the view on [173] religion that emerges from the first *Enquiry's* essays on miracles and providence. I then note an apparent, small inconsistency between these two essays. After deepening Hume's account of religion to remove this small inconsistency, I take up a more serious inconsistency between the *Natural History* and the first *Enquiry*.

II. Faith and authority in the first *Enquiry*

The first *Enquiry's* essay on miracles opens by approving of Tillotson's argument for the conclusion that religious mysteries [174] that are inconsistent with experience should not be accepted on authority, though they can be accepted when "brought home to everyone's breast, by the immediate operation of the Holy Spirit" (*Human Understanding*, 10.1).⁵ It then proposes to give "an argument of a like nature, which, if just, will ... be an everlasting check to all kinds of superstitious delusion," at least for those who are "wise and learned" (*Human Understanding*, 10.2). And it concludes by preening itself over the fact that "the method of reasoning here delivered ... may serve to confound those dangerous friends or disguised enemies to the Christian religion, who have undertaken to defend it by the principles of human reason" because "Our most holy religion is founded on *Faith*, not on reason; and it is a sure method of exposing it to put it to such a trial as it is, by no means, fitted to endure" (*Human Understanding*, 10.40). The Christian religion, Hume declared, "cannot be believed by a reasonable person without [a miracle]" (though it can, presumably, be believed by an unreasonable person without one). "Mere reason is insufficient to convince us of its veracity: And whoever is moved by *Faith* to assent to it, is conscious of a continued miracle in his own person, which subverts all the principles of his understanding, and gives him a determination to believe what is most contrary to custom and experience" (*Human Understanding*, 10.41)

According to the account of religious belief presented by these passages, people are of two kinds, the wise and the foolish. The foolish are capable of believing almost anything, on such slight bases as deference to authority. But the wise do not share this capacity. If a supremely powerful being exists, that being could graciously reveal truths that are beyond or contrary to experience and reason, and could compel the wise to believe them. But, apart from that gracious assistance, such truths could not be believed by a reasonable person. Those who claim that religion can be founded on reason rather than this sort of gift of faith are "dangerous friends or disguised enemies" who can only excite doubts when their projects inevitably fail.

This account of religious belief is seconded and supplanted by the first *Enquiry's* essay on providence and a future state. That essay is framed by the larger question of whether anti-religious views ought to be tolerated since "denying a divine existence, and consequently a providence and a future state, seem to loosen, in [175] great measure, the ties of morality, and may be supposed, for that reason, pernicious to the peace of civil society" (*Human Understanding*, 11.4). Responding to this concern, Hume's "friend," speaking for "Epicurus," charges that the "chief or sole argument" for the existence of God (the design argument) cannot establish that God provided for us in this life or intends a just distribution of rewards and punishments in an after life. Consequently, those who try to "establish religion upon the principles of reason ... excite, instead of satisfying, the doubts, which naturally arise from a diligent and scrupulous enquiry" (11.10). Invoking the same distinction between wise and vulgar classes that was drawn in the previous essay, the "friend" argues for allowing philosophers to continue investigating this "entirely speculative" question apart from state interference. The wise

Calvinism," in *Impressions of Hume*, ed. Marina Frasca-Spada and P.J.E. Kail (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005), 141–59.

⁵ Hume's *Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*, identified as *Human Understanding* in the text, is cited by section and paragraph number according to the numeration in Beauchamp's edition, cited above, n.2.

know from experience that a virtuous course of life is more conducive to happiness than a vicious one. Since they do not need to believe in a just distribution of rewards and punishments in an afterlife in order to feel constrained by moral rules, they should be allowed the freedom to examine religious questions without state interference (*Human Understanding*, 11.20). Neither are their deliberations likely to have any bad effect on the vulgar. Hume added in his own voice that this has never been known to occur, possibly because philosophical disputations are carried out “without enthusiasm” and are not very “alluring” (*Human Understanding*, 11.29). Once again, therefore, we see that Hume divided the populace into wise and vulgar, allowed that the vulgar are capable of believing almost anything, and insisted that the attempts of the wise to establish religion on a rational foundation are likely to lead to religious scepticism.

But there is an apparent inconsistency between the essay on miracles and that on providence. The essay on miracles opens by endorsing Tillotson’s argument against resting belief in religious mysteries on authority, where those mysteries contradict sensory experience. But, in passing, Hume’s friend in the essay on providence represents Epicurus as someone who deferred to the authority of priests and poets.

The religious philosophers, not satisfied with the tradition of your forefathers, and doctrine of your priests (in which I willingly acquiesce), indulge a rash curiosity, in trying how far they can establish religion upon the principles of reason; and they thereby excite, instead of satisfying, the doubts, which naturally arise from [176] a diligent and scrupulous enquiry. [*Human Understanding*, 11.10]

When priests and poets, supported by your authority, O Athenians, talk of a golden or silver age, which preceded the present state of vice and misery, I hear them with attention and with reverence. But when philosophers, who pretend to neglect authority, and to cultivate reason, hold the same discourse, I pay them not, I own, the same obsequious submission and pious deference. [*Human Understanding*, 11.16]

The essay on miracles, in contrast, presents a gracious gift of faith, rather than acceptance of religious authority, as the proper foundation for religious belief.

III. Religion and philosophy in the first *Enquiry*

This apparent conflict can be resolved by attending to some deeper features of Hume’s account in the two essays — features that are underscored by attending to the *Natural History of Religion*.⁶ Tillotson argued that authority should not be accepted in the face of contrary experience, not that no belief should be accepted on authority. And the “friend” of the essay on providence does not represent Epicurus as acquiescing or lending an obsequious submission or pious deference to “mysterious and absurd opinions” (*Natural History*, XIV: 81)⁷ or “superstitious delusions” (*Human Understanding*, 10.2). Instead, Epicurus tolerated “tales” of “a golden or silver age” and of the activities of powerful invisible beings rather like ourselves — beings that have bodies and that share human passions and vices (*Human Understanding*, 11.3 and 11.16).

[177] Hume’s friend further explains Epicurus’s practice by reverting to the distinction between “learned and wise” and “vulgar and illiterate” people (*Human Understanding*, 11.3).

⁶ The resolution that follows shares much in common with one offered earlier by Livingston, “Hume’s Conception,” 45–49. But Livingston inverts Hume’s story. Where Hume declared that “philosophy will soon find herself very unequally yoked with her new associate; and instead of regulating each principle, as they advance together, she is at every turn perverted to serve the purposes of superstition” (*Natural History*, XI: 65–66), Livingston writes that “the demand of modern religion for total dominion of body and soul, is due to the false philosophical thinking embedded in it” (48). My account restores Hume’s perspective on where the corrupting influence lies.

⁷ References to the *Natural History* are to the pagination of David Hume, ‘A Dissertation on the Passions’ and ‘The Natural History of Religion’. A Critical edition, ed. Tom L. Beauchamp (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2007).

According to the friend, “After the first alarm ... which arose from the new paradoxes and principles” of the early philosophers was over, the philosophers reached a tacit agreement with the priests and poets to make a “fair partition” of the populace amongst themselves. The philosophers would confine their speculations to an audience of the learned and wise, while leaving the priests and poets with an entire authority over the vulgar and illiterate (*Human Understanding*, 11.3). In publicly professing deference to the authority of priests and poets, Epicurus was merely living up to the conditions of this conjectural contract.

Nor need Epicurus have been entirely insincere in doing so. According to the friend, the accommodation between the philosophers and the priests was possible because the primitive religion of the time had no philosophical content. It consisted of “tales” of the activities of heroes and gods, and these tales had little bearing on the “speculative dogmas” concerning the origin of the universe or fate of humans after death that Epicurus was concerned to challenge. In the *Natural History*, Hume stressed that the gods were generally not conceived as creators or designers of the universe (*Natural History*, IV), but merely as “a species of intelligent creatures, of more refined substance and greater authority than the rest” (*Natural History*, XI: 65). That the world might contain such beings is, he noted, an entirely plausible speculation, and a philosopher could as reasonably accept tales of the activities of such beings as reports of the existence of giant squid (*Natural History*, XI). The only objection to the “mythological system” is that it is unsupported by any evidence other than the conflicting testimony transmitted through the poets of different nations (*Natural History*, XI) and is itself overloaded with internal contradictions (*Natural History*, XII). As long as he was unaware or forgiving of these defects, Epicurus could accept that the gods exist (as Hume’s friend correctly points out that he in fact did — *Human Understanding*, 11.11⁸) and “acquiesce” to the traditional tales told about their deeds (*Human Understanding*, 11.10), without contradicting any of his own views on the origin and design of the universe.

[178] Importantly, the friend claims that the dissolution of the original contract between priests and philosophers and the suppression of free philosophical inquiry into religion only began to take place after a marriage of the two enterprises, when philosophical theologians inflated people’s original superstitious beliefs in gods and heroes, and even the vulgar became caught up in “furious” disputes over whether the divine power is multiple or single, a creator or designer of the world, responsible for evil or concerned to provide for us.

This pertinacious bigotry, of which you complain, as so fatal to philosophy, is really her offspring, who, after allying with superstition, separates himself entirely from the interest of his parent, and becomes her most inveterate enemy and persecutor. Speculative dogmas of religion, the present occasions of such furious dispute, could not possibly be conceived or admitted in the early ages of the world; when mankind, being wholly illiterate, formed an idea of religion more suitable to their weak apprehension, and composed their sacred tenets of such tales chiefly as were the objects of traditional belief, more than of argument or disputation. [*Human Understanding*, 11.3]

This position is further developed in the *Natural History*. According to Hume in that work, once people developed the conception of a single, omnipotent deity, philosophers co-opted the notion, considering the possibility that a mind might have created and designed the universe to be a highly plausible speculation. The philosophers found both good reason for this speculation in the evidence of providential design in nature and serious inconsistencies — if nowhere else, then between the idea of a supremely powerful, intelligent, and benevolent creator, designer, and provider and the existence of evil. As philosophers will do, they devoted their energies to developing ever more refined theological systems to deal with the contradiction. But as devotees to a religion will do, they abandoned all moderate scepticism concerning their

⁸ Oddly, Hume represents himself as mistaken on this point: “certain tenets of philosophy, such as those of Epicurus ... [deny] a divine existence)” (*Human Understanding*, 11.4). Perhaps he just meant “a divine existence of the sort conceived by the religious philosophers,” i.e., an all-perfect creator.

speculations, and began to assert them with an intolerant dogmatism, becoming servants of the traditional superstition and oppressors of those who would question its claims.

[179] But where theism forms the fundamental principle of any popular religion, that tenet is so conformable to sound reason, that philosophy is apt to incorporate itself with such a system of theology.... But ... philosophy will soon find herself very unequally yoked with her new associate; and instead of regulating each principle, as they advance together, she is at every turn perverted to serve the purposes of superstition. [*Natural History*, XI: 65–66; cf. *Dialogues*, I: 138–40].⁹

IV. Reason in the first *Enquiry* and the *Natural History*

But the *Natural History* also contains claims that cannot be so readily made to fit with the account of vulgar and philosophical religious belief that is presented in the first *Enquiry's* essays on miracles and providence. Those essays agree in claiming that religion cannot be based on reason or argument, either from testimony to the occurrence of miracles performed to authenticate a revelation, or from the evidence of the design in nature. They further agree in charging that those who attempt to mount such arguments are “dangerous friends or disguised enemies” who can only “excite, instead of satisfying, the doubts, which naturally arise from a diligent and scrupulous enquiry.” But the *Natural History* contains repeated assertions that religion *is* founded on reasoning from the design in nature.

The whole frame of nature bespeaks an intelligent author; and no rational enquirer can, after serious reflection, suspend his belief a moment with regard to the primary principles of genuine Theism and Religion. [*Natural History*, Introduction: 33]

... I allow, that the order and frame of the universe, when accurately examined, affords [an “obvious and invincible argument, which might immediately lead the mind into the pure principles of theism”]. [*Natural History*, I: 35]¹⁰

[180] Were men led into the apprehension of invisible, intelligent power by a contemplation of the works of nature, they could never possibly entertain any conception but of one single being, who bestowed existence and order on this vast machine, and adjusted all its parts, according to one regular plan or connected system. [*Natural History*, II: 37]

Ignorant of astronomy and the anatomy of plants and animals, and too little curious to observe the admirable adjustment of final causes ... [barbarous peoples] remain still unacquainted with a first and Supreme Creator, and with that infinitely perfect [!] spirit, who alone, by his almighty will, bestowed order on the whole frame of nature. [*Natural History*, III: 41]

But whoever thinks that ... [the “doctrine of one supreme Deity, the author of nature”] has owed its success to the prevalent force of those invincible reasons, on which it is undoubtedly founded, would show himself little acquainted with the ignorance and stupidity of the people, and their incurable prejudices in favour of their particular superstitions. [*Natural History*, VI: 52]

Indeed, not only does the *Natural History* maintain that religion is properly founded on reason, it rejects the alternative positions on the proper foundations of religion that were endorsed by “Epicurus” and by Hume himself in the first *Enquiry*. It charges that popular

⁹ References to the *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion* are to the pagination of Kemp Smith’s edition, cited above, n.1.

¹⁰ The full text reads: “Nothing could disturb this natural progress of thought, but some obvious and invincible argument, which might immediately lead the mind [180] into the pure principles of theism, and make it overleap, at one bound, the vast interval which is interposed between the human and the divine nature. But though I allow, that the order and frame of the universe, when accurately examined, affords such an argument; yet I can never think, that this consideration could have an influence on mankind, when they formed their first rude notions of religion.”

conceptions of invisible power conveyed by tradition and authority are not genuinely theistic,¹¹ and, over the course of a long quotation from Chevalier Ramsay, discretely tucked away in a footnote, it attacks the view that religion is properly based on faith, employing Ramsay's words to suggest that a deity who would graciously compel only some to believe [181] would have to be "odious, a hater of souls, rather than a lover of them; a cruel, vindictive tyrant, an impotent or a wrathful dæmon, rather than an all-powerful, beneficent Father of spirits" [*Natural History*, XIII: 80, n.87].

These apparent contradictions between the *Natural History* and the first *Enquiry* recall another apparent contradiction in Hume's work on religion: Philo's notorious "reversal" at the outset of *Dialogues* XII, encapsulated in the declaration that "A purpose, an intention, or design strikes everywhere the most careless, the most stupid thinker.... And thus all the sciences almost lead us insensibly to acknowledge a first intelligent Author" [*Dialogues*, XII: 214–15]. Compare Philo's claim with this one, from Section XV of the *Natural History*:

A purpose, an intention, a design is evident in every thing; and when our comprehension is so far enlarged as to contemplate the first rise of this visible system, we must adopt, with the strongest conviction, the idea of some intelligent cause or author. [*Natural History*, XV: 85]

Interestingly, those reading Volume II of the *Essays and Treatises* prior to 1779, when the *Dialogues* first appeared, will have found the same "reversal" of opinion on the design argument, and found it expressed in almost the same terms. And they will have found it in the same place: towards the end of the volume. But they will not have found it in the mouth of a character in a dialogue. Hume spoke in his own voice when he wrote on the one hand that "Our most holy religion is founded on *Faith*, not on reason; and it is a sure method of exposing it to put it to such a trial as it is, by no means, fitted to endure" (*Human Understanding*, 10.40), and on the other that "I allow, that the order and frame of the universe, when accurately examined, affords [an 'obvious and invincible argument, which might immediately lead the mind into the pure principles of theism']" (*Natural History*, I: 35).

One way to account for this contradiction is by appeal to external factors. Hume did not live at a time when one could freely express radically anti-religious views, we might observe. What he really wanted to do was undermine all of the foundations for religious belief. But since he could not do that openly, he adopted the expedient of moderating his attacks on one [182] foundation of religious belief by pretending to accept the validity of another.¹²

But attributing such a strategy to Hume becomes less plausible when one considers that the first *Enquiry* and the *Natural History* were bound together in the same volume. That volume does not attack one foundation for religious belief while pretending to accept another. It contains different essays, each offering a credible attack on a different foundation for religious belief and all together offering a critique of religious belief in all its forms. The fact that the volume also contains a number of apparently inconsistent remarks on the true foundations of religion does not conceal this feature, and it is implausible that readers would look at the treatises in isolation or view the inconsistent professions of support as anything other than insincere. There would be no point to a pretence at religious commitment that is so shallow, not even a narrowly legalistic or a polite one. A lawyer defending Hume against charges of impiety would have had a hard time explaining why the attacks on all the foundations of religious belief persisted through the multiple revised and corrected editions produced during the latter part of Hume's lifetime, and why no one position on the true foundations of religious belief is sustained throughout all of the works. And a religious friend would have viewed such an inept attempt to conceal the attack on

¹¹ See throughout, but esp. *Natural History*, IV: 44 and 47–48. What it means to say that a religion is not 'genuinely theistic' is discussed at length below.

¹² This reading is suggested, though not endorsed, by Ferreira, "Religion's 'Foundation in Reason'," 579–80. A modified version of it is endorsed by Falkenstein, "Hume's Project," 12–16.

all the foundations of religion as patronizing.

In the remainder of this paper I investigate an alternative way of accounting for the apparent contradiction between the first *Enquiry* and the *Natural History*. I propose that, as with the tension between Epicurus' views on acquiescence to tradition in the essay on providence and Tillotson's argument against preferring testimony to the contrary evidence of one's senses in the essay on miracles, the contradiction between the first *Enquiry* and the *Natural History* is merely apparent. It points the way to a deeper point about Hume's position on religious belief — one that makes consistent sense of the apparently conflicting remarks. I bring this point out by saying some things about how Hume understood religion in general, and genuine theism, true religion, and rational religion in particular.

In offering these explanations, I do not mean to diminish the difficulties Hume faced in bringing his anti-religious views before [183] the public, or to suggest that he did not occasionally conceal, understate, or deny those views in order to get around these difficulties.¹³ Nor do I mean to entirely rule out the possibility that he might have used a pretense at concealment to make a cutting or ironic remark.¹⁴ But before invoking these expedients to account for what he said, we should see if we can find a single, sincere message in his texts.

Before proceeding, a final methodological point needs to be made. My claim is that Hume would have viewed his claims in the first *Enquiry* and the *Natural History* as consistent. It is not that he said everything he ought to have said to remove all appearance of contradiction between the two works. Sometimes, what is evident in one's own mind does not always make its appearance in print — or make it into print in the appropriate place at the appropriate time. I am concerned with the account of religious belief that would have been in Hume's mind rather than with the one he successfully managed to make explicit between the covers of Volume II. In ascertaining what would have been in his mind, I occasionally draw on the *Dialogues*, which he was writing at approximately the same time, but which was not available to readers of Volume II prior to 1779. My justification for these borrowings from the *Dialogues* is that they tell us about views on religion that would have been in Hume's mind as he was composing the *Natural History*. These views may have been omitted from the *Natural History* because they were assumed to be too obvious to call for comment or because an occasion to trigger their expression did not arise, rather than because Hume deliberately decided to conceal them.[184]

V. Hume's definition of religion

Hume's definition of religion was very broad. A religion, for Hume, need not involve a belief in an all-perfect creator of the universe, though it might. For Hume, a religion could be any body of doctrine involving a belief in the existence of invisible, intelligent power, be that power benevolent or malevolent, one or many, spiritual or corporeal. This equation of belief in invisible intelligent power with religion is suggested by the opening paragraph of Hume's *Natural History of Religion*.

¹³ Here is the best example, from the closing paragraph of *Natural History* VI: "Nothing indeed would prove more strongly the divine origin of any religion, than to find (and happily this is the case with Christianity) that it is free from ... [the] contradiction, so incident to human nature," [of "sometimes paint[ing] the Deity in the most sublime colours, as the creator of heaven and earth; sometimes degrad[ing] him nearly to the level with human creatures ... while at the same time ... ascrib[ing] to him suitable infirmities, passions, and partialities, of the moral kind]" (55). The parenthetical insertion is hardly sincere.

¹⁴ Witness Warburton's reaction to the remark cited in the previous note, which Warburton certainly took to be ironic: "of all the slanders against Revelation, this before us is the tritest, the dirtiest, and the most worn in the drudgery of free-thinking." William Warburton, "Remarks on Mr. David Hume's Essay on the 'Natural History of Religion'," in *The Works of the Right Reverend William Warburton, D.D. Lord Bishop of Gloucester: To which is prefixed a Discourse by way of General Preface, containing some Account of the Life, Writings, and Character of the Author by Richard Hurd*. New ed. 12 vols. (London: T. Cadell and W. Davies, 1811), 12: 359–60.

The belief of invisible, intelligent power has been very generally diffused over the human race ... but.... Some nations have been discovered, who entertained no sentiments of Religion, if travellers and historians may be credited [Introduction: 33].¹⁵

And it is the one feature that Hume took to be common to all religions.

The only point of theology, in which we shall find a consent of mankind almost universal, is, that there is invisible, intelligent power in the world [*Natural History*, IV: 44].¹⁶

Hume scholars might quibble with this definition. After all, for Hume, *all* power is “invisible” — in the sense of being something that is not discerned in any sense impression. But believing that animals and other human beings have powers to move their limbs does not make us religious. To get around this problem, we might charitably read Hume as meaning, not just that the power is invisible, but that the agent who exercises that power is invisible. Importantly, however, the agent need only be “invisible” in the sense of being concealed, not in the sense of being incorporeal. Hume made it clear that at least some religions “suppose their deities, however potent *and invisible*, to be nothing but a species of human creatures, perhaps raised from among mankind, and [185] retaining all human passions and appetites, *together with corporeal limbs and organs*” (*Natural History*, III: 41–42, my stress). Others involve a belief in the existence of “fairies, goblins, elves, [and] sprights” (*Natural History*, IV: 44), which are distinguished from one another by, among other things, their body types. Like Bigfoot, these intelligent agents are there to be seen; it is just that they keep themselves so well hidden that few or none of us have managed to do so, leaving us to accept their existence on faith or tradition, or infer it by reasoning from their supposed effects or by other less reliable operations of the imagination.

Admittedly, it would be odd to consider a belief in the existence of a creature like Bigfoot to be a religious belief, and Hume seems to have supposed that, in addition, the invisible intelligence must be an object of what he variously referred to as “worship,” “veneration,” “devotion,” or “adoration.”¹⁷ Thus, when Philo protests that he is not an atheist at the outset of *Dialogues* XII, he does not simply protest that he believes in the existence of a divine being, but insists that he “pays ... profound adoration” to that being. And in the *Natural History*, Hume remarked that polytheists are “really a kind of superstitious atheists” both because “they acknowledge no being, that corresponds to our idea of a deity” (presumably, a single, intelligent creator) and because the gods they do recognize do not merit “any pious worship or veneration” (*Natural History*, IV: 44). The point here is normative: polytheists are religious because they worship invisible intelligent powers. But their religion is so defective as to be a kind of “superstitious atheism” both because they fail to recognize the right sort of invisible intelligent power and because the invisible intelligent powers they recognize are too weak, ignorant, and vicious to deserve their worship.

VI. ‘Genuine theism’ vs. polytheism and demonism

There is room for a great deal of variation beneath this lean account of what a religion is. Most famously, Hume noted that there is necessarily some inconsistency and some vacillation

¹⁵ See, in addition, Sections II–V, VIII, XIII, and XV, in all of which religion is identified with the belief in “invisible power.”

¹⁶ I take “almost” in this passage to mean, not that there are some religions that do not recognize the existence of invisible, intelligent power, but that not all people are religious. The minority who do not recognize invisible intelligent power entertain “no sentiments of Religion” (*Natural History*, Introduction: 33), but may nonetheless be party to theological disputations (on the negative side, of course).

¹⁷ See *Natural History*, IV–VI, IX, and XII–XIII, which contain Hume’s most extensive discussions of the connections between worship and religion.

in popular conceptions of the nature of invisible intelligent power. At one extreme, the deity might be conceived as an infinitely perfect spirit. But, “The feeble apprehensions of men cannot be satisfied with conceiving their deity as a pure spirit and perfect intelligence” (*Natural History*, VIII: 59) so they “unite the [186] invisible power with some visible object” (*Natural History*, V: 49; VIII: 58).¹⁸ At the same time “their natural terrors keep them from imputing to ... [this object] the least shadow of limitation and imperfection” (*Natural History*, VIII: 59) for fear of insulting it and incurring its wrath (*Natural History*, VII: 56), and inspire them to eventually invent and attribute the properties of “unity and infinity, simplicity and spirituality” to it (*Natural History*, VIII: 58). And, Hume concluded,

They fluctuate between these opposite sentiments. The same infirmity still drags them downwards, from an omnipotent and spiritual deity, to a limited and corporeal one, and from a corporeal and limited deity to a statue or visible representation. The same endeavour at elevation still pushes them upwards, from the statue or material image to the invisible power; and from the invisible power to an infinitely perfect deity, the creator and sovereign of the universe. [*Natural History*, VIII: 59]

Religions can accordingly be arranged along a spectrum, depending on how refined a conception of invisible intelligent power they put forward. At one end of the spectrum is the view of the deity as a single, immaterial, omnipotent creator (*Natural History*, VI: 52; VII: 56; VIII: 58). At the other end is the unification of the invisible power with a species of visible object, like astronomical bodies, animals or statues (*Natural History*, V: 49). Beliefs at the extremes threaten to become irreligious or absurdly religious. When the single, immaterial, omnipotent creator is thought to be so infinitely perfect as to defy all description, “it is well, if ... [we] run not into inexplicable mystery, and destroy the intelligent nature of ... [the] deity, on which alone any rational worship or adoration can be founded” (*Natural History*, VI: 53–54). But when the invisible intelligent power is identified with cats and monkeys, or leeks and onions (*Natural History*, XII: 68), it is not only no longer invisible or intelligent, but not empirically observed to possess any supernatural power. Between these two extremes are a range of views, such as the view of uneducated medieval Christians that [187] while there is one supreme immaterial being, this being chooses to exercise its powers through the interposition of various quasi-material subordinate beings (*Natural History*, IV: 44); the view of the Getes, who affirmed the existence of only one god, but considered this god to be so far from being infinitely wise or powerful that they supposed it needs to be sent messengers to be informed of human needs and can be intimidated by a show of force (*Natural History*, VII); or the view of the ancient polytheists, who considered there to be many gods, who did not create or design the universe, who have bodies like our own, and who are governed by base passions like wrath and lust (*Natural History*, III–IV).

Religions at the one end of this spectrum are monotheistic, while those at the other end will tend to be polytheistic. In the *Natural History* Hume occasionally used the epithet “genuine theism” when referring to the religions at the former extreme.

The difference, on the one hand, between ... [a person who believes “the popular stories of elves and fairies” but denies the existence of “one supreme God, the author of nature”] and a genuine theist is infinitely greater than that, on the other, between him and one that absolutely excludes all invisible intelligent power. [*Natural History*, IV: 44]

The Getes ... were genuine theists and unitarians. They affirmed Zamolxis, their deity, to be the only true god [*Natural History*, VII: 57]

In these passages “genuine theism” appears to mean “pure monotheism.” “Genuine theism”

¹⁸ The parallel between this dichotomy and that between the mysterian and anthropomorphic conceptions of the divinity championed by Demea (with Philo’s assistance) and Cleanthes over the course of the *Dialogues* is striking.

would accordingly be a form of religious belief that involves a commitment to the existence of just one, superior being.

But this is not all there is to Hume's concept of "genuine theism," the case of the Getes notwithstanding. I noted earlier that, for Hume, a religion is not just a belief in invisible intelligent power, but the worship, veneration, and adoration of such a power. Hume maintained that these religious attitudes have often (indeed commonly) been directed at unworthy objects.

[T]he gods of all polytheists are no better than the elves or fairies of our ancestors, and merit as little [188] any pious worship or veneration. [*Natural History*, IV: 44]

But consult this image [of invisible, intelligent power], as it appears in the popular religions of the world. How is the Deity disfigured in our representations of him! What caprice, absurdity, and immorality are attributed to him! How much is he degraded even below the character, which we should naturally, in common life, ascribe to a man of sense and virtue! [*Natural History*, XV: 86]

Hume sometimes suggested that "genuine theism" should not have this feature. It should not simply involve worship of an invisible intelligent power, but belief in an invisible intelligent power who is genuinely worthy of worship.

[T]he good, the great, the sublime, the ravishing are found eminently in the genuine principles of theism.... [*Natural History*, XV: 86]

The fullest articulation of this sense of "genuine theism" is offered by Cleanthes in *Dialogues* XII:

genuine theism ... represents us as the workmanship of a Being perfectly good, wise, and powerful; who created us for happiness, and who, having implanted in us immeasurable desires of good, will prolong our existence to all eternity, and will transfer us into an infinite variety of scenes, in order to satisfy those desires, and render our felicity complete and durable. [*Dialogues*, XII: 224]

According to this view, a genuine deity should not merely be a creator with infinite power and knowledge, but an infinitely good and benevolent being, who is actively concerned about us and intends our happiness, if not in this life then in an afterlife. In this normative sense, the opposite of "genuine theism" is not bare polytheism, but any view of the invisible intelligent power as either weak and ignorant, or demonic and positively malevolent, or impassive and indifferent to human suffering. Note that the Getes, whom Hume described as "genuine theists" (because unitarians), were nonetheless not genuine theists in the [189] normative sense because they failed to conceive of their deity as omniscient and omnipotent.

But were their religious principles any more refined, on account of these magnificent pretensions? Every fifth year they sacrificed a human victim, whom they sent as a messenger to their deity, in order to inform him of their wants and necessities. And when it thundered, they were so provoked, that, in order to return the defiance, they let fly arrows at him, and declined not the combat as unequal. [*Natural History*, VII: 57]

This is just one of numerous historical anecdotes of limited or demonic conceptions of the divine nature that fill the pages of the *Natural History*. But it is not just demonic conceptions of divinity that can fail to be genuinely theistic in the normative sense. If the "Epicurus" of Hume's essay on providence is right, then reasoning from the design in nature cannot carry us all the way to this sort of genuine theism, either. Even though it may lead us to the belief that the universe has a single, intelligent cause, and may inspire a degree of admiration of the cause's ingenuity and power, it cannot justify the further belief that this cause has any particular concern for humanity, and so cannot lead us to conceive of a creator who is worthy of worship, veneration, or adoration.

Philo seconds this claim in the *Dialogues*.

True religion, I allow, has no such pernicious consequences [for social stability and common morality]: But we must treat of religion, as it has commonly been found in the world; nor have I any thing to do with that speculative tenet of theism, which, as it is a species of philosophy, must partake of the beneficial influence of that principle ... [*Dialogues*, XII: 223]

Though Philo is out to make a different point (about the influence of various forms of religion on human behaviour), he suggests in passing that what he refers to as “that speculative tenet of theism, which ... is a species of philosophy” is not quite the same thing as either “religion, as it has commonly been found in the world” or “true religion.” Presumably, “speculative theism” is the belief in the existence of a single, intelligent creator established by observing how all events in nature are regular and governed [190] by a system of laws delicately adjusted so as to ensure the continuation of the world in its current form. But it is one thing to show that nature is regular and an apparent product of intelligent design, and another to show that the designer is particularly concerned with us and intends our happiness. Design can manifest itself in many forms. One design might seek to maximize human happiness and flourishing. Another might give human beings a less congenial role to play in preserving some other kind of order, as Hume suggested towards the end of the *Natural History*.

Even the contrarieties of nature, by discovering themselves every where, become proofs of some consistent plan, and establish one single purpose or intention, however inexplicable and incomprehensible.

Good and ill are universally intermingled and confounded; happiness and misery, wisdom and folly, virtue and vice. Nothing is pure and entirely of a piece. All advantages are attended with disadvantages. An universal compensation prevails in all conditions of being and existence. And it is not possible for us, by our most chimerical wishes, to form the idea of a station or situation altogether desirable. [*Natural History*, XV: 85]

A world in which the inviolable laws governing the succession of events produce a precise balance of good and evil that is persistently maintained over time is still a world that exhibits evidence of design by a single, intelligent creator. That creator is just not one who is particularly concerned with human happiness. To the extent that genuine theism or “true religion” involves a belief in a creator who is well disposed towards us and desires our happiness, speculative theism falls short of establishing a “true religion.”

We therefore need to be circumspect about Hume’s references to “genuine theism.” Sometimes he meant to refer to genuine or pure monotheism, and so intended a contrast with polytheism. At other times he meant to refer to the belief in a being who is not merely invisible, intelligent, and powerful, but also concerned for our happiness, and so intended a contrast, not only with polytheism, but with any religious system that represents the deity as either immoral or indifferent. In the first, descriptive [191] sense, “speculative theism” would count as a form of “genuine theism,” at least if we accept Hume’s argument over the opening paragraph of *Natural History II* for the reasonableness of monotheism. But in the second, normative sense, speculative theism is not genuinely theistic.

VII. True and false religion

In addition to denominating religions “genuinely theistic” or not, Hume occasionally described them as being either “true” or “false.”

[1.] *That the corruption of the best things produces the worst*, is grown into a maxim, and is commonly proved, among other instances, by the pernicious effects of *superstition* and *enthusiasm*, the

corruptions of true religion. ["Of Superstition and Enthusiasm" *Essays I*: 73]¹⁹

[2.] One considerable advantage that arises from Philosophy, consists in the sovereign antidote which it affords to superstition and false religion. ["Of Suicide" *Essays I*: 577]

[3.] Shall we assert, that, in more ancient times, before the knowledge of letters, or the discovery of any art or science, men entertained the principles of pure theism? That is, while they were ignorant and barbarous, they discovered truth: But fell into error, as soon as they acquired learning and politeness. [*Natural History*, I: 34]

[4.] While they confine themselves to the notion of a perfect being, the creator of the world, they coincide, by chance, with the principles of reason and true philosophy [*Natural History*, VI: 54]

[5.] [Cleanthes:] And surely, nothing can afford a stronger presumption, that any set of principles [192] are true, and ought to be embraced, than to observe, that they tend to the confirmation of true religion [*Dialogues*, I: 140]

[6.] [Philo:] But in proportion to my veneration for true religion, is my abhorrence of vulgar superstitions. [*Dialogues*, XII: 219]

[7.] [Philo:] True religion, I allow, has no such pernicious consequences: But we must treat of religion, as it has commonly been found in the world; nor have I any thing to do with that speculative tenet of theism ... [*Dialogues*, XII: 223]

[8.] [Cleanthes:] Allow not your zeal against false religion to undermine your veneration for the true. [*Dialogues*, XII: 224]

Precisely what Hume meant by "true" and "false" in these passages is a subtle matter. As I have already suggested, one thing he might have meant by "true religion" is "religion that is truly or genuinely theistic" in the normative sense of involving a belief in an invisible intelligent being who is concerned for our happiness. A false religion, in contrast, would be a religion that mandates worship of a being who, even if ceremonially praised, is represented as cruel, vindictive, capricious or indifferent.²⁰

But in another sense the expression "true religion" could refer to a set of religious beliefs that are in fact true, while "false religion" could refer to a set of religious beliefs that are in fact false. Understood in this sense, there is no necessary connection between genuine theism and true religion, or between ingenuine theism and false religion. If the universe did not have an intelligent creator or designer, but did contain a species of invisible intelligent beings who were disposed to punish human beings for the violation of taboos, then genuine theism would be false and polytheism would be true.

As a matter of fact, Hume thought that the belief in invisible, intelligent powers who intervene in the course of nature to reward or punish human beings for their actions is, as a matter of [193] fact, false. And he thought that natural philosophy or reasoning proves this by showing that all natural events, even the most apparently random and unfortunate, are actually entirely regular in their occurrence.²¹ In passages where he was concerned to make just this point (such as 2–4 on the list above) his references to "true" and especially "false" religion need to be read accordingly. But in other passages (such as 7) Hume intended to draw a contrast

¹⁹ References to works in volume I of Hume's *Essays and Treatises on Several Subjects* are to the pagination of Hume, *Essays Moral Political and Literary*, ed. Eugene F. Miller (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1985).

²⁰ This view of what Hume may have had in mind by "true" religion is carefully examined by John Immerwahr, "Hume's Atheistic Theism," *Hume Studies* 22 (1996): 325–37.

²¹ "[S]uperstition, being founded on false opinion, must immediately vanish, when true philosophy has inspired juster sentiments of superior powers." "Of Suicide" *Essays I*: 577 and 579. See also *Natural History*, I: 34–35; II: 37; III: 40–41; VI: 52–53; XI: 65.

between religions that conceive of invisible, intelligent power as particularly concerned with human happiness, and those that involve more primitive, absurd, corrupt, demonic or impassive conceptions of that power. “True philosophy” might still prove that some of the latter forms of religion are false. But this is not to say that it manages to prove the more inflated conceptions of a benevolent provider to be true. So “true religion,” understood as belief in a particularly provident deity, may not turn out to be factually true.

VIII. Rational and irrational religion

There is a third distinction between types of religion that needs to be mentioned. Hume thought that some beliefs about invisible intelligent power can be based on reason, where “reason” is taken broadly to include what is discovered through sensory experience and what can be inferred from what is sensed by reasoning from effect to cause or cause to effect (*Natural History*, VI: 52). In particular, the belief that Philo describes as “speculative theism,” namely, the tenet that the world had a single, intelligent author, has its ground in reasoning from the evidence of design in nature. The alternative to this rational belief is beliefs that are not justified by reason, but accepted on the basis of some other impulse capable of producing conviction.

A common name for conviction that is not justified by reason is faith, and Hume employed that term in this sense and recognized faith as an alternative to rational religion (*Human Understanding*, 10.40–41). But he also went further, and recognized that faith can have causes. One such cause might be a gracious gift of inspiration from an unseen being, one that is miraculously able to subvert the normal operations of our cognitive powers and induce a belief in the absence of all evidence. Hume acknowledged this possibility at the close of the [194] essay on miracles (*Human Understanding*, 10.41). But he was also interested in two other causes, which he considered to be the most common (though not the most legitimate) sources of faith: the opposed passion sets of pride and hope, on the one hand, and fear and humility, on the other. (See especially *Natural History*, II–III: 38–43 and “Superstition and enthusiasm” in *Essays I*: 73–74.) In Hume’s view these passions not only produce faith, but shape it, giving it two characteristic forms. Pride and hope induce a form of religious belief that Hume, adopting a usage that was common at the time, referred to as enthusiasm. Fear and humility (or a sense of weakness) produce an alternative form of religion that Hume called superstition. Enthusiasm fosters a conception of a divinity who arbitrarily selects some for favours withheld from equally deserving (or equally undeserving) others.²² Superstition fosters a conception of a divinity who is wrathful and vengeful (*Natural History*, XIII). Neither form of religion disposes us to believe that the deity is very good or benevolent. Therefore, neither form of religion is genuinely theistic. But rational religion is not very different in this regard. While it may not foster a conception of a deity who is positively capricious or malevolent, it fails to establish a belief in a deity who is particularly provident. The intelligent power of speculative theism is impassive and indifferent to human suffering.

Hume maintained that the belief in a perfectly benevolent deity arises from a marriage of reason and superstition. Superstitious peoples suppose their deities to be “pleased, like themselves, with praise and flattery.” This leads them to attempt to outdo one another in “swelling up the titles of ... [the] divinity” with “newer and more pompous epithets.... till at last they arrive at infinity itself, beyond which there is no farther progress” (*Natural History*, VI: 53). And when these “magnificent ideas” are once invented, they “esteem it dangerous to refuse their assent” (*Natural History*, VII: 58). But, importantly, this assent is merely verbal. While they have no trouble accepting that the deity is all-seeing and infinitely powerful, they cannot bring

²² “The contradiction is still perhaps stronger between the representations given us by some later religions and our natural ideas of generosity, lenity, impartiality, and justice” (*Natural History*, XIII: 79).

themselves to actually believe that it is perfectly good and benevolent. Instead, they persist in thinking it is capricious, wrathful, vengeful, and malevolent (*Natural History*, XIII: 77–78). It takes reason to overcome this tendency. When investigating the natural causes of events philosophers find no evidence for the belief in beings who [195] intervene in the course of nature to punish humans for their actions. But they do find it plausible to speculate that the universe might have had a single, intelligent creator, albeit one that is not particularly interested in human affairs. The superstitious and rational paths of thought intersect. Superstition generates the absurd belief in an infinitely perfect but capricious and vindictive governing spirit. Reason rejects the view that there is a capricious and vindictive governing spirit, but finds evidence for the existence of some sort of superior intelligence. Adding what is not contradicted by reason (the belief in an infinitely perfect being), to what is indicated by it (the belief in an intelligent creator) produces the belief in an infinitely perfect and hence provident and benevolent creator. While this corrected belief is not established by the evidence, it is consistent with it, and at least verbally in accord with the dominant superstition.²³ This makes it attractive, and it is tempting for philosophers to attempt to support it by reconciling the conception of a perfectly provident divinity with the imperfect evidence that this world [196] provides for its existence by inventing such notions as that of an afterlife or a hidden plan — in much the way that they invent the theory of double existence in order to reconcile a belief in the existence of an external world with the discovery that experience does not lead us to know any more than our own impressions.²⁴ The invention, however, outstrips anything that can be supported by the evidence and owes its existence to popular religious traditions, grounded in the superstitious impulse to inflate the attributes of the creator. Without that accretion, however, rational religion is no closer to genuine theism than superstition and enthusiasm.

IX. Conclusions

I have argued that Hume considered a religion to involve both a belief in the existence of invisible, intelligent power and a disposition to worship that power. But he also thought that the sort of invisible intelligent power that most religious people believe in is not one that deserves to be worshipped. Most religious belief is therefore not “genuinely theistic” and most religions are

²³ The difference between the two conceptions of divinity is nonetheless ‘infinitely great’ as Hume was at pains to stress at *Natural History*, IV: 44. This is the most serious problem with P.J.E. Kail’s recent attempt to argue for an inflated account of Hume’s purposes in the *Natural history* (“Understanding Hume’s *Natural History of Religion*,” *Philosophical Quarterly* 57 [2007]: 190–211). Kail takes the notion of invisible intelligent power to be the core content of all religious belief and takes Hume to have attempted to “destabilize” all religious belief by showing that this core notion was originally created by illegitimate causes (195–96, 202, 205–208). But despite the fact that superstitious belief and genuine theism *intersect* over this core, Hume took the difference between the two to be “infinitely great” so that no account that treats them as of the same species can count as Humean. The one is the belief in an invisible (because hidden), finitely powerful, corporeal, possibly multiple, malevolent judge or judges of human action who possesses an intelligence something like our own. The other is the belief in an invisible (because spiritual), infinitely powerful and benevolent creator of the universe whose intelligence is so far beyond our own as to be incomparable to it. The one is caused by passion and ignorance and then inflated by further illegitimate causes in the direction of the other. The other is caused by an appreciation of the extent of the design in nature and borrows such content from the former as is broadly consistent with that evidence, while rejecting what is inconsistent with it. And as a matter of fact, the two beliefs are contrary in so many ways that there is much more that is rejected than is kept. The latter belief is not so easily destabilized, particularly if it, rather than superstition, supplies some lean, “attenuated” conceptual content that we bring to mystical and revelatory experiences, and these experiences can be taken to underwrite the more speculative additions to the concept. And as the latter belief has not been, according to Hume, at all popular, there is no “argument from common consent” supporting it that stands in need of refutation, even a bad one. Compare Livingston, “Hume’s Conception,” 42–44, who is more sensitive to the depths of the difference between what he describes as “true” and “false” religion.

²⁴ For a further investigation of the analogy between the belief in a provident deity and the theory of double existence see P.J.E. Kail, “Hume’s Natural History of Perception,” *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 13 (2005): 503–519.

“false” because they involve a commitment to a “corrupt” rather than a “true” conception of invisible, intelligent power. Some forms of religious belief are also literally false. They involve a belief in the natural efficacy of invisible intelligent powers that are not in fact operative in nature.

For Hume, genuine theism involves a commitment to the perfect benevolence as well as the perfect intelligence and power of a creator of the universe. He was willing to allow that a consideration of the design in nature can give us some reason to infer that the universe was created by a power with some sort of intelligence. It might also lead us to admire this being for its genius and abilities. And, insofar as whatever is admirable elicits love and esteem, it might even bring us so far as to feel the “profound adoration” Philo claimed to pay to “the divine Being, as he discovers himself to reason.” However, nature has not been so well designed to promote human happiness that we can safely infer that this being has any particular interest in us or concern for our suffering. Accordingly, natural philosophy is at best consistent with genuine theism. It cannot, however, go all the way to justify such a belief. Indeed, even natural instinct, insofar as that instinct is grounded in the habit to form vivacious ideas of [197] causes that are analogous and proportioned to those causes that have been observed to regularly precede roughly analogous effects in the past, cannot go all the way to induce such a belief.²⁵ Barring a miraculous dispensation of grace, it is only so far as that causal instinct is supplemented by those instincts responsible for superstition and enthusiasm, and natural speculation is wedded to antecedent religious beliefs of one or other of those forms, that the belief in a perfect, and particularly in a perfectly benevolent deity can take hold. To the extent that natural philosophy makes us aware of numerous instances in which the design in nature tends not to promote, or only imperfectly promote, animal or human happiness, it raises problems for the belief and “mitigates” it, returning it to its leaner form, a form that is not genuinely theistic. A study of the extent to which nature has been well designed (even if not particularly well designed for purposes of human thriving) might still induce the religious sentiments of “adoration” that Philo alluded to at the outset of *Dialogues* XII, but such adoration would be merely aesthetic rather than practical in nature.²⁶ While we might feel awed by the genius and power of the creator, we could not feel gratitude to a being who has not been particularly disposed to benefit us, and acts of service done for a being who is indifferent to what we do and unaffected by it would be absurd.

Despite an initial appearance of conflict, the first *Enquiry* and the *Natural History of Religion* agree with this underlying position. In the first *Enquiry*, Epicurus declares:

[The religious philosophers] paint, in the most magnificent colours, the order, beauty, and wise arrangement of the universe; and then ask, if such a glorious display of intelligence could proceed from the fortuitous concurrence of atoms, or if chance could produce what the greatest genius can never sufficiently admire. I shall not examine the justness of this argument. I shall allow it to be [198] as solid as my antagonists and accusers can desire. [*Human Understanding*, 11.10]

What “Epicurus,” and then Hume’s “friend” (responding to Hume’s objection concerning the unfinished building), question is just whether the argument can allow us to infer that the cause was particularly concerned to provide for us, either in this life or in an afterlife, and consequently, whether the argument is able to establish any genuine form of theism independently of recourse to superstitious traditions or personal revelation.

The Hume of the *Natural History* agrees. The introduction to the *Natural History* contains the remark that “The whole frame of nature bespeaks an intelligent author.” (Introduction: 33)

²⁵ While a good case can be made that this sentence only repeats what was said in the previous one, the contrast is required to make the following point about the relation between Hume’s mitigated scepticism and the theses of this paper. A fuller treatment of this topic is both important and, regrettably, more than I can take on here.

²⁶ Compare Immerwahr, “Hume’s Atheistic Theism,” 321–31. Unlike Immerwahr, I consider the aesthetic passion to be a correlative effect of the evidence that also produces the belief, not a motive for the belief. Immerwahr is nonetheless correct to point to the motivating role of passions in superstitious and enthusiastic belief.

But an intelligent author is not necessarily a benevolent author. The author could be malevolent or, more likely, simply indifferent to human actions or human suffering, except insofar as it plays a role in the larger economy of the world system (cf. *Dialogues*, XI: 212). Hume added that “no rational enquirer can, after serious reflection, suspend his belief a moment with regard to the primary principles of genuine Theism and Religion” (*Natural History*, Introduction: 33). But this raises the question of which of the principles of genuine theism are the “primary” ones. A primary principle might be an essential principle, without which theism is not genuine. But it might simply be a first principle — one that is more readily established or more evident than other equally essential principles. In this second sense, a rational enquirer might accept the “primary” principle that there is an intelligent author without going on to accept that the author is perfectly benevolent.²⁷

The same might be said of Hume’s other endorsements of the design argument in the *Natural History of Religion*. The *Natural History* contains many references to an intelligent designer of [199] nature, but only describes this designer as perfect on two occasions (*Natural History*, II: 35 and III: 41), and on both of these occasions the point is that barbarous peoples, who are “ignorant of astronomy and the anatomy of plants and animals, and too little curious to observe the admirable adjustment of final causes” would have initially been in no position to form such a magnificent idea. Hume did not go so far as to say that the idea of the perfection of the designer *is* suggested by the study of astronomy, anatomy or the extent of the design in nature.

On the contrary, *Natural History* VI contains the remark that “the immediate operation of providence” in “the sudden and unexpected death of such a one: The fall and bruise of such another: The excessive drought of this season: The cold and rains of another” constitute “such events, as, with good reasoners, are the chief difficulties in admitting a supreme intelligence” (52). This passing hint is amplified in a passage cited above (**2 paras. Before sect VII begins**) from the concluding section of the *Natural History*. There Hume takes off from the casual remark that “[e]ven the contrarieties of nature, by discovering themselves every where, become proofs of some consistent plan, and establish one single purpose or intention, however inexplicable and incomprehensible” (XV: 85), to insinuate that such order as there is to be found in nature has more to do with how a balance of goods and evils is sustained over time than with how goods have been maximized.

Good and ill are universally intermingled and confounded; happiness and misery, wisdom and folly, virtue and vice. Nothing is pure and entirely of a piece. All advantages are attended with disadvantages. An universal compensation prevails in all conditions of being and existence. And it is not possible for us, by our most chimerical wishes, to form the idea of a station or situation altogether desirable. [*Natural History*, XV: 85]

After going on for almost two pages in this vein, Hume concluded:

The whole is a riddle, an ænigma, an inexplicable mystery. Doubt, uncertainty, suspence of judgment appear the only result of our most accurate scrutiny, concerning this subject. [*Natural History*, XV: 87]

²⁷ A different case for the sincerity of Hume’s remark has been made by M. Jamie Ferreira, “Hume’s ‘Mitigated Scepticism’: Some Implications for Religious Belief,” in *Religion and Hume’s Legacy*, ed. D.Z. Phillips and Timothy Tessin (Houndsmills: Macmillan, 1999), 52. In “Hume’s Project,” 13–14, I overlooked Hume’s insertion of the term “primary” when making my case for the insincerity of Hume’s endorsements of the design argument in the *Natural History*. Had Hume written that “no rational enquirer can, after serious reflection, suspend his belief a moment with regard to the [...] principles of genuine Theism and Religion”, the remark would have to be added to the list of those that are insincere. In making this observation I do not mean to disagree with my principal claim in “Hume’s Project” that Hume’s purpose in the *Natural History* was just to show that popular religious beliefs are and always have been “superstitious” in nature.

[200] The “Epicurus” of the essay on providence had attributed the same result to accurate scrutiny.

The religious philosophers ... indulge a rash curiosity, in trying how far they can establish religion upon the principles of reason; and they thereby excite, instead of satisfying, the doubts, which naturally arise from a diligent and scrupulous enquiry. [*Human Understanding*, 11.10]

On a closer analysis, therefore, the first *Enquiry* and the *Natural History* would appear to be in broad agreement on the topic of religion. Both concede, for the purposes of argument, that the design argument can lead rational people to speculate that the universe had a single, intelligent cause. But both suggest that this is not sufficient for genuine theism.

To sum up, I have suggested that Hume meant to offer a consistent critique of religious belief throughout the works contained in Volume II of *Essays and Treatises on Several Subjects*. That critique does not involve an attack on the design argument, considered as an argument for the existence of an intelligent creator. Hume was willing to grant that argument, though he did at one point (*Human Understanding*, 11.30) allow himself (in his own voice) to “raise a difficulty” with that argument “without insisting on it; lest it lead into reasonings of too nice and delicate a nature.” His preference was instead to defend the tenet that, even were the design argument granted, it would not allow us to infer the existence of the sort of being who would be truly worthy of worship — one that we could suppose to be good and benevolent. The only possible basis for religious belief, he repeatedly declared, is not reason but faith — faith based either on superstitious humility and terror, enthusiastic hope and pride, or a miraculous gift of inspiration that, oddly for a being who is supposedly perfectly benevolent, is only given to some while being withheld from others. And thus, for Hume, true religion ends up without any real foundation either in reason or faith — though false religion, unfortunately, ends up with all too strong a foundation in faith. This is what Volume II of *Essays and Treatises on Several Subjects* has to teach us about religious belief. It is a lesson that may not be as clear or complete as it might be, but that is consistently articulated by all the works constitutive of the volume.[201]

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank an anonymous referee for *Eighteenth-Century Thought* for raising a number of astute objections and making a larger number of suggestions for improvement. The referee’s contributions have greatly enhanced this work. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the 34th Hume Conference, Boston, August 7–10, 2007. I am further indebted to those who were present at that meeting and offered their comments. Special thanks to Martin Bell for his reflections on what was said on that occasion.