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DAVID HUME'S CRITIQUE OF RELIGION AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR CONTEMPORARY THEOLOGY

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO

THE FACULTY OF THE DIVINITY SCHOOL

IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

BY

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INTRODUCTION

The primary purpose of this dissertation is to present a new reading of David Hume's two fundamental writings on religion, the *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*[1] and *The Natural History of Religion*.[2] Its secondary aim is to consider some important features of Hume's thought on religion that have been neglected or underemphasized in previous treatments, and to develop some of the implications of Hume's thought for contemporary discussions concerning the nature and justification of religion.

Overall, the project is designed to make three general points about Hume's philosophy of religion.

The first of these concerns the *form* of Hume's critique of religion. I take the position that Hume's critique is best understood as a type of unmasking project similar in important respects to those critiques which employ what Paul Ricoeur has referred to as a "hermeneutics of suspicion."[3] This view entails the

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[1] There are three editions of Hume's *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* presently available in English, each of which contains an important commentary by the editor: Norman Kemp Smith (1947); Nelson Pike (1970); and Stanley Tweyman (1991). For full bibliographical information, see the bibliography. Hereafter, this work will be referred to simply as "*Dialogues*," followed by a Roman numeral designating the part of that work, and an Arabic numeral designating the paragraph within the part.

[2] David Hume, *The Natural History of Religion*, ed. H. E. Root (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1956. Hereafter, this work will be referred to simply as the "*Natural History*," followed by the page number.

[3] See, for instance, Paul Ricoeur, "Religion, Atheism, and Faith," in *The Religious Significance of Atheism* (New York and London: Columbia University Press, 1969).

thesis that Hume's critique is not, as commonly assumed, based solely on his rejection of theistic arguments, but rests in important part on his understanding of the psychological origins and practical consequences of religion.

The second point I will develop concerns the *scope* of Hume's assessment of religion. Do Hume's writings counsel a total rejection of religion or instead allow that some expression of religion is commendable? I will seek to reinforce the view, held by one group of interpreters, that Hume's writings counsel a *total* rejection of theism, at least as this term is broadly defined.

The third point I will seek to establish in this dissertation concerns the *implications* of Hume's writings on religion for contemporary theology. I argue that Hume's critique of natural theology and his naturalistic explanation of religion form the basis for a plausible challenge to various types of theological enterprises that seek to provide a philosophical foundation for theism.

Having briefly laid out these three theses, let me elaborate on each of them and explain my strategy for developing them in the dissertation.

A. *The Form of Hume's Critique of Religion*

Much of the previous commentary on Hume's philosophy of religion has focused on his critical treatment of theistic arguments, and particularly on his analysis of the argument from design as it appears in the *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*. Although some recent commentary has shifted away from these

emphases, the longstanding preoccupation with Hume's philosophical attacks on natural theology has fostered the view that Hume's critique of religion consists for the most part in what contemporary philosophers have referred to as the "evidentialist" challenge to religion. According to this view, Hume's critique can for the most part be captured in the propositions that there is insufficient evidence to establish the probability of God's existence, and therefore, persons should not hold such belief.

The view advanced in this dissertation is that Hume's rejection of theism was not predicated solely or even primarily upon his rejection of theistic arguments, but depended as much or more upon his theory of how religious beliefs are formed and sustained, and how they might affect the psychological constitution and moral character of individual believers. The combination of skepticism and naturalism, which is characteristic of Hume's philosophical method in general, together with Hume's concern for the interaction between universal human tendencies on the one hand, and habits and beliefs acquired by convention on the other, led him in the subject of religion to develop two suspicions. The first is that believers are mistaken as to the true sources and consequences of religious belief. The second is that theologians and religious philosophers are mistaken as to the role of reason in their efforts to theorize about

God and religion. I will refer to these aspects of Hume's critique as "Hume's suspicion of religion" and "Hume's suspicion of theology" respectively.

In advancing this view of Hume's work, I am suggesting that Hume's critique of religion is in many respects a precursor to the type of critique commonly associated with Marx, Nietzsche and Freud. The aim of these nineteenth century critics was not so much to demonstrate the lack of a rational basis for religious belief as to explain it away as the product or symptom of underlying and unacknowledged social and psychological conditions. This same general approach to the subject of religion is reflected in much of Hume's writings on religion, most obviously in the *Natural History of Religion*, though I will also show how Hume extends this strategy very skillfully in the *Dialogues* to the subject of philosophical theology.

B. *The Scope of Hume's Assessment of Religion*

The second thesis I seek to defend in this dissertation concerns the scope of the critique of religion that David Hume's writings embody. Viewed as a whole, Hume's writings on religion express an uncompromisingly critical posture toward traditional forms of theism including orthodox Christianity. However, there are numerous difficulties in interpreting these works, their relation to one another, and their relation to other aspects of Hume's philosophy, which leave the nature and scope of Hume's critique of religion ambiguous. Do Hume's writings

on religion allow that some form of religion is justifiable, or by some standard commendable? If so, what is the content of this religion, and on what grounds is it supportable?

In this dissertation, I seek to provide additional support for the view that Hume's major works on religion—the *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* and *The Natural History of Religion*—form an argument for the rejection of any form of theism. This thesis requires two further points of explanation. First, this is not a claim about Hume's intentions. Though I would ascribe such a view to Hume himself (for I believe that it was his intent to subtly discredit even what during his time were the most liberal expressions of theism), my claim is somewhat different. I will argue that, regardless of Hume's actual intentions (which are better determined from biographical and other extra-textual evidence), the critique embodied in his writings on religion urges a rejection of any belief in a reality which is in any way distinguishable from the natural world. When I use the term "Hume's Critique of Religion," I shall be referring to the view of religion manifested in Hume's writings on the subject, regardless of whether or not Hume personally held such a view.

The second point is that my thesis is explicitly concerned with the relation of Hume's critique to Western notions of religious belief. It might be more appropriate to say that my dissertation addresses Hume's critique of *theism*,

provided that it be understood that in this context the term "theism" is not being used in the narrow classical sense but in a broad sense to mean the belief in some being, power, dimension, or ontological principle either external to or immanent in the world, upon which all of the world and human experience ultimately depend. While it would be interesting and profitable to assess the implications of Hume's critique for non-Western religious beliefs and practices, this is beyond the scope of my project.

C. *The Implications of Hume's Critique for Contemporary Theology*

The third general point I seek to establish in this dissertation concerns the implications of Hume's critique of religion for contemporary philosophical theology. I attempt to show how the central features of Hume's critique pose issues that have been perennial problems for contemporary philosophical theology. One issue, in particular, will receive special attention. Hume's critique of natural theology as it is developed in the *Dialogues* demonstrates a critical problem for liberal theologies, namely, that efforts to make religious belief respectable by secular intellectual standards have a tendency to result in conceptions of God which are devoid of any distinctively religious content. This tendency suggests that liberal theology, by virtue of its apologetic posture, is plagued with a type of self-defeating logic. The more plausible a theology becomes by secular philosophical standards, the less relation that theology bears

to any religious tradition and the less distinguishable it is from philosophy or social theory. In his *Dialogues*, Hume artfully illustrates this self-defeating logic through the conversations and disputations of Philo and Cleanthes. As such, Hume gives us a paradigmatic case of the reduction of theological concepts to non-theological ones, and leaves us to ponder the value of retaining a religious hypothesis. It is in this sense that Hume's work will forever serve as a perpetual challenge to the ambitions of Western philosophical theology.

The outline of the dissertation is as follows. I begin, in chapter one, with an overview of Hume's writings on religion and the problems of interpretation that they pose. In chapters two and three, I present my readings of Hume's two major works on religion, the *Natural History* and the *Dialogues*. While the emphasis of the *Natural History* is on the *origins* of religious belief in the passions and sentiment, the emphasis of the *Dialogues* is on religious belief itself (in particular, the argument from design). My reading of the *Dialogues*, which is the heart of the dissertation, attempts to show, through an analysis of the literary and rhetorical dimensions of the text, that Hume's ostensible concerns with the arguments for the existence of God tends to conceal his more profound concerns with the origin and source of religious belief, which only become manifest in Part XII of the text. In chapter four, finally, I offer some reflections of the relevance of Hume's critique of religion for contemporary thought.

CHAPTER ONE

HUME'S WRITINGS ON RELIGION AND PROBLEMS OF INTERPRETATION

A. *Hume's Writings on Religion*

Hume published four major works on the subject of religion.[1] The earliest of these is the essay, "Of Miracles." Written in the years 1735-37, and first published in 1748 as Section X of *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, this essay represents an attack on the notion of revealed religion by attempting to discredit the use of miracle stories as a foundation for religious beliefs.[2] In barest outline, Hume's argument is that a miracle (which he defines as a violation of a law of nature) must always be less credible than the natural law it violates, since no testimony of such an event could possibly serve as evidence strong enough to outweigh the evidence we have in support of natural laws. The

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[1] Hume also published a number of minor texts on the subject of religion, which we will only consider in passing in the course of this dissertation. The essays "Of Suicide" and "Of the Immortality of the Soul" address subjects pertaining to specific religious teachings and doctrines, while "Of Superstition and Enthusiasm" discusses the relation of religion to personality. Hume's essays have been collected in the volume *Essays: Moral, Political, and Literary*, 2 vols., ed. T. H. Green and T. H. Grose (London: Longmans & Green, 1875). The *Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978) contains an important section entitled "Of the Immateriality of the Soul." Hume's views on religious institutions—which are invariably negative—are scattered throughout his eight-volume *History of England* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1985).

[2] David Hume, "Of Miracles," in *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Charles W. Hendel (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1955), pp. 117-141. Hereafter referred to as "On Miracles."

central point Hume makes here concerns the relative unreliability of personal testimony. We often experience testimony which is false or inaccurate, but our experience of nature reveals an infallible regularity. Accordingly, it is more probable that human testimony of miracles is flawed than that a natural law has been transgressed. Hume's primary aim in this essay is to show that there is insufficient historical evidence to establish the occurrence of miracles, and that therefore such events could not legitimately serve as a means of grounding or supporting religious doctrines.

As a complement to his critical treatment of revealed religion, Hume published, as Section XI of the *Enquiry*, "Of a Particular Providence and of a Future State," an essay addressing natural theology and focusing on the so-called argument from design.[3] In its simplest form, the argument from design is a causal argument which seeks to show that a Designer can be inferred from our observations of the regularity and order of the operations of nature. Through a hypothetical exchange between Epicurus and his religious critics, Hume seeks to undercut this type of argument using two principles. First, whenever we argue from an effect to a cause, we are never allowed to posit more about the cause than is necessary to produce or account for the effect. By this principle, the design

[3] David Hume, "Of a Particular Providence and of a Future State," in *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Charles W. Hendel (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1955), pp. 142-157. Hereafter referred to as "Of a Particular Providence."

argument can establish at most that there must be some cause or causes of the world sufficient to explain the regularity and order we perceive in the workings of nature. It cannot, as its proponents have claimed, establish the existence of anything like the classical notion of a perfect God, since none of the divine attributes are necessary to account for our observations of natural order.

The second principle Hume introduces more radically undercuts the argument. According to Hume, we can never legitimately infer a cause from an effect except in cases where we have in the past observed a constant conjunction between two such events, or two sufficiently analogous events. In other words, if the effect we seek to explain is not of a particular class of events which we have previously observed to be in connection with a certain class of causes, we cannot legitimately infer a cause from our observation of the event. Under this principle the design argument is not only severely restricted in what it can legitimately establish; it is completely invalid because it seeks to establish a cause and effect relation between some agent and the universe without prior experience of these or sufficiently similar events ever being conjoined. Hume develops the implications of each of these lines of argument more fully in the *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*.

Published posthumously in 1779, the *Dialogues* represents Hume's most mature thinking on the subject of religion. The effort he expended over a period

of twenty-five years in writing and revising it, as well as his concern to assure its publication after his death, suggests that he viewed this work as a particularly important expression of his philosophical views and literary abilities. Composed in the form of a conversation between three friends (Cleanthes, Philo, and Demea), as reported by a young student (Pamphilus), the *Dialogues* comprises a sequence of conversations concerning the nature and existence of God, the most significant of which concern the validity of the Argument from Design—an argument that played a key role in the empirical tradition of eighteenth-century natural theology. In the conversations, Cleanthes defends the claims associated with this tradition against the "careless skeptic," Philo, who develops a series of objections to the design argument similar to those Hume introduces in his previous essay, "Of a Particular Providence." Demea voices an orthodox Christian position using rationalist arguments of the sort that neither Hume nor the empirical theologians of his time considered philosophically respectable.

Hume's other major work on religion, *The Natural History of Religion*, is principally an inquiry into the psychological origins of religion which features a discussion of the relation between religion and morality. Defining religion as the belief in an invisible intelligent power, Hume contends that polytheism historically preceded monotheism and that the development of both is the natural outgrowth of tendencies in human nature which are activated largely by fear of the

unknown causes of natural events. In the *Natural History*, Hume focuses on the origins of religion and on the consequences of religious belief for character and conduct. As I will argue in this paper, the *Natural History* contains what approaches a functionalist account of religion similar in its formal aspects to nineteenth- and twentieth-century social science accounts.

B. *Problems of Interpretation*

1. *Ambiguity in the Dialogues*

There is widespread disagreement over whether Hume's writings are critical of all forms of religious expression or whether they allow for some positive assessment of religion. There are two general areas of controversy. The first concerns the position on natural theology expressed in the *Dialogues*. The problem is this: In his earliest essay on the subject of religion, "Of a Particular Providence," Hume seeks to show through a hypothetical exchange between Epicurus and his religious critics that the argument from design—an argument which attempts to show that a Designer can be inferred as the cause of order we observe in nature—does not succeed. Hume concludes there that such an argument can establish, at most, that there may be some cause of order or design in the universe, and that this bare hypothesis lacks any content which could support the notion of an all powerful deity or have any consequences for human conduct. In the *Dialogues*, Hume places similar arguments in the mouth of Philo,

an avowed skeptic, who throughout the first eleven parts of the twelve-part work seems to succeed in deceptively undermining both the *a priori* proofs of Demea and the argument from design formulated by his friend Cleanthes. However, in Part XII, Philo goes on to deliver a series of puzzling speeches in which he appears to reverse his position to concede some degree of legitimacy to the argument from design either as a foundation for or expression of what he calls "true" or "rational" religion. The picture becomes further complicated by the fact that Hume ends the work with the narrator, Pamphilus, adjudging his teacher, Cleanthes, the winner.

What then is Hume's position? Are we to accept the narrator's verdict as Hume's view, interpret Philo's "unfeigned sentiments" as a sincere profession, and read from this Hume's endorsement of some modified deistic view which Cleanthes and Philo might seem to agree on? Or instead should Philo's final speeches be interpreted as carefully worded attempts to place a truly agnostic conclusion in the guise of a religious profession; and the narrator's verdict interpreted as a clever subterfuge?

These and related questions have been debated extensively in the literature on Hume. Until Norman Kemp Smith's commentary on the *Dialogues* first

appeared in 1935,[4] the prevailing view among philosophers was that Philo's final speeches should be read as a sincere concession to Cleanthes, and that Hume intended his audience to accept the narrator's verdict in favor of Cleanthes as representing Hume's own view. Kemp Smith changed the tide of opinion with a persuasive argument for the view that Philo maintains a consistent and wholly negative position toward the argument from design and that "Philo from start to finish represents Hume." Subsequent commentary has been divided. Some, such as Richard Wollheim, have followed Kemp Smith's view.[5] Others, such as Nelson Pike, have argued that no one character represents Hume but that his position can be found in points of convergence in Philo's and Cleanthes' views—a position which suggests that Hume was willing to ascribe some validity to at least one version of the argument from design.[6] Still other commentators, such as R. J. Butler, have argued that Philo and Cleanthes, while disagreeing on the soundness of the design

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[4] Norman Kemp Smith, "Introduction," in David Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, ed. Norman Kemp Smith (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1947), pp. 1-123.

[5] Richard Wollheim, "Introduction," in David Hume, *Hume on Religion*, ed. Richard Wollheim (Cleveland: World Publishing Co., 1964). See also Ernst Mossner, "Hume and the Legacy of the Dialogues," in *David Hume: Bicentenary Papers*, ed. G. P. Morice (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1977), pp. 1-22.

[6] Nelson Pike, "Hume on the Argument from Design," in David Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, ed. Nelson Pike (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1970), pp. 125-238.

argument for God's existence, nevertheless agree that the idea of a Designer is natural and unavoidable.[7]

The view that I develop in chapter three of this dissertation is that Philo successfully carries out a deceptive ploy, that his final speeches are to be regarded as ironic, and that the narrator's assessment is to be held suspect by virtue of his fledgling status and possible prejudice in favor of his teacher. I argue that Philo is Hume's champion, and that the position he advances is consistent with Hume's previous position—that the argument from design can establish no notion of God which is, in any significant way, distinguishable from the effects it is meant to explain.

2. *Uncertain Implications of Hume's Skepticism and Naturalism*

If it turns out, as I will argue, that the position on natural theology expressed in the *Dialogues* is a wholly negative one, a second issue arises which has received less attention from Hume's interpreters. If the skeptical arguments posed in the *Dialogues* succeed against natural theology and theistic arguments in general, to what extent do they discredit religious belief *per se* as distinct from attempts to base religion on reason? It is not clear, at least from the *Dialogues*,

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[7] See, for instance, R. J. Butler, "Natural Belief and the Enigma of Hume," *Archiv für Geshichte der Philosophie* (1960) pp. 73-100, and the treatment of Butler's argument by J. C. A. Gaskin in *Hume's Philosophy of Religion*, 2nd ed. (Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Humanities Press, 1988), pp. 116-131.

how skeptical attacks on religion are to be understood, or what their implications are for theology. Philo's remarks in the *Dialogues*, if taken as sincere, might suggest that Hume's rejection of natural theology is not meant as a rejection of religious faith. He says that "to be a philosophical skeptic is, in a man of letters, the first and most essential step toward being a sound believing Christian . . . ."[8] In light of such statements, it is arguable that the position on religion in the *Dialogues* is wholly compatible with, if not serviceable to, a theological perspective which asserts the priority of faith to reason, and that therefore the position in the *Dialogues* provides support for some version of fideism or for a theological view such as that of Sören Kierkegaard or of Karl Barth.[9]

In further support of this reading, it might be argued that Hume's attack on revealed religion in his essay "Of Miracles" discredits only that notion of revelation which is based on a supernaturalist understanding of miracles and that an existentialist understanding of miracles such as that of Rudolph Bultmann or Martin Buber is not susceptible to Hume's objections. If this is plausible, an argument might be made that Hume's writings, while they contain a critique of natural theology as well as supernaturalism, are not inconsistent with some

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[8] *Dialogues*, XII, 3.

[9] Anders Jeffner has noted that "certain schools of modern Protestant theology can regard as positive the destructive tendencies in Hume's philosophy of religion . . ." and cites Karl Barth's theology as an example. See Jeffner, *Butler and Hume on Religion* (Stockholm: Diakonistyrelsens Bokforlag, 1966) p. 20, fns. 20, 21.

expression of religion which is founded on an appropriate understanding of faith and revelation.[10]

Beyond this, it has been argued that Hume's writings allow for some other type of justification for religion. This possibility is suggested by a consideration of Hume's writings on epistemology. In the *Treatise of Human Nature* and the *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, Hume acknowledges that his skeptical arguments can in no way undermine certain basic beliefs such as belief in the regularity of nature. He explains this fact by attributing these beliefs to forces in human nature and habit and acknowledges the necessity in acting in accord with such beliefs, despite the fact that reason plays no role in acquiring or maintaining them. In light of this treatment of certain basic beliefs, Hume's skeptical attack on religion poses some questions. If religious beliefs lack any rational justification, are they nevertheless universal, natural, and in some sense indispensable? If not, how are they to be explained? Hume addresses these questions in *The Natural History of Religion* where he locates the springs of religion in natural human tendencies but does not, on my reading, equate such tendencies with universal habits of thought or so called "natural beliefs." Nevertheless, several commentators have argued that Hume's treatment of

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[10] See, for instance, Delbert J. Hanson, *Fideism and Hume's Philosophy: Knowledge, Religion and Metaphysics* (New York: Peter Lang, 1993), who argues that Hume's skepticism should be understood as a foundation for religious fideism.

religious beliefs does approximate his treatment of so called "natural beliefs" and that his treatment of religious belief as a type of basic belief helps to explain and reconcile the seeming inconsistency of Philo's speeches in the *Dialogues*.[11]

C. *Toward an Alternate Account of Hume's Philosophy of Religion*

The account of Hume's critique I develop in this dissertation is designed both to respond to the interpretive problems outlined above, and to provide a point of departure for assessing the significance of Hume's critique for certain issues in contemporary theology. The view I seek to defend can be summarized in the following way.

Taken together, Hume's two major works on religion form a critique of religion which has two distinct thrusts. In the *Dialogues*, Hume seeks to determine the extent to which there is any rational justification for belief in God by evaluating what during his time was the most highly esteemed theistic argument, namely the argument from design. Hume rejected the possibility of an *a priori* demonstration of God's existence, and if the empirical argument fails entirely, then the consequences for natural theology are wholly negative. If

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[11] See R. J. Butler, "Natural Belief and the Enigma of Hume," *Archiv für Geshichte der Philosophie* (1960), pp. 73-100, and the treatment of Butler's argument by J. C. A. Gaskin in *Hume's Philosophy of Religion*, 2nd. ed. (Atlantic Highlands, N. J.: Humanities Press, 1988), pp. 116-131. See also Keith E. Yandel, *Hume's "Inexplicable Mystery": His Views on Religion* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990); Stanley Tweyman, "Introduction," in David Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, ed. Stanley Tweyman (London and New York: Routledge, 1991), pp. 1-94.

religious beliefs lack a sufficient rational justification—that is, if they cannot be substantiated either as necessary truths established *a priori* or matters of fact established from empirical evidence—what then is their origin, what sustains them, and are there reasons for maintaining them regardless of their lack of any rational foundation?

In the *Natural History* Hume addresses these questions. The answers that he gives there are that: (1) religion originated out of the human attempt to cope with fear and anxiety; (2) even in its more advanced forms religion has been sustained largely by this motivation; and (3) when religion has any effect on morality at all, such effect is purely negative, obscuring or in some way interfering with the influence of those natural sentiments which incline persons to beneficence and socially useful conduct.

In addition to advancing these conclusions on the causes and effects of religion, Hume's work provides an explanation of the persistence of natural theology. The view embodied in the *Natural History* is that human beings have a natural propensity to develop systems of explanation for the world and their place in it. Such propensity has prompted the development of theistic and non-theistic hypotheses as well as various systems of philosophical and scientific reasoning. The view embodied in and advanced by the *Dialogues* is that the plausibility of theistic arguments is largely due to the influence of a religious world view which

predisposes certain persons to the acceptance of such arguments. Such religious world views and predispositions are, in Hume's account, a function of both individual psychology and social convention.

Hume's overall critique, as I interpret it, extends to any form of religion which posits the reality of some transcendent being, dimension, or principle. Hume took a dimmer view of religious orthodoxy than he did of the deism of his enlightened contemporaries, and it is "superstition" and "enthusiasm" which he chiefly deplores and considers as evidence for the potentially adverse effects of religion on character. Nevertheless his writings call into question even the most attenuated notion of God by asking whether there is any empirical evidence for, natural necessity in, or moral advantage to, postulating some dimension or being which in any way transcends or is different from the natural order. As I interpret it, the answer embodied in Hume's works is that theism, defined in the broadest sense, is neither rationally justified, naturally necessary, nor socially beneficial, and that therefore it can and ought to be dispensed with.

Finally, Hume's arguments regarding the moral disadvantages of religion are not, to my mind, convincing. (In the final chapter, I will compare Hume's position on this score with that of Freud.) However, Hume's objections to natural theology remain even more compelling when read in light of twentieth-century philosophical justifications of theism.

My defense of this reading of Hume's critique of religion will begin with a discussion of *The Natural History of Religion* and an analysis of the explanation of religion proposed there. I have chosen this text as a starting point because I believe it gives a more straightforward indication of Hume's overall approach to the subject of religion, and because certain themes and points in the *Dialogues* become more accessible in light of the theory of religion that Hume elaborates in the *Natural History*.

CHAPTER TWO

HUME'S SUSPICION OF RELIGION: *THE NATURAL HISTORY OF RELIGION*

A. *Hume's Approach to the Subject of Religion*

The *Natural History* opens with a concise statement of Hume's overall approach to the subject of religion.

> As every inquiry, which regards religion, is of the utmost importance, there are two questions in particular, which challenge our attention, to wit, that concerning its foundation in reason, and that concerning its origin in human nature.[1]

Most of what Hume says about the first of these issues—that concerning the rational basis of religious beliefs—is contained in the *Dialogues*. Most of what Hume says about the second of these issues—that concerning the natural origins of religion—is contained in the *Natural History*. As numerous commentators have observed, the pattern of inquiry described by Hume in the passage quoted above is characteristic of the procedure Hume employs in his analysis of beliefs generally.[2] The first phase of the inquiry concerns whether there is any rational justification for a belief. Hume is notorious for his skeptical conclusion that reason does not supply a foundation for our beliefs, but is more or less a tool, the use of which is motivated and governed by various passions. After

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[1] *Natural History*, 21.

[2] See, for example, Barry Stroud, *Hume* (London: Macmillan, 1988), chapter 4, pp. 68-97.

purportedly showing that our beliefs lack a foundation in reason, Hume sets about to explain their origins and persistence by an appeal to certain tendencies in human nature and convention. According to Hume, there are certain types of beliefs such as those concerning cause and effect, which cannot be established by any legitimate philosophical argument but are nevertheless indispensable to human conduct and invulnerable to skeptical attack.

Taken as a whole, Hume's writings on religion reflect this same two-stage inquiry, although no one of his works alone embodies the entire program. However, for the most part, the results Hume reaches with respect to religious beliefs are more ambiguous than the conclusions he draws about so-called "natural beliefs."

There has been very little effort by philosophers to assess Hume's views on religion as presented in the *Natural History*.[3] Two notable works, however, have paid considerable attention to the *Natural History*. The first of these, *Explaining Religion*, by J. Samuel Preus, is a book which charts the history of various non-theological efforts to interpret and/or explain religions phenomenon, beginning with Jean Bodin and ending with Sigmund Freud. According to Preus, "David Hume stands in this account as a pivotal figure, being our clearest

[3] This is perhaps due in part to the fact that Hume's treatment of religion in that work seems to fall within the province of psychology and sociology rather than philosophy as these subjects are often demarcated in the contemporary academy.

exemplar of the self-conscious turn from theological to a scientific paradigm for the study of religion."[4] Preus's support of this thesis derives in large part from his reading of Hume's *Natural History.* The second work that gives substantial attention to the *Natural History* is Keith Yandell's book, *Hume's "Inexplicable Mystery."* As a philosopher, Yandell is less interested in the historical significance of the *Natural History* for religious studies than with its philosophical significance for understanding the "unified doctrine or theory of religion" embodied in Hume's philosophical writings as a whole.[5]

There is much in both of those works that I agree with. In particular, I agree with Preus's key insight that Hume's *Natural History* is a credible precursor to the most influential nineteenth and twentieth century social scientific theories of religion.[6] Likewise, I agree with Yandell's proposition that the *Natural History* is crucial to an understanding of Hume's overall treatment of religion and that it is a useful tool for developing a richer interpretation of the *Dialogues.* However, I believe that neither of these commentators has gone far enough in exploring the contribution of Hume's work to the nineteenth and twentieth century genre of

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[4] J. Samuel Preus, *Explaining Religion: Criticism and Theory of Bodin to Freud* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1987), p. 84.

[5] Keith E. Yandel, *Hume's "Inexplicable Mystery": His Views on Religion* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990).

[6] See also H. E. Root's *Introduction to the Natural History of Religion*, which acknowledges Hume's effort to approach religion as a detached outsider.

critical theory and like most other commentators, ignore Hume's assessment of the role of social, cultural and educational differences in accounting for religious and theological differences.[7]

B. *Hume's Definition of "Religion"*

According to Hume, the distinguishing feature of all religion is a belief in "invisible and intelligent power."[8] Hume refers to this belief throughout the work as "the original belief" and explains that such a belief, though widely held, is neither "absolutely universal" nor "uniform" in its manifestations. In his introduction to the *Natural History*, Hume states these points in the following way:

> The belief in invisible, intelligent power has been very generally diffused over the human race, in all places and in all ages; but it has neither perhaps been so universal as to admit of no exception, nor has it been in any degree, uniform in the ideas, which it has suggested. Some nations have been discovered, who entertained no sentiments of religion, if travelers and historians may be credited; and no two nations, and scarce any two men, have ever agreed precisely in the same sentiments. It would appear,

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[7] Moreover, while Preus is certainly correct in his assessment that Hume's explanation of religion is largely rooted in individual psychology when compared to thinkers such as Emile Durkheim, Hume's psychological account clearly recognizes the role that culture and history play in variations of religious belief and in various assessments of theology. Yandell's preoccupation with Hume's calculus of human propensities likewise leads him to neglect Hume's concern with the role of convention in the formation, propagation, and maintenance of religious beliefs. Furthermore, I interpret the *Natural History* as a self-conscious effort by Hume to launch a reductionistic account of religion—an account in which the interplay of human psychology and society provide the necessary and sufficient conditions for religious belief, such that the believer's attribution of power and agency to a divine being must be mistaken.

[8] *Natural History*, 22.

> therefore, that this preconception springs not from an original instinct or primary impression of nature, such as gives rise to self love, affection between the sexes, love of progeny, gratitude, resentment; since very instinct of this kind has been found absolutely universal in all nations and ages, and has always a precise determinant object, which it inflexibly pursues. The first religious principles must be secondary; such as may be easily perverted by various accidents and causes, and whose operation too in some cases, may, by extraordinary concurrence of circumstances, be altogether prevented. What those principles are, which give rise to the original belief, and what those accidents and causes are, which directs its operation, is the subject of our present inquiry.[9]

The approach to religion that Hume outlines in this passage assumes a certain instrumentalism. Religion will be explained by (1) isolating a core or essential religious belief; (2) explaining the origin of such core belief by appeal to principles of human nature and psychology; and (3) explaining the variation in manifestations of religious belief, as well as the variation in its effects by an appeal to certain "accidents and causes" presumably a reference to environmental, social, and historical contingencies. There are two aspects of these passages worth emphasizing. First, given the fact that Hume unequivocally states that religious belief is not invariably and universally a part of human experience, it is clear that he does not consider it on par with those so called natural beliefs in cause and effect, personal identity, and external objects which are indispensable to human conduct. Hume clearly does not ascribe an indispensable status to

[9] *Natural History*, 21.

religious beliefs and it is therefore puzzling that some philosophers have made serious arguments to the contrary.[10]

The second aspect about these passages worth noting is Hume's insistence that variation in the object of religious beliefs is a function of various "accidents and causes." Although Hume does not endeavor to carefully examine the role of social and cultural factors in the formation of religious beliefs, Hume's account implies that such factors do play some formative role insofar as it depicts variation in religious belief as a function of variation in social and historical circumstances, intellectual capabilities and educational opportunities. This aspect of Hume's explanation of religion becomes more apparent in his defense of the proposition that theism evolved from polytheism.

C. *The Origins of Religion*

According to Hume, if we look to the earliest examples of belief in invisible intelligent power, we find polytheism and we find it coinciding with a primitive state of society where the immediate concerns for day-to-day survival continue to hold sway over men's minds. In this primitive state of affairs, a rudimentary form of religious belief develops as a means of coping

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[10] See, for example, R. J. Butler, "Natural Belief and the Enigma of Hume," *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosphie* (1980), pp. 73-100. The issue of whether Hume treats religious belief as a type of "natural belief" that is indispensable to human conduct is treated in more detail in Chapter Four of this dissertation.

psychologically with fear of the unknown, anxiety caused by uncertainty of the future, and the threatening and bewildering events that confront persons in their daily efforts to survive.

> We are placed in this world, as in a great theatre, where the true springs and causes of every event are entirely concealed from us; nor have we either sufficient wisdom to foresee, or power to prevent those ills, with which we are continually threatened. We hang in perpetual suspense between life and death, health and sickness, plenty and want; which are distributed amongst the human species by secret and unknown causes, whose operation is oft unexpected, and always unaccountable. These unknown causes, then become the constant object of our hope and fear; and while the passions are kept in perpetual alarm by an anxious expectation of the events, the imagination is equally employed in forming ideas of those powers, on which we have so entire a dependence.[11]

The confrontation between human beings and the natural world activates certain passions, the principal of these being fear and hope:

> It must necessarily, indeed, be allowed, that, in order to carry men's intention beyond the present course of things, or lead them into any inference concerning invisible intelligent power, they must be activated by some passion, which prompts their thought and reflection; some motive, which urges their first enquiry. But what passion shall we here have recourse to, for explaining an effect of such mighty consequences? Not speculative curiosity, surely, or the pure love of truth. That motive is too refined for such gross apprehensions; and would lead men into inquiries concerning the frame of nature, a subject too large and comprehensive for their narrow capacities. No passions, therefore, can be supposed to work upon such barbarians, but the ordinary affections of human life; the anxious concern for happiness, the

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[11] *Natural History*, 22.

> dread of future misery, the terror of death, the thirst of revenge, the appetite for food and other necessaries. Agitated by hopes and fears of this nature, especially the latter, men scrutinize, with a trembling curiosity, the course of future causes, and examine the various and contrary events of human life. And in this disordered scene, with eyes still more disordered and astonished, they see the first obscure traces of divinity.[12]

Such is the general outline Hume gives of the psychological origins of religion. Fear and Hope are a natural response to man's earliest confrontation with his natural environment. Such passions in turn stimulate the imagination which is governed by certain universal tendencies. Chief among these tendencies is "an universal tendency among mankind to conceive all beings like themselves, and to transfer to every object, those qualities, with which they are familiarly acquainted, and which they are intimately conscious":[13]

> The unknown causes which continually employ their [primitive men's] thought, appearing always in the same aspect, are all apprehended to be of the same kind or species . . . . Nor is it long before we ascribe to them thought and reason and passion, and sometimes even the limbs and figures of men, in order to bring them nearer to a resemblance with ourselves.[14]

In conjunction with the natural propensity for attributing human qualities to unknown powers, human beings have, according to Hume, the general tendency to develop allegories to explain the agency of deity. These tendencies of the

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[12] *Natural History*, 28.

[13] *Natural History*, 29.

[14] *Natural History*, 30.

imagination are universal according to Hume but would not be sufficient to fully account for religious belief without some additional propensity to seek a satisfying system of explanation for life and its vicissitudes. As Hume puts it

> The more that [primitive men] consider these causes themselves, and the uncertainty of their operation, the less satisfaction do they meet with in their researches; and however unwilling, they must at least have abandoned so arduous an attempt, were it not for a propensity in human nature which leads into a system, that gives some satisfaction.[15]

For Hume then, the origins of primary religion are principally if not exclusively *psychological*, although the universal principles of psychology which are operative in the formation of religious belief will result in different expressions of such belief depending upon the societal and intellectual development.

D. *The Historical Development of Religion*

1. *The Primacy of Polytheism*

Hume begins his explanation of the causes of religion by examining the history of religion as a whole. Relying on written historical accounts of ancient societies, classical literature, and the observations of his contemporaries regarding "barbarous nations," Hume argues that as a matter of historical fact, the first expressions of religious belief were polytheistic and that in every instance

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[15] *Natural History*, 31.

monotheism has evolved from polytheism as a more advanced expression of the belief in invisible power. Hume's argument for this thesis is significant, not for its historical accuracy but because it demonstrates Hume's belief that social, political, and intellectual differences among societies are to be counted among the "accidents and causes" which condition the expression of certain religious tendencies in human nature and which account for the absence of uniformity among religious beliefs.

Hume advances three arguments for his claim that polytheism is "the first and most ancient religion of mankind." The first is an empirical argument: Our most reliable historical sources show that polytheism was the predominate form of religion in ancient societies and in undeveloped agrarian societies whereas monotheism has become pervasive in modern western societies.

According to Hume, the explanation for this historical development lies in the natural evolution of the human species both intellectually and socially.

> It seems certain, that according to the natural progress of human thought, the ignorant multitude must first entertain some groveling and familiar notions of superior powers, before they stretch their conception to that perfect being, who bestowed order on the whole frame of nature. We may as reasonably imagine, that men inhabited palaces before huts and cottages, or studied geometry before agriculture; as assert that the Deity appeared to them a pure spirit, omniscient, omnipotent, and omnipresent, before he was apprehended to be a powerful, though limited being, with human passions and appetites, limbs and organs. The mind rises gradually, from inferior to superior: By abstracting from what is imperfect, it forms an idea of perfection: And slowly

> distinguishing the nobler parts of its own frame from the grosser, it learns to transfer only the former, much elevated and refined, to its divinity.[16]

As the foregoing passage illustrates, Hume takes it as axiomatic that there is some natural evolutionary process at work in human history which accounts for an ever increasing body of scientific knowledge and control over the environment, and more effective means of organizing socially and politically.

Hume's second argument for the historical primacy of polytheism *presupposes* his evolutionary principle, and develops from a consideration of what theory of religion is most consistent with such a principle. Hume's primary vehicle for argument is to consider two possible theories of how theism arose, the evolutionary theory which depicts theism as an outgrowth of polytheism versus the leading non-evolutionary theory which depicts theism as the consequence of scientific reasoning from observations of natural design. Hume rejects the latter theory on the ground that it does not comport with intellectual and societal patterns of development that he observes in history.

> Nothing could disturb this natural progress of thought, but some obvious and invincible argument, which might immediately lead the mind 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

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[16] *Natural History*, 24.

> have an influence on mankind, when they formed their first rude notions of religion.[17]
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> Adam, rising at once, in paradise, and in the full perfection of his faculties, would naturally, as represented by Milton, be astonished at the glorious appearances of nature, the heavens, the air, the earth, his own organs and members; and would be lead to ask, whence these wonderful scene arose. But a barbarous necessitous animal (such as man is on the first origin of society) pressed by such numerous wants and passions, has no leisure to admire the regular face of nature, or make inquiries concerning the cause of those objects, to which from his infancy he has been gradually accustomed.[18]

As these passages illustrate, Hume's thesis of the primacy of polytheism is based at least in part on the argument that any alternative theory of the origins of religion must be inconsistent with the idea of human intellectual and social evolution.

Hume's third argument for the historical primacy of polytheism is peculiar, and on my reading disingenuous. According to this third argument, the non-evolutionary account of theism cannot possibly be correct because "if men were at first led into the belief of one supreme being, by reasoning from the frame of nature, they could never possibly leave that belief in order to embrace polytheism."[19]

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[17] *Natural History*, 24.

[18] *Natural History*, 24.

[19] *Natural History*, 25.

This argument is curious coming from Hume because it seems to give some credence to the argument from the design, not merely as a rational support for religion, but as having a causal role in the origins of theism. By posing, as a hypothesis, that theism could have originated from contemplation of the natural order and from the curiosity to explore an explanation for natural order, Hume appears to be suggesting that under proper historical conditions, the argument from design can become irresistible and will in some sense *cause* persons to believe in God.

At this point, I will merely state as a proposal that Hume never seriously entertains the notion that the *argument* from design could play a causal role in the formation of religious belief. However, he does appear to hold two notions which are easily confused with this one. First, Hume holds that under certain historical circumstances and within a particular intellectual climate, the natural human tendency to seek a causal explanation for life's events may prompt the belief in an invisible, intelligent power *as a seemingly intuitive response to perceptions of design and the workings of nature.* In other words, within a certain cultural context and assuming a certain level of education and scientific reasoning, the perception of design and order may be so impressive that the leap to an intelligent cause will seem almost intuitive. Thus, a properly informed and culturally conditioned perception of natural order may provide a direct route to religious

belief of a very minimal sort. The second notion Hume appears to hold is that the *argument* from design is a persuasive one for certain persons who by virtue of (1) scientific outlook, and (2) a religious upbringing, are predisposed to accept it. In other words, certain societal and personal psychological conditions must be present to account for the argument's persuasiveness. That Hume holds such views is more fully substantiated by a careful reading of the *Dialogues*.

2. *The Evolution of Monotheism from Polytheism*

We have already seen that Hume rejected the notion that monotheism arose from conscious reflection about the purposes of nature or man's place in it. According to Hume, although monotheism might be susceptible to philosophical justifications, its origin, like that of polytheism, lies in the realm of psychological mechanisms, and its evolution from polytheism reflects the evolutionary development of those mechanisms. In Hume's account, monotheism is, like polytheism, rooted in the desire to alleviate fear by developing methods of controlling the external world of assuaging the anxieties that are attendant upon man's confrontation with the world and his vulnerability. As Hume depicts it, monotheism has an inner logic. The greater men grow in the consciousness of their frailty, the greater and more sophisticated must their tools of coping become. The notion of a single, all perfect deity is then, for Hume, a function of ever sophisticated efforts to control the external world and the internal anxiety that arises

in man's confrontations within. The *Natural History* contains some colorful statements of this thesis:

> In proportion as men's fears or distresses become more urgent, they still invent new strains of adulation; and even he who outdoes his predecessor in swelling up the titles of his divinity, is sure to be outdone by his successor in newer and more pompous epithets of praise. Thus, they proceed; til at last they arrive at infinity itself, beyond which there is no further progress: And it is well, if, in striving to get farther, and to represent a magnificent simplicity, they run not into inexplicable mystery, and destroy the intelligent nature of their deity, on which alone any rational worship or adoration can be founded. 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; though they are guided to that notion, not by reason, of which they are in great measure incapable, but by the adulation and fears of the most vulgar superstition.[20]

As this passage indicates, Hume's theory of religion in the *Natural History* is largely a functionalist account which assumes certain propensities of human nature such as the propensity of "adulation" as the means of satisfying certain desires.

The interplay of such tendencies or propensities likewise account for what Hume observes to be an inner tension in monotheism which he refers to as the "flux and reflux of polytheism and theism." He observes "that men have a natural tendency to rise from idolatry to theism, and to sink again from theism into idolatry." According to Hume, the reasons have to do with a tension between the need, on the one hand, to attribute an increasing degree of power to deity as a means

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[20] *Natural History*, 43.

of alleviating fear, and on the other, an inability to satisfy their need for an appeasible object of devotion through purely abstract principles:

> The feeble apprehensions of men cannot be satisfied with conceiving their deity as a pure spirit and perfect intelligence; and yet their natural terrors keep them from imputing to him the least shadow of limitation and imperfection. 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 endeavor 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.[21]

E. *The Consequences of Religion*

What is significant and distinctive about Hume's approach to religion is not only the *genealogical* orientation he takes to the subject matter, but his effort to evaluate the *effects* of religious belief on individual psychology and culture. As I have argued above, Hume's genealogy of religious belief does not result in a characterization of beliefs in deity as a variety of naturally necessary or indispensable beliefs. Religious belief, as depicted in the *Natural History*, is the consequence of an admixture of natural human propensities driven or animated by the passions of fear and hope. These psychological mechanisms of religion take place within an evolutionary development of human knowledge and social and

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[21] *Natural History*, 48.

political organization. As a result, the manifestations of religious belief vary and display a certain evolution from polytheism to monotheism, and from mythological and traditional religion to rational and scholastic religion. However, the natural tendencies that become directed and guided to various different expressions of religious belief continue to impose limitations on the variation of religions and even exert a certain internal logic on the form of religious belief the primary illustration of which occurs in what Hume refers to as the flux and reflux of monotheism and polytheism.

This overall account of the origins of religion shares a family resemblance to the Freud's theory of religion, and especially to those aspects of Freud's theory developed in *The Future of an Illusion*.[22] I will take up this comparison in the closing chapter in a discussion of Hume's contribution to critical theory. At this point, however, it is worth noting that while Hume's account of the *origins* of religion resembles Freud's in certain important respects, Hume's account of the *consequences* of religion is harsher and more negative, perhaps bearing more similarities to Nietzsche's derisive remarks about religious personality and the

[22] Sigmund Freud, *The Future of An Illusion*, trans. James Strachey (New York: W. W. Norton, 1961).

slave morality than to Freud's more positive evaluation of the moral and psychological value of religion.[23]

Hume's negative assessment of the moral consequences of religion in the *Natural History* is carried out with the aid of a ruse that is utilized by Hume in the *Dialogues* as well. His strategy is to pay lip service to a distinction between "popular" religion, which he often describes as monotheism corrupted by superstition, and "true" religion which Hume at times seems to define by a base belief in a design or orderliness to the universe having no practical consequences whatsoever. Conspicuously, Hume reserves all of his comments on the moral, cultural and psychological consequences of religion for popular forms of religious belief in most cases using "true" religion to suggest a bare belief in natural laws, having none of the adverse consequences of popular expressions of religion.

In light of Hume's thorough—and on my reading successful—challenge to the Design Argument in the *Dialogues*, the only plausible interpretation of Hume's comments on the distinction between "true" and "popular" religion in the *Natural History* is that *"true" religion is an empty concept*, the purpose of which is to give Hume a means of deflecting accusations of being an outright antagonist of religion and conscious secularizer.

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[23] See, for example, the section on the "Natural History of Morals," in Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, in *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, ed. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Modern Library, 1992).

Hume's analysis of the consequences of religion in the *Natural History* is carried out in two segments: the first is couched as a comparison of monotheism and polytheism with regard to their various effects; the second is more straightforwardly directed to the effects of popular monotheism on morality.

To summarize the first of these segments—the comparison of monotheism and polytheism—Hume invariably concludes that monotheism is corrupted and, as most often expressed, is attended with some serious disadvantages when compared with polytheism. Hume discusses at least four disadvantages of monotheism—I will focus here on what I take to be the two primary ones.[24]

First, according to Hume, monotheism breeds intolerance and leads to persecution, while polytheism, by contrast, fosters religious toleration. As Hume articulates it, "the intolerance of almost all religions, which have maintained the

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[24] The third and fourth disadvantages are equally important. The third disadvantage: According to Hume, polytheism, even if it has no rational foundation, is not internally inconsistent in the way that monotheism is; it is plausible that there might be gods who are in some sense superhuman, and in fact this conception does not engender the inconsistencies which are inherent in the notion of an all perfect being who allows evil. The final disadvantage: Unlike polytheists, monotheists have a tendency to be derisive of other systems which they deem absurd; they manifest a propensity to rationalize their own doctrines, no matter how absurd they may be, while at the same time considering other, no more absurd doctrines, to be entirely ludicrous.

Hume suggests that monotheism may have one advantage over polytheism, namely, that it derives some rational support from the argument from design, although in the *Dialogues* he suggests that such support is illusory. However, because monotheism has this tendency to incorporate philosophy, adherents of monotheism are likely to overextend the use of reason to justify and create absurd doctrines. Accordingly, philosophy may become yoked to superstition to produce theological systems which are seductive but specious.

unity of God, is as remarkable as the contrary principle of polytheists."[25] Hume is fond of citing, as evidence of this precept, the well known history of religious persecution culminating in the Spanish Inquisition.

Secondly, monotheism on Hume's account encourages self-abasement. By investing a deity with greater degrees of power and knowledge, the monotheist unwittingly constructs a God who he resents but to whom he must nevertheless express his subordination. Monotheism, as it is popularly found, leads to an overpowering of the human spirit which becomes manifested in the virtues of humility and self-sacrifice. Polytheism on the other hand, with its less than perfect and more personal deities, provides its adherents with a cast of imperfect gods who are more their equals and whose courage persons may seek to emulate.

> Where the deity is represented as infinitely superior to mankind, this belief, altogether just, is apt, when joined with superstitious terrors, to sink the human mind into the lowest submission and abasement, and to represent the monkish virtues of mortification, penance, humility, and passive suffering, as the only qualities which are acceptable to him . . . . Instead of the destruction of masters, the subduing of tyrants, the defense of our native country; whippings and fastings, cowardice and humility, abject submission and slavish obedience, are become the means of obtaining celestial honors among mankind.[26]

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[25] *Natural History*, 50.

[26] *Natural History*, 52.

It is impossible to neglect a comparison of these passages with Nietzsche's pronouncements in such works as the *Genealogy of Morals* regarding the influence of Christianity on character.[27] A salient feature of both Hume's and Nietzsche's writings on religion and morality is the notion that monotheism, and in particular Christianity, has caused a subversion of culture by fostering a culturally pervasive type of psychopathology, in which subservient tendencies are misrepresented as strengths and virtues. Both thinkers are fond of developing this idea by making a comparison between New Testament conceptions of virtue and those embodied in Homer's writings. Although there are key differences in the way in which Hume and Nietzsche articulate the causes of this psychopathology, both are operating at least implicitly with the notion that theism has resulted in a subversion of natural human tendencies. In Hume's case, it is a subversion of the natural inclinations of benevolence which guide proper conduct. In Nietzsche's case, it is a subversion of the will to power. In both cases, the religious believer has, by virtue of his faith in an all-powerful transcendent deity, lost a vision of his human capacities, and has sought to compensate himself for this loss psychologically by re-presenting it as a gain.

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[27] See Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, in *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, ed. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Modern Library, 1992), especially Essay I, sections, 7, 10-11.

There is thus an argument in Hume's work that religion both *subverts* human nature and effectively *disguises* this subversion. Moreover, the severity of this pathology bears a direct correlation to the conception of God that is invoked, and this correlation is explained by the hypothesis that the more power and authority the believer attributes to God, the more difficult it becomes for him to assert his own authority and power. A certain ideology of Christian values is unconsciously construed as a means of legitimizing this situation which is testament to a condition of "alienation." Such an account of Hume's writings does of course invoke the imposition of some nineteenth and twentieth century categories. My point, however, is not that Hume expressly develops an "ideology critique" in the systematic fashion of, say, Marx or Freud, but rather that, by adopting a hermeneutics of suspicion, Hume's approach to the subject of religion results in a type of "unmasking" project, one that contains, albeit implicitly, the notion that religious belief is a form of false consciousness and consists in a web of beliefs that both express and disguise what critical theories would refer to as a state of alienated being.

This picture of Hume's treatment of religion becomes more accessible in light of the second phase of Hume's treatment of religion and morality in the *Natural History*—a phase in which Hume gives his *explanation* of the adverse consequences of religion for morality. Hume's explicit treatment of this subject

in the *Natural History* begins with the observation that "in every religion, however sublime the verbal definition which it gives of its divinity, many of the votaries, perhaps the greatest number, will still seek the divine favour, not by virtue and good morals, which alone can be acceptable to a perfect being, but either by frivolous observances, by intemperate zeal, by rapturous extasies, or by the belief of mysterious and absurd opinions."[28] Hume explains this admittedly distorted picture of religious life by attempting to show that the motivation for *religious* conduct is distinct from that of *ethical* conduct. In order for human beings to derive the compensatory benefits of religion they must demonstrate their faith through conduct that goes beyond the ordinary and that demonstrates more than the natural tendency to act benevolently towards family and friends. This hypothesis rests in part on Hume's understanding of morality as having its origins in certain natural tendencies which, when properly channeled, provide the basis for a civilized society. According to Hume, acting in accord with such tendencies is not enough to satisfy the need to prove one's faith:

> The duties, which a man performs as a friend or parent, seem merely owing to his benefactor or children; nor can he be wanting to those duties, without breaking through all the ties of nature and morality. A strong indication may prompt him to the performance: a sentiment of order and moral obligation joins its force to those natural ties: And the whole man, if truly virtuous, is drawn by his duty, without any effort or endeavor. Even with regard to the

[28] *Natural History*, 70.

> virtues, which are more austere, and more founded on reflection, such as public spirit, filial duty, temperance, or integrity; the moral obligation, in our apprehension, removes all pretension to religious merit; and the virtuous conduct is deemed no more than what we owe to society and to ourselves. In all this, a superstitious man finds nothing, which he has properly performed for the sake of his deity, or which can peculiarly recommend him to the divine favor and protection.
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> . . . And any practice, recommended to him, which either serves to no purpose in life, or offers the strongest violence to his natural inclinations; that practice he will more readily embrace, on account of those very circumstances, which should make him absolutely reject it. It seems the more purely religious, because it proceeds from no mixture of any other motive or consideration. And if, for its sake, he sacrifices much of his ease and quiet, his claim of merit appears still to use upon him, in proportion to the zeal and devotion which he discovers.[29]

Hume's treatment in these passages of the effects of religious belief on moral motivation provides a rather simplistic picture, which perhaps is too dependent on Hume's unjustifiably narrow selection of religious experience on the one hand, and on his overly optimistic conception of human nature on the other. However, regardless of these defects of his treatment of the relationship between religion and morality, Hume does pose rather dramatically the question of how the religious and moral spheres of human experience are related. It is in fact surprising that Hume does not seek to support his theory of the consequences of religious belief by appeal to the story of Abraham and Isaac, which for later

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[29] *Natural History*, 71-72.

writers such as Soren Kierkegaard, became the paradigmatic example of how religious belief as properly understood requires a "teleological suspension of the ethical."[30]

Hume's account of the relation of religion to morality remains the least convincing of his theses on religion for several reasons. First, Hume's conception of the relation of morality to human nature minimizes the significance of selfish impulses as a motivation for conduct. On this issue, he parts company with thinkers like Hobbes, and is thereby less apt to perceive the regulatory benefits of religious belief (as Freud did, for example). Hume's theory is also difficult to reconcile with the observations that religion can and has been used to justify a wide variety of practices—some of which are consistent with what Hume would consider the dictates of a civilized society, others of which are disruptive of these same dictates. Hume's theory, then, appears to be addressing a very narrow sub-class of religious experience, and for this reason there is reason to doubt its soundness.

Despite these deficiencies in the *content* of Hume's theory of how religion and morality are related, however, the *form* of his theory continues to display Hume's critical approach to the subject of religion as one of "suspicion"—an

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[30] See Soren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling* and *Repetition*, ed. Howard and Edna Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983).

approach that seeks to describe religious beliefs and practices in terms of a symptomatology. Throughout his discourse, Hume is careful to express his negative appraisal of religion and its consequences by using the category of "popular religion" as his target. Yet in the end he cannot refrain from the observation that the universal propensity to believe in "an invisible, intelligent power" has, in almost every historical manifestation, resulted in a *subversion* of human potential. Hume's caustic remark at the close of the *Natural History* is characteristic in this regard:

> Survey most nations and most ages. Examine the religious principles, which have, in fact, prevailed in the world. You will scarcely be persuaded, that they are anything but sick men's dreams.[31]

By the close of the *Natural History*, there remains no question about Hume's utter disdain for "superstition" and "enthusiasm," or his perception that *most* religion is subversive of character and culture. Furthermore, it is evident that Hume considers the ultimate origins of *all* religion (and presumably even uncorrupted as "true religion") to lie in the human psyche. It remains for Hume to address whether there is any separate *rational* support for what has evolved historically and culturally out of psychological necessity. This is the task he undertakes in the *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, to which we must now turn.

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[31] *Natural History*, 76.

CHAPTER THREE

HUME'S SUSPICION OF THEOLOGY: THE *DIALOGUES CONCERNING NATURAL RELIGION*

Hume's *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* contains a number of insights concerning the origin, meaning, and resolvability of disputes about religion. Chief among these is Hume's insight that philosophical reasoning is consciously and unconsciously utilized by religious persons to rationalize their faith presuppositions. In Hume's work, this insight does not originate entirely from a distrust of religious institutions characteristic of Enlightenment thinking, (although distrust of the church and its political aspirations is a recurrent theme in the *Dialogues* and in other of Hume's works, notably the *History of England*). Rather, Hume's suspicion of theology appears to stem largely from his skepticism regarding the limits of human reason.[1]

Hume's critique of theology is driven by and expressed as a suspicion that natural theology is for the most part an unconscious effort to rationalize and legitimate a preexisting and culturally acquired religious view of the world. This critique entails the view that theistic arguments lack rational force in the absence of a predisposition to view the world in theistic terms. The vehicle by which

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[1] For a helpful discussion of the relation of skepticism and naturalism, see P. F. Strawson, *Skepticism and Naturalism: Some Varieties* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985).

Hume develops this suspicion is a dramatic exchange between a Christian dogmatist, a philosophical theologian and a philosophical skeptic. In the *Dialogues* Hume develops his suspicion of theology by placing theological and philosophical disputes within the context of a hypothetical conversation between three friends, Cleanthes, Philo, and Demea. By utilizing this dialogue form, Hume allows various arguments and styles of reasoning to be assessed in relation to the intellectual and personal dispositions of the conversants. As Hume constructs the dialogue, Philo succeeds in making his case against religion and theology without ever being fully recognized by his companions as a true antagonist to religion. He can accomplish this not because the other participants are totally naive and do not suspect him, but instead because none of them, not even Cleanthes, can fully appreciate that his own arguments and common sense view of the world *presuppose* a religious premise which Philo does not share. Philo perceives the importance that religious presuppositions play in his companions' reasoning as well as their relative blindness to the role these assumptions play. He is able to choose his words in a way that will make his statements appear to be conciliatory to religion. As I will illustrate below, those statements in which Philo appears to make a statement either about the reasonableness or inescapability of certain religious beliefs are usually conspicuously not statements about what he himself believes. They are

statements either about what "religious persons" believe or about how any person who takes Philo to be a "religious person" would interpret his words. In short, these passages do not represent Philo's statements about his own beliefs, but instead statements about the beliefs of a religious person. And, as I have attempted to demonstrate in the foregoing chapters, a "religious person" has a culturally acquired view of the world which on Hume's account, is less desirable than that of a secular humanist.

Philo emerges as the character in control of the conversations if not by the persuasiveness of his arguments, then by virtue of his success at manipulating the views of his opponents into a successful argument against theism without being fully detected as an agnostic. Through the personal dynamics between Philo, Cleanthes, and Demea, Hume explores his suspicion that disputes between theologians and secular philosophers over the origins and benefits of religion, are a manifestation of certain culturally acquired motivational attitudes and dispositions operating in the guise of objective discourse.

Hume's suspicion of theology does then begin to approximate a kind of critical theory aimed at unmasking philosophical discourse about religion. This is the view of Hume's *Dialogues* which I will now attempt to flesh out in the present chapter.

A. *The Significance of the Dialogue Form*

What is the meaning of disagreements between religious believers and nonbelievers, or the meaning of the disputes between natural theologians and sceptics? In the *Dialogues*, Hume illustrates rather than posits some answers to these questions. As discussed above in chapter two, Hume sought to understand religion in terms of its natural psychological origins and cultural consequences. He understood theology as the result of philosophy in the service of religious belief, and religious belief as a product of a given natural and cultural environment that activates certain passions, which in turn trigger certain natural tendencies of thought. Moreover, religious belief varies because of differences in social, cultural, and intellectual circumstances within which people and their natural passions and propensities of thought are situated. The dialogue form affords Hume a superior means of illustrating the dynamics of how religion correlates with personality, cultural and educational differences and of how intellect and reason operate in the service of religious beliefs. Throughout the conversations of the *Dialogues*, Hume invites the reader to evaluate the validity of certain beliefs and arguments according to the general character and credibility of the conversants, each of whom displays an individual style and tone in the conversations. It is clear from his other writings and especially from his assessment of testimony in the "Essay of Miracles," that Hume was interested in

the relation between personality and belief. In the *Dialogues*, then, we are not surprised to find his narrator making evaluations of the philosophical arguments using observations about the "character" of the conversants.

B. *The Role of the Narrator*

The conversations between Philo, Cleanthes and Demea are set forth as a part of a letter written by Pamphilus to his friend Hermippus. Pamphilus is described as a young student of Cleanthes who was present during the conversations as "a mere auditor." His opening remarks regarding the pedagogical merits of the dialogue form and subject matter of the conversations, his intermittent observations about the participants' behavior at various points during the conversations, and his brief evaluation of the debates at the close of the work pose some issues relevant to the assessment of Hume's position.

In addition to giving Hume a literary vehicle, the narrator allows Hume to accomplish two objectives: (1) to guide Hume's audience to those issues that are crucial for understanding the debate between the conversants; and (2) to disguise the more unpopular anti-religious positions that Hume actually adopts with respect to those issues.

In his opening remarks to Hermippus, Pamphilus conveys his understanding of the subject matter of the conversations. He comments on the pedagogical merits of the dialogue form, describing it as a method of instruction

"peculiarly adapted" to those subjects where an "obvious" but "important" "point of doctrine" requires a novel and engaging means for its inculcation, and in those subjects where an "obscure and uncertain" question of philosophy requires a flexible form adequate for the variety of approaches in the dispute.[2] According to Pamphilus, "these circumstances are all to be found in the subject of natural religion," a subject which, as Pamphilus understands it, encompasses both the "obvious truth" of God's existence and those "obscure questions concerning the *nature* of that Divine Being," an issue which "has been always subjected to the disputations of men."[3]

It is important to emphasize Pamphilus' overall conception of the subject matter of natural religion as it is treated in the conversations. He understands the issue of God's existence as a "truth" and "point of doctrine," beyond question and the issue of God's nature as an "obscure" and "uncertain" "question of philosophy." These then are the premises by which he judges the arguments of the disputants. He contrasts the "accurate philosophical turn of Cleanthes" with "the careless skepticism of Philo" and "the rigid, inflexible orthodoxy of Demea." It is reasonable to infer that each of these descriptions reflects Pamphilus' own judgment of the speakers' responses in relation to premises which he perceives to

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[2] *Dialogues*, Intro, 3-4.

[3] *Dialogues*, Intro, 5.

be governing their conversation. From Pamphilus' perspective, Cleanthes has demonstrated an "accurate philosophical turn" by adequately treating the issue of the Divine nature as a "question of philosophy." As it seems to Pamphilus, Cleanthes provides an argument which both represents a legitimate philosophical attempt to determine the Divine attributes, and which at the same time adds corroborating force to that well-established truth of God's existence. By contrast, Philo appears to be "careless" in his skepticism, as his objections to Cleanthes' argument are founded on an inconsistent use of skeptical principles (as Cleanthes observes); and, correlatively, because Philo does, at times, let his reasoning stray beyond the dictates of common sense, questioning the theistic principles which he purports to find beyond question. Demea's orthodoxy seems intolerable because his "rigid" insistence on the mysteriousness of the Divine nature leads him to an unwarranted dismissal of any legitimate attempt to solve the "philosophical" question of God's nature.

To what extent should we trust the narrator's assessment of the philosophical import of the conversations? In actuality there is a discrepancy between Pamphilus' notion of the subject matter and the issues at stake in the discussion of natural religion, for it becomes obvious to the reader during the course of the conversations that Philo's chief intention is to place the truth of God's *existence* in question, a truth which according to the narrator has all the

while been an issue beyond serious dispute in the conversations. The carelessness which Pamphilus perceives in Philo's skepticism reflects his own failure to discern the more radical implications of Philo's argument.

Hume communicates to the reader that the narrator's judgment is questionable. Pamphilus' youth places him, as he describes it, as a "mere auditor" of the disputes, and this fact implies consequences for the accuracy of his account of the conversations. As a pupil of Cleanthes, he may conceivably be predisposed to favor the reasoning of his teacher. More generally, however, his fledgling status may arouse some doubts concerning his ability to assess the theoretical content of the conversations. We must of course accept as accurate his account of the conversations as this is all Hume has given us. However, by depicting Pamphilus as a mere auditor and student of Cleanthes, Hume suggests that we may have reason to suspect the narrator's judgment. Consequently, while we should consider significant the issues Hume chooses for Pamphilus to address, we are also given reasons by Hume to question Pamphilus' conclusions. And indeed it would be difficult not to question Pamphilus' judgments since they are so obviously at variance with certain aspects of the conversations.

C. *The Ostensible Subject Matter of the Dialogues*

Historically, the *Dialogues* has been read as a philosophical treatment of arguments for and against the existence of God. Within this prevailing interpretive tradition, the *Dialogues* is scrutinized for a Humean answer to two issues: (1) whether the argument from design can provide a rational basis for at least some minimal version of theism; and (2) whether there are bases of support for religious belief apart from those sought through natural theology. Hume's answers to these questions and his legacy for theology in general, remain clouded by the difficulty of sorting out the positions of his three main characters, Philo, Cleanthes, and Demea; and by the difficulty of determining which if any one of these characters speaks for Hume.

Demea represents a position of Christian orthodoxy. He is convinced that the purposes of the conversations with his two friends are not to question God's existence but merely to assess the extent to which knowledge of God's *nature* is possible. He maintains that God's existence can be demonstrated by *a priori* arguments, but that His nature is wholly unknowable.

In contrast to Demea, Cleanthes seeks to justify claims about the nature and existence of God purely on the basis of inferences from experience. His theology is founded on the view that questions regarding the existence and nature of God are questions of fact, and that all knowledge regarding matters of fact is

derived *a posteriori*. In Parts II and III of the *Dialogues*, Cleanthes advances a sophisticated version of the argument from design to support the proposition that there exists a Being of superior virtue and intelligence. He concedes that the argument does not establish the attributes assigned to God by classical theism but maintains that it does nevertheless provide a sufficient justification for theism.

Philo's position is ambiguous. With Demea, Philo claims to be a skeptic with respect to knowledge regarding the nature of God, and rejects the use of the Design Argument to establish the Christian conception of God. However, Philo also appears to reject Demea's *a priori* arguments for God's existence, and with Cleanthes, holds that all knowledge of factual matters is derived *a posteriori*.

In Parts I-IX, Philo advances and elaborates upon a set of objections to the argument from design similar to those Hume advances in his earlier essay, "Of A Particular Providence." Utilizing a feigned alliance with Demea, Philo frequently seeks to give the impression that his arguments are not intended to support skepticism with respect to the *existence* of God, but only with respect to the Divine nature. However, the more radical implications of his arguments are obvious both to the reader and to Cleanthes, and throughout the first eleven parts of the twelve-part work, Philo seems intent on undermining any theological benefit whatever to the argument from design.

The problem of discerning Philo's position is complicated in Part XII, where Philo appears to reverse himself and concede some degree of legitimacy to the argument from design. In his final speech, Philo states

> If the whole of natural theology, as some people seem to maintain, resolves itself into one simple, though somewhat ambiguous, at least undefined, proposition, that the cause or causes of order in the universe probably bear some remote analogy to human intelligence if this proposition be not capable of extension, variation, or more particular explication; if it affords no inference that affects human life, or can be the source of any action or forbearance; and if the analogy, imperfect as it is, can be carried no further than to the human intelligence and cannot be transferred, with any appearance of probability, to the other qualities of the mind; if this really be the case, what can the most inquisitive, contemplative, and religious man do more than give a plain, philosophical assent to the proposition, as often as it occurs, and believe that the arguments on which it is established exceed the objections which lie against it?[4]

On its face, this passage appears to represent a concession to Cleanthes. It has been cited by some commentators to support the view that Philo acknowledges a role for natural theology and endorses theism on the basis of the design argument.[5] However, because of its numerous qualifications, this passage remains ambiguous. In subsequent portions of this chapter, I shall argue that this passage does not express Philo's endorsement of natural theology, but instead represents Philo's insight that for philosophically minded religious persons—persons who

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[4] *Dialogues*, XII, 33.

[5] See, for instance, Nelson Pike, "Hume on the Argument from Design," in David Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, ed. Nelson Pike (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1970), pp. 125-238.

both adhere to the principles of scientific reasoning, and who possess a view of the world shaped by certain religious beliefs and attitudes—assent to some version of the argument from design is unavoidable. The key to the meaning of the passage, therefore, lies in Hume's and Philo's use of the term "religious man." To such a person the argument from design will provide a satisfying principled explanation of God's existence. Philo, however, assiduously avoids identifying himself as such a person.

Even if Philo's total rejection of the design argument and natural theology can be established, this does not resolve the issue of his (or Hume's) views on religion. Certain of Philo's speeches in Part XII seem calculated to give the impression that he endorses religion on some ground or another. He asserts that "[t]o be a philosophical skeptic is, in a man of letters, the first and most essential step towards being a sound, believing Christian—a proposition which [he] would willing recommend to the attention of Pamphilus [the narrator]."[6] As we shall see below, this statement is compatible with some versions of fideism. Philo also makes statements in this part which are consistent with the view that human beings have an innate sense of religion which is activated by their recognition of design in the operations of nature. For example, he states that

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[6] *Dialogues*, XII, 33.

> no one has a deeper sense of religion impressed on his mind, or pays more profound adoration to the Divine Being, as he discovers himself to reason in the inexplicable contrivance and artifice of nature. a purpose, an intention a design strikes everywhere the most careless, the most stupid thinker; and no man can be so hardened in absurd systems as at all times to reject it.[7]

This passage could be construed as support for the view that some minimal belief in God is basic to human nature and unavoidable.

In the following portions of this chapter, I seek to show that these passages do not represent Philo's endorsement of theism but are best understood as carefully worded efforts to avoid the detection of his anti-religious leanings. My justification for this position centers around a literary analysis that focuses on certain formal and rhetorical characteristics of Hume's text.

D. *Philo's Conversational Strategy: A Feigned Alliance with Demea*

The conversations as reported begin with a discussion between Demea and Philo over the proper methods of educating young persons. Demea compliments Cleanthes in the care that he has taken in the education of Pamphilus, and recommends a method of education which he believes will assure an enduring religious faith and commitment to Christian doctrines. His method is to avoid the subject of natural theology until students have (1) been inculcated with a due

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[7] *Dialogues*, XII, 2.

sense of religion, and (2) been shown the inadequacies and imperfections of human reason.

> It is only as a science, replied Demea, subjected to human reasoning and disputation, that I postpone the study of natural theology. To season their minds with early piety is my chief care; and by continual precept and instruction and I hope too, by example, I imprint deeply on their tender minds and habitual reverence for all principles of religion. While they pass through every other science, I still remark the uncertainty of each part; the eternal disputations of men; the obscurity of all philosophy; and the strange, ridiculous conclusions which some of the greatest geniuses have derived from the principle of mere human reason. Having thus tamed their minds to a proper submission and self-diffidence, I have no longer any scruple of opening to them the greatest mysteries of religion, nor apprehend any danger from that assuming arrogance of philosophy, which may lead them to reject the most established doctrines and opinions.[8]

Philo perceives in Demea's religious use (or abuse) of skepticism, a means of surreptitiously developing his own unfettered skeptical attack on natural theology, and throughout the first eleven parts of the twelve part work, Philo will utilize this tactic as his principal means of developing an agnostic position in the guise of a confessional appropriation of skepticism.

The evidence for this interpretation of Philo's intentions is supplied by Hume in the text itself through the expressions of doubt which the other participants periodically cast on the sincerity of Philo's alliance with Demea. There are three places in the course of the *Dialogues* where Philo's sincerity is

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[8] *Dialogues*, I, 1.

openly doubted. All three relate to Philo's apparent alliance with Demea. The first case emerges at the outset of the conversations in Part I and develops in the following way:

In the context of explicating his ideas on education, Demea clarifies his religious use of skepticism for instructing young persons:

> I imprint deeply on their tender minds an habitual reverence for all the principles of religion. While they pass through every other science, I still remark the uncertainty of each part; the eternal disputations of men; the obscurity of all philosophy.[9]

Philo chimes in with the following comment which seems to suggest his concurrence with Demea:

> Your precaution . . . of seasoning your children's minds early with piety is certainly very reasonable, and no more than is requisite in this profane and irreligious age. But what I chiefly admire in your plan of education is your method of drawing advantage from the very principles of philosophy and learning which by inspiring pride and self-sufficiency, have commonly, in all ages, been found so destructive to the principles of religion.[10]

Philo further cultivates this superficial alliance with Demea by sketching two misguided attitudes towards the relation of philosophy to religion, as if to insinuate that Demea has successfully avoided these:

> The vulgar, indeed, we may remark, who are unacquainted with science and profound inquiry, observing the endless disputes of the

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[9] *Dialogues*, I, 2.

[10] *Dialogues*, I, 3.

> learned, have commonly a thorough contempt for philosophy; and rivet themselves the faster, by that means, in the great points of theology which have been taught them. Those who enter a little into study and inquiry, finding many appearances of evidence in doctrine the newest and most extraordinary, think nothing too difficult for human reason, and, presumptuously breaking through all fences, profane the inmost sanctuaries of the temple.[11]

Then, turning the discussion to Cleanthes, "who will, he hopes, agree," Philo rallies to the point of exalting Demea's use of skepticism: "Let Demea's principles be improved and cultivated: Let us become thoroughly sensible of the weakness, blindness, and narrow limits of human reason."[12] He continues in this vein, ending his speech in a flurry of rhetorical questions which highlight Demea's emphasis on the inadequacy of human reason. At this point, the narrator steps in with the following observations:

> While Philo pronounced these words, I could observe a smile in the countenance both of Demea and Cleanthes. That of Demea seemed to imply an unreserved satisfaction in the doctrines delivered, but in Cleanthes' features I could distinguish an air of finesse, as if he perceived some raillery or artificial malice in the reasonings of Philo.[13]

Cleanthes corroborates the narrator's perceptions by revealing his suspicions of Philo:

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[11] *Dialogues*, I, 3.

[12] *Dialogues*, I, 3.

[13] *Dialogues*, I, 4.

> You propose then, Philo . . . to erect religious faith on philosophical skepticism; and you think that, if certainty or evidence be expelled from every other subject of inquiry, it will all retire to these theological doctrines, and there acquire a superior force and authority. Whether your skepticism be as absolute and sincere as you pretend, we shall learn by and by, when the company breaks up; we shall then see whether you go out the door or the window, and whether you really doubt of your body has gravity or can be injured by its fall, according to popular opinion derived from our fallacious senses and more fallacious experience.[14]

In these passages, Cleanthes is accusing Philo of adopting a position of skepticism which is incompatible with the dictates of everyday experience and common sense. The narrator has noted that Cleanthes perceives "some raillery or artificial malice in the reasonings of Philo." Cleanthes' immediate response at this juncture of Philo's speech suggests that he recognizes a challenge to his own position concealed in Philo's words. Philo is not truly so naive as to "hope" for an agreement with Cleanthes on the issue of the deficiencies of human reason. It would appear from Cleanthes' response that he seriously doubts both the sincerity of Philo's alliance with Demea and the manner in which Philo has characterized Demea's position. Though Cleanthes has not fully grasped what Philo is up to, he has identified something contrived in Philo's alliance with Demea.

There are two additional places in the conversations where the sincerity and intentions of Philo are openly called into question. A scenario similar to that

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[14] *Dialogues*, I, 5.

of Part I is developed in Part X, where Philo again seems to take the side of Demea. In the preceding conversations of Part IX, Cleanthes has subjected Demea's version of the ontological and cosmological arguments to devastating attack, and Philo has quite willingly helped to spell out the damaging consequences of Cleanthes' objections.[15] However, Philo then smoothes over the violence done to Demea's position by urging that they drop "all these abstractions," and, in a conciliatory manner, Philo draws Demea back into an unaware position. Here at the opening of Part X, Demea formulates his understanding of man's innate sense of religion as it emerges from the recognition of the incurable shortcomings in human nature:

> It is my opinion, I own . . . that each man feels, in a manner, the truth of religion within his own breast; and, from a consciousness of his imbecility and misery rather than from any reasoning, is led to seek protection from that Being on whom he and all nature are dependent.[16]

Here Philo concurs:

> I am indeed persuaded . . . that the best and indeed the only method of bringing everyone to a due sense of religion is by just representation of the misery and wretchedness of men.[17]

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[15] See *Dialogues*, IX, 10.

[16] *Dialogues*, X, 1.

[17] *Dialogues*, X, 2.

Demea warms up and further elaborates on "this great and melancholy truth."[18] As if to corroborate Demea's position, Philo notes the universal recognition of this miserable state of human affairs by all men of letters throughout history:

> In this point the learned are so perfectly agreed with the vulgar, and in all letters, sacred and profane, the topics of human misery have been insisted on with the most pathetic eloquence that sorrow and melancholy could inspire.[19]

From this point on, Philo develops Demea's observations about human frailty into a problem of theodicy, posing insurmountable difficulties for Cleanthes' argument from design.[20] Cleanthes, smiling again, this time identifies Philo's deceptive intentions:

> And have you, at last, . . . betrayed your intentions, Philo? Your long agreement with Demea did indeed a little surprise me, but I find you were all the while erecting a concealed battery against me. And I must confess that you have now fallen upon a subject worthy of your noble spirit of opposition and controversy. If you can make out the present point, and prove mankind to be unhappy or corrupted, there is an end at once of all religion. For to what purpose establish the natural attributes of the Deity, while the moral are still doubtful and uncertain.[21]

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[18] *Dialogues*, X, 3.

[19] *Dialogues*, X, 4.

[20] See *Dialogues*, X, 5-29.

[21] *Dialogues*, X, 30.

Up to this point Demea is apparently still unaware of the radical implications of Philo's argument and is therefore surprised that Cleanthes should so easily "take umbrage."[22] Cleanthes clarifies the crux of the matter for Demea in the opening passages of Part XI. He addresses the implications of Philo's arguments "in the present subject" (that concerning the Divine nature) for the issue of God's existence. Cautioning Demea, he speaks as follows:

> in the present subject, if we abandon all human analogy, as seems your intentions, . . . I am afraid we abandon all religion and retain no conception of the great object of our adoration.[23]

Cleanthes then invites Philo to speculate on the modified hypothesis that "the Author of Nature is not infinitely perfect, though far exceeding mankind."[24] Philo accepts the task as an opportunity to expand the damaging implications of the "mixed" nature of the universe, subsequently announcing his "true conclusion,"

> that the original source of all things is entirely indifferent to all these principles, and has no more regard to good above ill than to heat above cold, or drought above moisture, or to light above heavy.[25]

With this Philo has concluded his exploitation of Demea's theory of the religious uses of skepticism. If Demea has not yet perceived this, he is quickly

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[22] *Dialogues*, X, 31.

[23] *Dialogues*, XI, 1.

[24] *Dialogues*, X, 1.

[25] *Dialogues*, XI, 14.

awakened by Philo's terse challenge to "assign a cause for it [evil], without having recourse to the first cause."[26] Finally, Philo's intentions to place the truth of God's existence in serious question become evident even to Demea, whose words of alarm, together with a subsequent confirmation from Cleanthes, constitute the third instance of an explicit reference to Philo's deceptions:

> Hold! Hold! . . . Wither does your imagination hurry you? I joined in alliance with you in order to prove the incomprehensible nature of the Divine Being, and refute the principles of Cleanthes, who would measure everything by human rule and standard. But I now find you running into all topics of the greatest libertines and infidels, and betraying that holy cause which you seemingly espoused. Are you secretly then, a more dangerous enemy than Cleanthes himself?[27]

Cleanthes confirms Demea's worst fears:

> Are you so late in perceiving it? . . . Believe me Demea, your friend Philo, from the very beginning, has been amusing himself at both our expense; and it must be confessed that the injudicious reasoning of our vulgar theology has given him too just a handle of ridicule.[28]

These portions of the conversations, together with the first indications of Philo's ploy in Part I, disclose Philo's underlying intentions and his strategy for achieving them. The true purposes behind his alliance with Demea are hinted at in Part I and unfold to a point of clarity in Demea's awakening in Part XI. Cleanthes has

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[26] *Dialogues*, XI, 17.

[27] *Dialogues*, XI, 18.

[28] *Dialogues*, XI, 19.

an initial, yet undefined, suspicion of Philo in Part I. In Part X, Cleanthes realizes that the purpose behind Philo's "long agreement with Demea" was to "erect a concealed battery against [him]," not merely in a dispute over the nature of the Divine, but in a challenge to "all of religion." By the end of Philo's speeches in Part XI, it becomes clear even to Demea that Philo all along has been posing as a theist only to "betray that holy cause which [he] seemingly espoused."

Governed by an unquestioned belief in the truth of God's existence and guided by the anthropological assumptions of Christian orthodoxy, Demea's religious use of skepticism becomes both a resource for Philo's argument against Cleanthes and a disguise for his more radical attacks on theism. Demea does not stop to question why his theological use of reason should not itself be subject to skeptical doubts or, further, why his *a priori* theistic proofs are not vulnerable to the same limitations he finds in philosophy more generally.

E. *Philo's Rhetorical Tactics*

As the foregoing passages illustrate, the conversations in Parts I and X of the *Dialogues* suggest that Philo achieves his false alliance with Demea by adopting an ingratiating posture, using extraneous compliments and words of encouragement to create an impression of agreement and sincerity. He commends Demea's "reasonable" precautions in early education and is quick to comment on "what he chiefly admires" about Demea's practice. Furthermore, he claims to be

"indeed persuaded" by Demea's observations on the human predicament. The rhetoric characteristic of these passages in which an initial suspicion of Philo's intentions is confirmed by one or more of the participants, provides a clue for discerning the deceptive pattern of Philo's speeches elsewhere in the conversations. A concurrence with Demea prefaced by an effusive display of sincerity constitutes a reasonable occasion for suspicion that Philo is up to something.

An illustrative case emerges in Part II. The situation occurs in the course of Philo's false agreement with Demea and exemplifies the style of irony characteristic of Philo's disingenuous comments. Demea begins the conversation by elaborating his belief in the self-evident truth of God's existence:

> I must own Cleanthes, . . . that nothing can more surprise me than the light in which you have all along put this argument. By the whole tenor of your discourse, one would imagine that you were maintaining the being of a God against the cavils of atheists and infidels, and were necessitated to become champion for that fundamental principle of all religion. But this, I hope, is not by any means a question among us. No man; no man, at least of common sense, I am persuaded, ever entertained a serious doubt with regard to a truth so certain and self-evident. The question is not concerning the being but the nature of God. This I affirm, from the infirmities of human understanding, to be altogether incomprehensible and unknown to us.[29]

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[29] *Dialogues*, II, 1.

Demea continues in this vein, appealing to Father Malebranche as a philosophical authority for his reasoning, and is then answered by Philo in the following self effacing fashion:

> After so great an authority, Demea, . . . as that which you have produced, and a thousand more which you might produce, it would appear ridiculous in me to add my sentiment or express my approbation of your doctrine. But surely, where reasonable men treat these subjects, the question can never be concerning the being but only the nature of the Deity. The former truth, as you well observe, is unquestionable and self-evident. Nothing exists without a cause; and the original cause of this universe (whatever it be) we call God, and piously ascribe to him every species of perfection.[30]

From this exchange, Demea's understanding of the purposes of the conversations becomes clear. He is quite certain that the object of the conversations concerns the nature of God and that "no man, at least of common sense" would ever doubt the fact of His existence. However, he is slightly "surprised" that Cleanthes' response to Philo should imply that a challenge had been made on that issue. In light of the later developments in Parts X and XI, examined above, Philo's response here fits a pattern. As Philo seeks to reassure Demea of his sympathetic intentions, one is apt to detect a note of falsity. Though he would seem to endorse the limits of Demea's orthodoxy, he never actually identifies himself with those "reasonable men" who treat religious questions from

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[30] *Dialogues*, II, 3.

a theistic assumption. We are left with the possibility that the "common sense" which compels "reasonable men" to accept the "self-evident truth" of God's existence is in Philo's eyes a theistic prejudice, disguised and legitimated by that method of "priestcraft" which he speaks of earlier in the conversations. For, in the paragraph immediately following, Philo strikes at the very issue which he has assured Demea is beyond question for "reasonable men."

> Our ideas reach no farther than our experience: We have no experience of divine attributes and operations. I need not conclude my syllogism: You can draw the inference yourself. And it is a pleasure to me (and I hope to you, too) that just reasoning and sound piety here concur in the same conclusions, and both of them establish the adorably mysterious and incomprehensible nature of the Supreme Being.[31]

At this juncture again, Philo feigns a naive "hope" that Cleanthes will agree with him. However, Cleanthes has the gist of Philo's words and grasps the meaning of the syllogism. The "inference" to be drawn is that if experience will afford no basis for determining anything about the nature of God, then it will likewise be inadequate as a means for establishing His existence. Thus, Cleanthes gets to the point and, "not to lose any time in circumlocutions," delineates his most able defense of the argument from design; an argument which he claims "alone . . . proves at once the existence of a Deity and his similarity to human mind and

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[31] *Dialogues*, II, 4.

intelligence."[32] Thus, even though Philo has feigned his approval of Demea's belief in the incontestable truth of God's existence based on the evidence of common sense, he has carefully avoided a clear affirmation of this position.

F. Philo's Philosophical Position

1. *Philo's Skepticism*

If the foregoing portions of the text have provided a means of identifying those speeches in which Philo has engaged in some deception, at times through the use of irony, we are now in a better position to locate those passages where Philo speaks more straightforwardly, filling in the philosophical substance of his position. The procedure here is to accept, at least initially, those speeches which lack the rhetorical accouterments of Philo's ingratiating posture, and at the same time which support the aims of Philo as they are revealed in his feigned alliance with Demea.

The clearest and most complete expression of Philo's philosophical principles occurs in Part I, shortly after his initial agreement with Demea. Cleanthes challenges Philo to reconcile his skepticism with the demands of common life. In response, Philo advances a mitigated version of skepticism which acknowledges a legitimate role for reason provided that it is operating within the bounds of sensory experience and legitimate inductive inferences.

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[32] *Dialogues*, II, 15.

> To whatever length anyone may push his speculative principles of skepticism, he must act, I own, and live, and converse like other men; and for this conduct he is not obliged to give any other reason than the absolute necessity he lies under of doing so. If he ever carries his speculations farther than this necessity constrains him, and philosophizes either on natural or moral subjects, he is allured by a certain pleasure and satisfaction which he finds in employing himself after that manner. He considers, besides, that everyone, even in common life, is constrained to have more or less of this philosophy; that from our earliest infancy we make continual advances in forming more general principles of conduct and reasoning; that the larger experience we acquire, and the stronger reason we are endowed with, we always render our principles the more general and comprehensive; and that what we call philosophy is nothing but a more regular and methodical operation of the same kind. To philosophize in such subjects is nothing essentially different from reasoning on common life, and we may only expect greater stability, if not greater truth, from our philosophy on account of its exacter and more scrupulous method of proceeding.[33]

This passage and those which immediately follow, represent Philo's sincere philosophical position, the principles of which remain unaltered throughout the conversations. Nowhere in the immediately surrounding passages does Philo find cause to reassure the audience of his sincerity or reiterate his pious intentions. It is a serious response to Cleanthes and its philosophical import is clearly defined.

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[33] *Dialogues*, I, 9.

Philo's position as disclosed in these passages is one of *mitigated* skepticism.[34] Philo distinguishes this position from an artificially imposed disposition of radical doubt which meets with contradiction in the demands of ordinary conduct. Nor is Philo's skepticism inimical to sophisticated philosophical reasoning. Rather, it is a version of skepticism which endorses speculation insofar as it is grounded in observation and sensory experience. Without this authority, reason is at once without a means of validation.

The central point of disagreement between Philo and Cleanthes concerns the ramifications of this position for natural theology. Philo seems to maintain that any theistic proposition is beyond the possibility of empirical verification and hence becomes vulnerable to a suspension of judgment. As he continues to address Cleanthes, these conclusions become evident:

> So long as we confine our speculations to trade, or morals, or politics, or criticism, we make appeals, every moment, to common sense and experience, which strengthen our philosophical conclusions and remove (at least in part) the suspicion, which we so justly entertain with regard to every reasoning, that is very subtle and refined. But in theological reasonings, we have not this advantage, which at the same time we are employed upon objects which, we must be sensible, are too large for our own grasp, and of all others, require most to be familiarized to our apprehensions.

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[34] On Hume's mitigated skepticism, see Terence Penelhum, "Hume's Scepticism and the *Dialogues*," in *McGill Hume Studies*, ed. D. F. Norton, et. al. (San Diego: Austin Hill Press, 1979), pp. 253-278; and "Natural Belief and Religious Belief in Hume's Philosophy," in *The Philosophical Quarterly*, Vol. 33, No. 131 (April 1983), pp. 166-181.

> We are like foreigners in a strange country to whom everything must seem suspicious . . . .[35]

Then according to Philo's principles, the argument from design does not establish an understanding of the nature of God *or* the truth of His existence from the authority of our experience of the observable world. As the "objects" of "theological reasoning," they are too large for our "grasp" and must therefore be made "familiar" to us in order to be apprehended. According to Philo, such circumstances result in a victory for the skeptic whose task is merely to force the claims of his opponents into an indeterminate position.

> But it is evident, whenever our arguments lose their advantage and run wide of common life, that the most refined skepticism comes to be upon a footing with them, and is able to oppose and counterbalance them. The one has no more weight than the other. The mind must remain in a suspense or balance, which is the triumph of skepticism.[36]

For Philo, Cleanthes' arguments for God's existence have "run wide of common life" and are therefore vulnerable to refutation by skeptical inquiry.

The implications of Philo's avowed skepticism are summarized in the following statement.

> All religious systems, it is confessed, are subject to great and insuperable difficulties. Each disputant triumphs in his turn, while

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[35] *Dialogues*, I, 10.

[36] *Dialogues*, I, 11.

> he carries on an offensive war, and exposes the absurdities, barbarities, and pernicious tenets of his antagonist. But all of them, on the whole, prepare a complete triumph for the skeptic, who tells them that no system ought ever to be embraced without regard to such subjects; for this plain reason, that no absurdity ought ever to be assented to with regard to any subject. A total suspense of judgement is here our only reasonable resource.[37]

In Part X, Philo again claims a "triumph for skepticism" and challenges Cleanthes to "tug the laboring oar, and to support his [Cleanthes] philosophical subtleties against the dictates of plain reason and experience."[38]

The implications of Philo's skepticism for the argument from design are presented in a surprisingly dark and cynical fashion in Part XI. Playing on the words of Cleanthes' earlier explication of the teleological argument, Philo addresses the company as follows:

> Look round the universe. What an immense profusion of beings, animated and organized, sensible and active! You admire this prodigious variety and fecundity. But inspect a little more narrowly these living existences, the only beings worth regarding. How hostile and destructive to each other! How insufficient all of them for their own happiness! How contemptible or odious to the spectator! The whole presents nothing but the idea of a blind nature impregnated by a great vivifying principle, and pouring forth from her lap, without discernment or parental care, her maimed and abortive children.[39]

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[37] *Dialogues*, VIII, 12.

[38] *Dialogues*, X, 36-37.

[39] *Dialogues*, XI, 13.

When juxtaposed to Cleanthes' "look round the world,"[40] this passage reveals the conclusions of Philo's skeptical appraisal of Cleanthes' argument. As Philo portrays it, the universe gives no clue of a Perfect Designer. An examination of the natural universe and the human situation will allow of nothing more than a bare recognition of an indifferent design at work. In short, for Philo, we can, by the resources of reason alone, establish nothing more than the probable hypothesis of an orderly world as the outcome of some natural principle of design, for as he has depicted it, "the whole present nothing but the idea of a blind nature."

2. *Philo's Position on Natural Theology and His Treatment of the Design Argument*

The chief subject of the conversations among Demea, Philo and Cleanthes is the so-called "argument from design." In Part II of the *Dialogues*, Cleanthes advances a version of this argument which he summarizes in the following way:

> Look round the world: Contemplate the whole and every part of it: You will find it to be nothing but one great machine, subdivided into an infinite number of lesser machines, which again admit of subdivisions, to a degree beyond what human senses and faculties can trace and explain. All these various machines, and even their most minute parts, are adjusted to each other with an accuracy, which ravishes into admiration all men, who have ever contemplated them. The curious adapting of means to ends, throughout all nature, resembles exactly, though it much exceeds, the productions of human contrivance—of human design, thought, wisdom, and intelligence. Since therefore the effects resemble each other, we are led to infer, by all rules of analogy, that the

[40] *Dialogues*, I, 15.

> causes also resemble, and that the Author of nature is somewhat similar to the mind of man, though possessed of much larger faculties, proportioned to the grandeur of the work, which he has executed. By this argument *a posteriori*, and by this argument alone, we do prove at once the existence of a Deity and his similarity to human mind and intelligence.[41]

Demea's response to this argument is unambiguous. He rejects Cleanthes' claim that arguments from experience are the only means of establishing God's existence and holds that *a priori* arguments are in fact superior for this purpose because they demonstrate God's existence as a necessary truth rather than as a contingent matter of fact, the truth of which can be established only to a greater or lesser degree of probability. Philo continues in Part II to feign support for Demea's efforts to argue the incomprehensibility of the Divine nature and the advantages of philosophical skepticism as a means of supporting this tenet of Orthodox Christianity. Philo is nevertheless allied with Cleanthes in the important assumption that all knowledge of fact is derived from experience and that *a posteriori* arguments alone might provide an avenue of support for statements of fact such as those regarding God's existence. Philo however, does not allow that the empirical argument which Cleanthes has proposed will lend any support to the proposition that there exists a being possessing any of the attributes associated with the God of traditional theism. It remains a point of ambiguity and

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[41] *Dialogues*, II, 5.

disagreement among Hume's commentators whether Philo means to go the further step of denying any benefit whatever to the argument from design as a basis for theism.

While it is generally acknowledged that Philo's objections to Cleanthes' argument from design embody many of the same principles espoused by Hume in his essay "Of a Particular Providence." Philo's development of these principles results in some distinctive emphases. For example, consider Hume's principle developed in the Treatise and employed in his essay "Of a Particular Providence"—that we are only warranted in inferring a cause from an effect in cases where we have in the past observed a recurring connection or constant conjunction between these two species of events. Philo espouses this principle in the *Dialogues* as well, as the following passage indicates:

> When two *species* of objects have always been observed to be conjoined together, I can infer, by custom, the existence of one wherever I see the existence of the other; and this I call an argument from experience. But how this argument can have place when the objects, as in the present case, one single, individual, without parallel or specific resemblance, may be difficult to explain.[42]

However, in the *Dialogues*, Philo (and Hume) recognizes that this is not a complete response to Cleanthes' version of the argument from design because it leaves open the possibility (which Cleanthes seeks to exploit) that the natural

[42] *Dialogues*, II, 23.

universe is sufficiently similar to other objects and events whose causes are familiar to us. In other words, Cleanthes' argument begins with the premise that the world is sufficiently analogous to a human artifact such that it does fall within that species of objects which in our experience are constantly joined to a species of causes which exhibit intention and intelligence.

The open issue then between Cleanthes and Philo is whether the analogy between the natural world and human artifacts is sufficiently strong to warrant any inference regarding the causes of the natural world. According to Philo the analogy is too weak to enable anything more than speculation and conjecture about the causes of the world.

> If we see a house, Cleanthes, we conclude, with the greatest certainty, that it had an architect or builder because this is precisely that species of effect which we have experienced to proceed from that species of cause. But surely you will not affirm that the universe bears such a resemblance to a house that we can with the same certainty infer a similar cause, or that the analogy is here entire and perfect. The dissimilitude is so striking that the utmost you can here pretend to is a guess, a conjecture, a presumption similar cause.[43]

Philo's position here is that (1) arguments by analogy cannot preclude or support any reliable hypothesis concerning causes that we have not directly observed unless the two effects are very nearly identical; and (2) there is no object

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[43] *Dialogues*, II, 8.

sufficiently analogous to the universe as a whole to provide any basis for inferring the latter's cause or causes. Philo develops this latter proposition by emphasizing the unreliability of comparing a small fragment of the universe to the universe as a whole.

> A very small part of this great system, during a very short time, is very imperfectly discovered to us; and do we thence pronounce decisively concerning the origin of the whole?[44]

Cleanthes responds to Philo's arguments in Part III by urging that the analogy between the universe as a whole and human artifice is "self evident" and undeniable. According to Cleanthes, "it is by no means necessary that theists should prove the similarity of the works of nature to those of art, because this similarity is self-evident and undeniable." As it turns out, Cleanthes means by this that it is impossible, he thinks, for any person of common sense to reject the proposition that there exists an orderliness, regularity and adjustment of means to ends in the natural world or to reject the similarity of this quality to that orderliness which is unique to the products of human intelligence. Cleanthes elaborates using two hypotheticals—an articulate voice which comes from the clouds and a library of self propagating books. According to Cleanthes the existence of order and regularity in the operations of nature is no less compelling a proof of intelligent cause than are an articulate voice or a library of literary

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[44] *Dialogues*, II, 21.

works. According to Cleanthes, all three of these experiences naturally present us with the idea of a design and intelligence.

Cleanthes further maintains that the natural and irresistible quality of this inference provides further support for its probability.

> The declared profession of every reasonable sceptic is only to reject abstruse, remote, and refined arguments; to adhere to common sense and the plain instincts of nature; and to assent, wherever any reasons strike him with so full a force that he cannot, without the greatest violence, prevent it. Now the arguments for natural religion are plainly of this kind; and nothing but the most perverse, obstinate metaphysics can reject them. Consider, anatomize the eye; survey its structure and contrivance, and tell me, from your own feeling, if the idea of a contrivers does not immediately flow in upon you with a force like that of sensation. The most obvious conclusion, surely, is in favor of design; and it requires time, reflection, and study, to summon up those frivolous though abstruse objections which can support infidelity.[45]

> And if the argument for theism be, as you [Philo] pretend, contradictory to the principles of logic, its universal, its irresistible influence proves clearly that there may be arguments of a like irregular nature. Whatever cavils may be urged, an orderly work, as well as a coherent, articulate speech, will still be received as an incontestable proof of design and intention.[46]

Thus, according to Cleanthes, belief in God is in some sense natural and unavoidable on the basis of an irresistible impression that the universe bears some significant analogy to human artifice, is immediately obvious to any person of common sense, and cannot honestly be doubted. This explains, according to

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[45] *Dialogues*, III, 7.

[46] *Dialogues*, III, 8.

Cleanthes, why Philo's arguments against the analogy produce (in Cleanthes' mind) little or no conviction.

From this point on in the conversations, Philo's objections to natural theology fall into three different lines of argument: (1) A further rejection of Cleanthes' use of analogy; (2) an agreement that Cleanthes' hypothesis even if supportable by analogical reasoning, is of no consequence to religion; and (3) skepticism of the search for ultimate explanations.

a. *Rejection of Cleanthes' analogy*

Throughout the conversations, but especially in Parts VI through VIII, Philo develops the objection that Cleanthes' analogy is at best tenuous and that the data upon which Cleanthes relies to support his analogy—order, regularity, and the apparent relation of means to ends in the operations of nature is indeterminate and therefore insufficient to ground any reliable analogy from which to legitimately infer a reliable hypothesis regarding the first cause of the universe.

Philo's favorite method of demonstrating the infirmities of Cleanthes' argument is to show that the theistic hypothesis which Cleanthes purports to infer from his analogy of the world to a vast machine is no more and perhaps less satisfactory than a number of other hypotheses which exclude the notion of intelligence, design or mental activity. This predicament, according to Philo is the result of having insufficient data upon which to establish any reliable analogy

regarding the origins of the universe as a whole. Philo expresses this objection to Cleanthes in the following manner:

> What you ascribe to the fertility of my invention, replied Philo, is entirely owing to the nature of the subject. In subjects adapted to the narrow compass of human reason there is commonly but one determination which carries probability or conviction with it; and to a man of sound judgment all other suppositions but that one appear entirely absurd and chimerical. But in questions as the present, a hundred contradictory views may preserve a kind of imperfect analogy, and invention has here full scope to exert itself. Without any great effort of thought, I believe that I could, in an instant, propose other systems of cosmogony which would have some faint appearance of truth; though it is a thousand, a million to one if either yours or any one of mine be the true system.[47]

In fact, Philo develops in some detail some rather intriguing if not convincing alternatives to Cleanthes' theistic hypothesis. The first, which precedes the foregoing passage, is the theory that the world more closely resembles a living organism such as an animal or a plant that it does a machine or product of human contrivance and that therefore, the causes of the world should (according to Cleanthes' own principles) more closely resemble generation or vegetation than mental activity. Philo develops this theory at some length throughout Parts VI and VII of the *Dialogues*.

In Part VIII, Philo considers yet another hypothesis which he claims would equally well account for the natural order. He describes it as the old

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[47] *Dialogues*, VIII, 1.

Epicurean hypothesis and explains it as the chance arrangement of inherently animated matter into uniform appearances.

> The original force, still remaining in activity, gives a perpetual restlessness to matter. Every possible situation is produced, and instantly destroyed if a glimpse or dawn of order appears for a moment, it is instantly hurried away and confounded by that neverceasing force which actuates every part of matter . . . . Thus the universe goes on for many ages in a continued succession of chaos and disorder. But is it not possible that it may settle at last, so as not to lose its motion and active force (for that we have supposed inherent in it) yet so as to preserve a uniformity of appearance, amidst the continual motion and fluctuation of its parts? This we find to be the case with the universe at present.[48]

Cleanthes is quick to point out what he perceives to be the shortcomings in this hypothesis which lie, he believes, in its apparent failure to explain why certain forms of life work together so effectively to create a certain economy of operations. Although Philo at this point merely acknowledges that all hypotheses of this sort are subject to imperfections, he is not without some possible rejoinders to Cleanthes. Perhaps his most obvious response has already been given earlier in the conversations. Philo seems to concede the existence of an order and economy in the operations of the universe but he believes that an explanation for this need go no further than the acknowledgment of the order itself. If any cause could be inferred beyond this it would contain no more than the generalization that the world operates according to certain principles of economy.

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[48] *Dialogues*, VII, 7-8.

> What we see in the parts, we may infer in the whole; at least, that is the method of reasoning on which you [Cleanthes] rest your whole theory. And were I obliged to defend any particular system of this nature, which I never willingly should do, I esteem none more plausible than that which ascribes an eternal, inherent principle of order to the world, though attended with great and continued revolutions and alternations. This at once solves all difficulties; and if the solution, by being so general, is not entirely complete and satisfactory, it is at least a theory that we must search or later have recourse to, whatever system we embrace.[49]

I believe that Philo ultimately endorses something like this position and that he does *not* perceive it to be compatible with theism. However, he will from time to time throughout the conversations appear to grant some validity to Cleanthes' hypothesis that the cause of the universe bears some resemblance to human intelligence. I will now explore what Philo does with this proposition.

b. *Even if true, Cleanthes' religious hypothesis is inconsequential*

Assume *arguendo* that Cleanthes' analogy between the natural world and human art is close enough or obvious enough to establish a strong probability that the cause of the universe bears some resemblance to human intelligence, of what value or consequence is such a hypothesis? According to Philo, none whatever. As Philo begins to spell them out, the consequences of Cleanthes' argument are as follows:

> First, by this method of reasoning you renounce all claims to infinity in any of the attributes of Deity. For, as the cause ought

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[49] *Dialogues*, VI, 12.

only to be proportioned to the effect, and the effect, so far as it falls under our cognizance, is not infinite, what pretensions have we, upon your suppositions, to ascribe that attribute to the Divine Being?[50]

Secondly, you have no reason, on your theory, for ascribing perfection to the Deity, even in his finite capacity or for supposing him free from every error, mistake, or incoherence, in his undertakings.[51]

And what shadow of an argument, continued Philo, can you produce from your hypothesis to prove the unity of the Deity? A great number of men join in building a house or ship, in rearing a city, in forming a commonwealth; why may not several deities combine in contriving and framing a world?[52]

In a word, Cleanthes, a man who follows your hypothesis is able, perhaps, to assert or conjecture that the universe save time arose from something like design; but beyond that position he cannot ascertain one simple circumstance, and is left afterwards to fix every point of his theology by the utmost license of fancy and hypothesis. This world, for ought he knows, is very faulty and imperfect, compared to a superior standard; and was only the first rude essay of some infinite deity who afterwards abandoned it, ashamed of his lame performance; it is the work only of some dependent, inferior deity, and is the object of derision to his superiors; it is the production of old age and dotage in some supernatural deity; and ever since his death has run on at adventures, from the first impulse and active force which it received from him.[53]

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[50] *Dialogues*, V, 5.

[51] *Dialogues*, V, 6.

[52] *Dialogues*, V, 8.

[53] *Dialogues*, V, 12.

In short, even assuming the validity of Cleanthes' analogy and the probability of his hypothesis, the result is in Philo's words, a "hypothesis tended with no advantages."[54] Philo drives home this point in Parts X and XI by developing the implications of natural and moral evil for Cleanthes' argument.

> And is it possible, Cleanthes, said Philo, that after all these reflections, and infinitely more which might be suggested, you can still persevere in your anthropomorphism, and assert the moral attributes of the Deity, his justice, benevolence, mercy, and rectitude, to be of the same nature with these virtues in human creatures? His power, we allow, is infinite; whatever he wills is executed; but neither man nor any other animal is happy; therefore, he does not will their happiness. His wisdom is infinite; he is never mistaken in choosing the means to any end; but the course of nature tends not to human or animal felicity; therefore, it is not established for that purpose. Through the whole compass of human knowledge there are no inferences more certain and infallible than these. In what respect, then, do his benevolence and mercy resemble the benevolence and mercy of men?[55]

For Cleanthes, the problem is not merely one of how to reconcile evil with the existence of a benevolent God but instead of how on Cleanthes' principles one could possibly infer the existence of a purely benevolent God from a world in which good and evil are combined throughout and in which human beings regularly inflect pain and suffering on one another. Philo's (and Hume's) rule that we should apportion our conclusions regarding the nature of the cause to what we

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[54] *Dialogues*, VIII, 4.

[55] *Dialogues*, X, 25.

perceive is the effect renders it impossible to *infer* a benevolent God from these circumstances.

c. *The search for ultimate causes is misguided*

Although Philo has reluctantly entertained the notion that hypothesis is valid for purposes of demonstrating the emptiness of it, he does not anywhere in Parts I-XI of the *Dialogues* sincerely concede that Cleanthes' argument by analogy is a sound one. The data from which Cleanthes seeks to infer the existence of an all perfect agent is simply too meager and indefinite even to establish the existence of anything more than a principle of order inherent in the universe. This view is consistent with and supportive of a third and more general line of objection which Philo periodically pursues in the conversations, namely that the entire project of assigning ultimate causes is both in some sense natural and misguided. We get the first hint of this position in Part IV immediately after Cleanthes has argued for the undeniability of a Designer. Philo questions the wisdom of pursuing the existence of a cause similar to human intelligence which would only further beg the question of its own causes.

> How can we satisfy ourselves without going on in infinitum? . . . It were better, therefore, never to look beyond the present material world. By supposing it to contain the principles of its order within itself, we really assert it to be God; and the sooner we arrive at that Divine Being, so much the better. When you go one step beyond

> the mundane system, you only exile an inquisitive human which is impossible ever to satisfy.[56]

Throughout the remainder of the conversations Philo will find ways to support his skepticism by examining both the evidentiary basis of Cleanthes' hypothesis and its consequences for religion. His verdict, however, is that the evidence Cleanthes has chosen; our observations in the orderliness and predictability of the universe, can be explained equally well by a number of different hypotheses, none of which can compel any more conviction than the next *without the preexistence of certain prejudices*. The reason for this as Philo explains is because any hypothesis regarding the causes of the universe which contains more than is necessary to account for the data itself is speculation and subject to honest doubt.

3. *Philo's Position on Religion*

It appears from his speeches in Parts I-XI that Philo consistently and unequivocally rejects Cleanthes' natural theology, subjecting it to at least three types of objection. (1) We are unable to develop a reliable analogy from which to infer the ultimate causes of the universe; (2) even if the universe resembles a machine and the causes of the two bear some remote resemblance, this bare proposition of no practical or theoretical consequence, and will not support any

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[56] *Dialogues*, VI, 9.

particular religious belief; and (3) the effort to identify an external cause of the universe is misguided.

Philo's assessment of religion does not appear to hinge on his evaluation of natural theology. To recall it briefly at this point, Philo's alliance with Demea *appears* to be based on Philo's acceptance of Demea's educational theory that philosophical skepticism can be an aid to religion, and a means of deflecting philosophical criticism which may interfere with the inculcation of religious tenets and values. At the same time, his feigned alliance with Demea on these points allows him to wager a series of comments about "priestcraft" and the uses and abuses of philosophical principles by theologians which are essentially inimical to Demea's position. The true significance and negative force of these statements goes undetected by Demea who is convinced by Philo's ingratiating manner and tactful use of the language that Philo does not question the existence of an all perfect Deity whose nature is ultimately too great for discernment by the human intellect.

Toward the end of the conversations, Philo rekindles his alliance with Demea in another context which affords Philo the opportunity to develop his (and Hume's) theory of the natural causes and moral consequences of religion. This strategy begins in Part X, when Demea announces his view of general revelation. According to Demea, it is not reason or philosophical acumen which leads

mankind to religion, but human suffering and a proper recognition of human imperfections, both intellectual and moral, which reveal the "truth of religions."

> It is my opinion, I own, replied Demea, that each man feels in a manner, the truth of religion within his own breast; and, from a consciousness of his imbecility and misery rather than from any reasoning, is led to seek protection from that Being on whom he and all nature are dependent. So anxious or so tedious are even the best scenes of life that futurity is still the object of all our hopes and fears. We necessarily look forward and endeavor, by prayers, adoration, and sacrifice, to appease those unknown powers whom we find, by experience, so able to afflict and oppress us. Wretched creatures that we are! What resource for us amidst the innumerable ills of life did not religion suggest some methods of atonement, and appease those terrors with which we are incessantly agitated and tormented?[57]

Demea's speech here is reminiscent of Hume's prose in the *Natural History* of Religion and rehearses the same circumstances which Hume presents in the *Natural History* as the natural circumstances under which human beings generate religion.

G. Philo's Challenge to Cleanthes' Moral Argument for Theism

As we saw in the *Natural History*, Hume sounds a negative note with respect to all forms of popular religion, advancing the view that popular religion has in every form led to detrimental consequences for society. For Hume, the reasons for these negative consequences have to do with the fact that a religious motive is made to replace the natural motive which inclines persons to proper

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[57] *Dialogues*, X, 1.

conduct. Acting from moral motives is not enough for the religious man. His effort to win God's favor at times requires a suspension of the ethical which clarifies or demonstrates his dedication to a high being. This is the gist of Hume's criticism of *religion* as distinguished from theology. Furthermore, according to Hume's account, history is full of cases which evidence these pernicious consequences.

Hume elaborates his conception of the relation between religion and morality both in the *Natural History* and in the *Dialogues*. In the *Natural History* the picture Hume gives is that religion, in its popular forms as opposed to "true" religion, may lead to socially irresponsible conduct on the one hand, and outright vicious acts on the other. In the *Dialogues*, Hume allows Philo to explain the dynamic of this relationship. Philo argues on the one hand that natural inclinations do and ought to function as a motive for conduct more powerful than religious belief and that religion as a secondary influence may either become utilized for other interests or else remain inconsequential for behavior altogether. However, Philo goes on to argue that the incessant attempt to refer one's behavior to the will of a divine being in order to achieve a prosperous life hereafter may subvert the natural moral sentiments and thereby lead to immoral practices. Elaborating the first side of this relationship, Philo maintains that the primary impetus for moral conduct stems from natural inclinations and that religious

motives have much less effect on human action than religious authorities have often proclaimed. Philo states that "it is certain from experience that the smallest grain of natural honesty and benevolence has more effect on men's conduct, than the most pompous views suggested by theological theories and systems."[58] According to Philo, natural inclinations work incessantly upon men's minds; religious motives "operate only by starts and bounds."[59] However—and this is the second side of the relationship—religious belief in general and the belief in a future state in particular, can affect human conduct by obscuring the natural moral sentiments through the habitual attempt to secure favor with the deity. Philo puts this dynamic in the following way.

> But even though superstition or enthusiasm should not put itself in direct opposition to morality; the very diverting of the attention, the raising up a new and frivolous species of merit, the preposterous distribution which it makes of praise and blame, must have the most pernicious consequences and weaken extremely men's attachment to the natural motives of justice in humanity.[60]

Philo continues in this vein stating that:

> The steady attention alone to so important an interest as that of eternal salvation is apt to extinguish the benevolent affections, and beget a narrow, contracted selfishness. And when such a temper is

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[58] *Dialogues*, XII, 13.

[59] *Dialogues*, XII, 13.

[60] *Dialogues*, XII, 16.

> encouraged it easily alludes all the general precepts of charity and benevolence.[61]

Philo concludes that "thus the motives of vulgarist superstition have no great influence on general conduct; nor is their operation very favorable to morality, in the instances where they predominate."[62] In Part XII of the *Dialogues*, Cleanthes advances a different kind of argument in favor of theism which focuses not on whether belief in God is justifiable by empirical arguments but instead whether there are moral advantages for accepting theism. In effect, Cleanthes argues that all forms of religion are to some degree justifiable because they provide authority for morality. Philo's response is an artful version of Hume's claims in the *Natural History* that religion has no moral advantages and often seems to foster immoral practices. It is important to note that Philo's criticism, though it might appear to be limited to what he refers to as vulgar superstition and enthusiasm, on closer scrutiny appears to extend to *any* expression of religion which posits the existence of a being or power beyond human nature.

H. *The Role of "Common Sense" in Philo's Position*

Cleanthes has all along been convinced that his version of the teleological argument is confirmed by the dictates of common sense. If Philo's arguments seem to undermine any certain logical route from experience to a theistic

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[61] *Dialogues*, XII, 19.

[62] *Dialogues*, XII, 20.

conclusion, then there is, according to Cleanthes, yet an incontestable proof in the immediate intuitive force of the idea of a Designer. Cleanthes' final appeal lies in a claim for the authority of common sense:

> The declared profession of every reasonable skeptic is only to reject abstruse, remote, and refined arguments, to adhere to common sense and the plain instincts of nature; and to assent, whenever reasons strike him with so full a force that he cannot, without greatest violence prevent it. Now the arguments for natural religion are plainly of this kind; and nothing but the most perverse obstinate metaphysics can reject them.[63]

Thus, for Cleanthes, God's existence is not immediately self evident, but the argument by which this truth is established does depend on an obvious analogy which can only be questioned at the cost of relinquishing all inclinations of common sense and obvious reason. Cleanthes understands Philo to be raising unwarranted objections, contriving obstacles which have little force in the face of such a compelling analogy. He reiterates this evaluation of Philo's reasoning at the close of the conversation in Part VII. By this point, Philo has demonstrated the viability of several alternative hypotheses for explaining the order of the natural universe. And, contrary to Cleanthes' claims, it has *not* required "the most perverse obstinate metaphysics" to raise these objections. Yet Cleanthes takes no note of this and attributes Philo's arguments to his "fertility of invention." That is,

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[63] *Dialogues*, III, 7.

he perceives Philo's objections to stem from a predilection for controversy, rather than from a sincere posture of skepticism.

Cleanthes admits that Philo's objections have caught him without a rebuttal, but he is "not ashamed to acknowledge himself unable, on a sudden to solve regularly such out-of-the-way difficulties as Philo necessarily starts upon him." Moreover, he seems quite certain that common sense and reason are entirely against [Philo], and that such whimsies as he has delivered may puzzle but can never convince us.[64]

As is evident from his ironic treatment of Demea's statements in Part II, Philo is careful to qualify the use of common sense reasoning in matters of religion. Indeed, Philo's skeptical principles preclude such a possibility. For though he does find a persuasiveness in the dictates of natural reason, he is convinced that this common sense is a distillate of experience as observed in ordinary life, and that it is operative as a compelling influence only in those cases where our hypotheses are derived from observation and are verifiable by this authority. Philo has made it explicit that theological speculation has "run wide" from this empirical base and that therefore there can be no certainty that the intuitive force of a theological proposition can be attributable to common sense. As he puts it, "theological reasoning" requires that "apprehensions" be well-

[64] *Dialogues*, VIII, 16.

familiarized with the "objects" of inquiry.[65] If his opponents understand their arguments to be grounded in common sense, then from Philo's view, they have mistaken their well inculcated familiarity with the "object" for a naturally compelling common sense proposition.

It is this religious predisposition which Philo perceives in his colleagues, and which allows him to maintain the strategy of posing his more radical argument in the guise of an in-house theological dispute. Though his skepticism clearly aims at placing any philosophically grounded theistic claims in question, and though he is on this account suspected of infidelity, there is nevertheless a convinced audience around him whose well inculcated theistic beliefs predispose them to accept Philo's deceptively reassuring confessions of piety.

I. *Philo's "Unfeigned Sentiments" and Hume's Position*

Let me briefly summarize the features of my analysis as they emerge from Parts I through XI. It becomes clear that Philo's chief intentions are to force a "suspense of judgement" on the question of God's existence—to place the issue beyond philosophical adjudication, and thereby to undermine the rational footing of natural religion as a means of demonstrating the existence of God. His true intentions are developed under the guise of a dispute over the nature of God. He appears to side with Demea who maintains that God's nature is unknowable. By

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[65] See *Dialogues*, I, 10.

juxtaposing the conflicting claims of his colleagues, Philo is able to use their observations to undermine various philosophical avenues of support for theism. This pattern is marked by Philo's feigned alliance with Demea and with Philo's practice of ingratiating himself with his opponents by complimenting their reasoning and assuring them of his good intentions. Finally, Philo's success in implementing this strategy is owing to his insight into the religious dispositions of his company and the dynamics of their reasoning. He perceives that his colleagues are predisposed to accept theistic explanations, and that they are therefore disinclined to fully acknowledge his infidelity.

By the close of the conversations in Part XI, Philo's cover remains intact. Demea's departure will place a considerable strain on Philo's strategy of using the issue of Divine nature as a pretext; Cleanthes is perceptive enough to recognize the dangerous direction of Philo's arguments. The consequences of Philo's skepticism have been fully revealed, and in the final conversation with Cleanthes, the task is to consolidate these features and to restore any trust which may have been lost in the previous disputes.

In light of this scenario, Philo's devout proclamations in the final dialogue with Cleanthes warrant a considerable degree of suspicion. Having identified Philo's philosophical intentions and conversational strategy, together with the rhetorical features which facilitate these, Philo's confessions of piety become

more readily revealed as a refinement of his previous tactics. By the close of the conversations in Part XI, Philo has completed his purposes of undermining Cleanthes' argument from design. Having no further use for Demea's confounded reasoning, his chief task is to reestablish some credibility with his friend and host, Cleanthes, whose tolerance for the skeptic's "spirit of controversy" is no doubt waning.

Perhaps Philo finds it inappropriate to flaunt his successes over Cleanthes in the presence of Cleanthes' pupil Pamphilus, or perhaps he finds a challenge in maintaining his true position in the cover of hospitable intentions. In either case, the pattern of his deceptive behavior in the previous conversations suggests that Philo's strategy is still intact. In the final dialogue he is out to consolidate his gains, both as a sound thinker and as an accomplished rhetorician. His method is to step back into the ostensibly religious purposes of the conversation, reutilizing the ironic significance of his previous speeches.

With Demea excused from the company, Philo is left without the benefit of a naively articulated philosophical theism. In the previous conversations, Demea's reiteration of the indubitable truth of God's existence provided Philo with an easy place of retreat. Here, he could push his skepticism far enough to do its damage and, if arousing suspicion, could always revert to a feigned affirmation of

Demea's statements. Now, from the time of Demea's departure to the end of the conversations, Philo must provide his own props.

Unlike Demea, Cleanthes has all along recognized the threat of Philo's philosophical principles for theistic arguments. However, in his suspicion, he is never quite certain of Philo's true intentions, and as we see in the opening of Part XII, Cleanthes attributes the "strange lengths" of Philo's arguments to his "spirit of controversy" and to his "abhorrence of vulgar superstition."[66] Philo perceives an opportunity and immediately adopts Cleanthes' distorted perception of Philo's intentions. To console his friend, Philo confides the following explanation of his opinions:

> I must confess . . . that I am less cautious on the subject of Natural Religion than on any other; both because I know that I can never, on that head, corrupt the principles of any man of common sense and because no one, I am quite confident, in whose eyes I appear a man of common sense will ever mistake my intentions. You, in particular, Cleanthes, with whom I live in unreserved intimacy, you are sensible that not withstanding the freedom of my conversations and my love of singular arguments, no one has a deeper sense of religion impressed on his mind, or pays more profound adoration to the Divine Being, as he discovers himself to reason in the inexplicable contrivance and artifice of nature.[67]

The rhetorical features of this passage alert us immediately to the probability of an ironic speech. As the previous discussion has shown, Philo's strategy is

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[66] *Dialogues*, XII, 1.

[67] *Dialogues*, XII, 2.

characterized by an ingratiating posture, carried out with an effusive display of his well-meaning religious intentions. His confession to Cleanthes epitomizes this tactic. Philo, now eager to rekindle his friend's trust, makes his most polished effort. He has something he "must confess" to Cleanthes, with whom he lives "in unreserved intimacy." Elsewhere in the conversations, Philo's airs of sincerity have signaled an oncoming twist of irony, and in these lines he is consistent with the pattern.

The ironic significance of Philo's confession hinges on the use of the terms "common sense" and the disparate meanings which have been invested in this term by each of the participants. Both Demea and Cleanthes have substantiated their theistic arguments with a final appeal to "common sense" reasoning. They differ in their epistemic principles but do nevertheless maintain an insistence on the compelling force of natural reason to clinch their theistic arguments. For Demea, the truth of God's existence is self-evident to "any man of common sense." Cleanthes rejects Demea's *a priori* approach, but in the last analysis does in fact rely on the authority of common sense to establish the validity of his *a posteriori* argument. Philo has claimed an accord with common sense insofar as this represents the reasoning which stems from habitual responses of ordinary human conduct and is corroborated by empirical evidence. He is not willing to attribute the appeal of a hypothesis to its accord with common sense unless it can

be shown that the basis for such a claim is established from observable phenomena. Only then can he be certain that its appeal is attributable to the inclination of natural reason as it arises from experience.

As shown in the previous discussion, Philo has found use for Demea's notion of common sense in his feigned alliance by deceptively acknowledging the reasonableness of religious men, while never actually identifying himself with this class. Here, in his final dialogue with Cleanthes, he adopts a similar approach, this time embracing Cleanthes' trust in Philo's religious intentions. The opening lines of Philo's confession falsely imply that he does not really own the antagonistic implications of his previous arguments, and that these seemingly irreligious speculations were wagered only in the full recognition of their implausibility to "any man of common sense." He continues by insisting that "no one . . . in whose eyes he appears a man of common sense will ever mistake his intentions."

Philo's qualifiers are again the key to his irony. The play on words becomes apparent from a recognition of the difference between Cleanthes' use of the term "common sense" and that of Philo's. Secure in his assumption that his theistic argument carries the advantage of an accord with common sense reasoning, Cleanthes takes the first part of Philo's confession to mean the following: (1) that Philo has ventured to impious lengths only because he realized

that by virtue of its appeal to common sense, the theistic premise could withstand such careless objections, and (2) that Philo was sure that anyone who perceived him as a sensible man assenting to the dictates of common reason would never mistake the raillery of his mischievous spirit for serious objections to the theistic assumption. However, from what has been discerned of his strategy, these lines reveal quite a different meaning. Philo has argued against the legitimacy of Cleanthes' theistic proof, realizing all the while that (1) he would make little headway towards persuading a *religious man of common sense*, i.e., someone who is predisposed to theistic conclusions, and that (2) any man of this disposition would never suspect him of mounting a serious attack against the established truth of God's existence. Cleanthes is a religious man; Philo is not.

The remaining lines of Philo's confession further embody the skeptical conclusions of his philosophical arguments as elaborated in the previous conversations. He claims that "no one has a deeper sense of religion impressed on his mind, or pays more profound adoration to the Divine Being, as he discovers himself to reason in the inexplicable contrivance and artifice of nature." First to be noted are the two senses in which Philo uses the word "religion" in the dialogues. For the most part, his previous speeches address the theistically focused Christian faith, and in this context, he has understood religion as an orientation of prejudice originating in the feelings of fear and hope, and

perpetrated by institutionalized authority. His statements about "priestcraft," coupled with his speeches on the miserable state of human existence, indicate his biases, as do numerous passages from Part XII.[68] However, in Part XII, Philo does develop another sense of religion, distinguishing it from false prejudice. His skeptical conclusions reveal a reverence for the orderly character of the natural universe and that faculty in man which allows him to discover this design. Insofar as his skeptical principles will allow him this much, Philo does practice "true religion" of reason and contemplation of the natural order. Thus, though Cleanthes has clearly taken his words for their more orthodox possibilities, Philo is still able to remain consistent with his disavowal of Christian religion and theistic belief in general, and yet "pay a profound adoration to the Divine Being." For this Being is that which "discovers himself to reason in the inexplicable contrivance and artifice of nature" or, in other words, that principle of order in the universe which is discovered by human reason.

This naturalistic explanation is the pivotal ground of Philo's "unfeigned sentiments" as they emerge in the subsequent lines of his speeches. In his further responses to Cleanthes, he stands by the "maxim" "that nature does nothing in vain,"[69] and in the next exchange he continues this theme to suggest that a

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[68] See especially *Dialogues*, XII, 29.

[69] *Dialogues*, XII, 2.

suspense of judgement on this point is not, with any degree of intellectual honesty, possible.[70] Considering the variance of opinion on this matter, he is inclined to locate the real problem of controversy in the ambiguous use of language.

Philo's "unfeigned sentiments," as they are developed in Part XII, paragraphs 6, 7, and 8—and professed as such in paragraph 9—may be viewed in two claims. First, there is an analogy between human artifacts and the order of nature which will allow us to conclude that similar causal principles are at work.[71] Second, Philo contends that the controversy between believers and skeptics over this matter is a merely verbal dispute which stems from the ambiguity concerning matters of degree.[72] By introducing this theoretical framework, Philo is able to reduce the results of Cleanthes' analogy to a naturalistic explanation of the universe, positing "God" as nothing more than an embellishment of the principle of natural order. The following passage illustrates this reduction:

> Here, then, the existence of a Deity is plainly ascertained by reason; and if we make it a question whether, on account of these analogies, we can properly call him a mind or intelligence, not withstanding the vast difference which may reasonably be

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[70] *Dialogues*, XII, 6.

[71] See *Dialogues*, XII, 6.

[72] See *Dialogues*, XII, 68.

> supposed between him and human minds; what is this but a mere verbal controversy?[73]

As Cleanthes interprets these words, Philo would seem to be suggesting a rapprochement between skeptics and believers, by showing the ambiguity of the "dispute concerning theism" to rest in a verbal misunderstanding. However, Cleanthes takes this verbal dispute to concern the degree of similarity between God's nature and the nature of the human mind. Ironically, Philo is suggesting that the real issue concerns the degree to which the principle of order can be compared to human intelligence. Nothing in Philo's clever speech concedes any reason to infer or postulate anything more than the bare principles of order in nature. As Philo puts it, the disputants may here agree in their sense and differ in their terms, or *vice versa*. As we have seen, both Philo and Cleanthes can use the term "Designer," but to Philo the only point which remains unambiguous is that there exists a principle of natural order which bears some resemblance to human intelligence. Although Cleanthes continues to impute a theistic cause to this principle, there is nothing in Philo's speeches which clearly links his principle of order with a reality beyond nature itself.

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[73] *Dialogues*, XII, 6.

By this point in the conversation, Philo has safely regained the trust of his friend Cleanthes and continues to reiterate the conclusions of his skeptical principles in the guise of religious conviction:

> If the whole of natural theology, as some people seem to maintain, resolves itself into one simple, though somewhat ambiguous, at least undefined, proposition, that the cause or causes of order in the universe probably bear some remote analogy to human intelligence if this proposition be not capable of extension, variation, or more particular explication; if it affords no inference that affects human life, or can be the source of any action or forbearance; and if the analogy, imperfect as it is, can be carried no further than to the human intelligence and cannot be transferred, with any appearance of probability, to the other qualities of the mind; if this really be the case, what can the most inquisitive, contemplative, and religious man do more than give a plain, philosophical assent to the proposition, as often as it occurs, and believe that the arguments on which it is established exceed the objections which lie against it? Some astonishment, indeed, will naturally arise from the greatness of the object; some melancholy from its obscurity; some contempt of human reason that it can give no solution more satisfactory with regard to so extraordinary and magnificent a question.[74]

These lines reflect the ultimate intentions of Philo in the conversations. He has seen to it that the "whole of natural theology" "has resolved itself" to a mere "proposition" of natural order. Insofar as he recognizes the "Divine Being" who discovers himself to reason, he is a "religious man." Furthermore, these lines reflect the aim of his strategy. He has allowed the issue to "resolve itself" by placing the religious claims of his opponents against one another, and by

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[74] *Dialogues*, XII, 33.

eventually reducing the theistic component of natural religion to a naturalistic principle.

In the speech cited above, Philo has begun his final steps back into the feigned position of religious skepticism which won his earlier alliance with Demea, while at the same time remaining consistent with his true position of agnosticism. He notes the "greatness of the object," "the melancholy which arises from its obscurity" and "the contempt of human reason," all themes of the skeptical doubt which characterized Demea's position. Philo continues to address Cleanthes concealing his true sentiments behind a facade of orthodoxy.

> But believe me, Cleanthes, the most natural sentiment which a well-disposed mind will feel on this occasion is a longing desire and expectation that heaven would be pleased to dissipate, at least alleviate, the profound ignorance by affording some more particular revelation to mankind, and making discoveries of the nature, attributes and operations of the divine object of our faith.[75]

Having established a portrait of Philo's aims and methods, it becomes clear that his words are well chosen to serve an ironic function. If by the term "well-disposed" Philo means to imply the notion of a mind "seasoned" with piety, or sufficiently familiarized with the "object" of theological reasoning, he is again careful not to claim this disposition for his own. At the same time, these lines suggest the conclusion of Philo's true skepticism, that there is no empirical

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[75] *Dialogues*, XII, 33.

justification for the theistic proposition. For the "well-disposed mind" of a believer, there is, in the absence of any concrete empirical evidence, "a longing desire and expectation that heaven would be pleased to dissipate, at least alleviate, the profound ignorance . . ." Yet, for a mind which is not guided by this theistic predisposition, the lack of empirical evidence must lead to an agnostic conclusion. Furthermore, as Philo continues to point out, there are two routes which belief bound reasoning must take; that of "the person, seasoned with a just sense of the imperfections of natural reason, [who] will fly to revealed truth with the greatest avidity," and that of "the haughty dogmatist, persuaded that he can erect a complete system of theology by the mere help of philosophy . . . ."[76] Again, Philo has subtly traced the methodological predilections of his opponents, while falsely insinuating his preference for a theistic skepticism. Yet, he conspicuously avoids a personal avowal of theism and, by his previously announced principles, it is clear that he perceives both Cleanthes and Demea to have assumed more than they are allowed by reason alone.

In his closing remarks to Pamphilus, Philo maintains his familiar pretext of religious skepticism, attempting to fully restore a continuity with the position of his opening speeches. His words are meant to finalize the false impression that

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[76] *Dialogues*, XII, 33.

he has never seriously deviated from the orthodox leaning of Demea's fideistic skepticism.

> To be a philosophical skeptic is, in a man of letters, the first and most essential step towards being a sound believing Christian proposition which I would willingly recommend to the attention of Pamphilus; and I hope Cleanthes will forgive me for interposing so far in the education and institution of his pupil.[77]

These remarks appear as the conclusion of a believer—a "well disposed" person who is summarizing his treatment of the issue of the Divine nature, reemphasizing the prideful tendency of man and warning against the consequences of anthropomorphism. In this context, Philo's recommendation takes on the following meaning. "To be a philosophical skeptic" is to question the adequacy of reason for the task of assigning the Divine attributes (the truth of God's existence being beyond question). And, in "a man of letters" (one who is sensitive to the misery of human existence), it becomes essential to acknowledge these inadequacies as a witness to the impossibility of inferring the perfect nature of God from the character of the universe. Then, for a "sound believing Christian," a philosophical skepticism is essential for preserving the sacredness and perfection of the object of belief. Philo has never identified himself as a "well-disposed mind" and we are familiar enough with the disguise to know that these comments are intended to fill any gap in a long sustained deceptive ploy. Thus, in these

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[77] *Dialogues*, XII, 33.

lines, Philo has come full circle, reutilizing the features of his earlier alliance with Demea.

At the close of the conversations in Part XII, Philo has seen to it that the issues entailed in the subject of natural religion appear intact; that the problem of the nature of God continues to be a question of much dispute, and that this debate presupposes the being of God as a truth beyond doubt. These are the assumptions of a "sound believing" religious skeptic and are advanced by Philo as the basis of a proper religious education.

Pamphilus' closing comments on the outcome of the conversations reflect his understanding of the subject matter as he presents it in the introduction. As he judges it, "Philo's principles are more probable than Demea's but . . . those of Cleanthes approach still nearer to the truth."[78] As we have seen, Philo has all the while pushed beyond the theistic assumptions which Pamphilus leaves unquestioned. He has concealed his true aims in deceptive language which allows him to develop an attack on theism under the guise of a doctrinal dispute. Pamphilus has been eluded by this subtlety, recognizing neither the ulterior aims of the skeptic nor the full force of his arguments. As a result, the narrator closes his account of the conversations with a verdict founded on a mistaken understanding of the issues of the dialogues, and of Philo's intentions in particular.

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[78] *Dialogues*, XII, 34.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE LEGACY OF HUME'S CRITIQUE OF RELIGION

In this final chapter, I would like to turn my attention to a legacy of Hume's critique of religion. If the readings of the *Dialogues* and the *Natural History* I have just presented are plausible, I believe they clearly demonstrate the continuing relevance of Hume's thought for contemporary reflections on religion and theology. In what follows, I would like to explore three ways in which Hume's writings remain significant for contemporary religious thought.

The first has to do with the *scope* of Hume's critique of theistic claims, which constitutes what I take to be one of the most problematic legacies of Hume's critique of religion—namely, the relation between religious belief and the passions. Hume famously asserts that reason is a slave to the passions, and that rational argumentation in itself is rarely, if ever, sufficient to convince believers to alter or abandon their religious convictions. What then is the status of religious beliefs? In particular, can religious belief be considered to be a "natural belief," like the belief in causality (i.e., necessarily grounded in human nature even if open to attack on strictly rational grounds)? Or does Hume's ultimate attack on religion lie in the claim that religious beliefs can *never* be assimilated to natural beliefs, but in the end are reducible to extra-rational determinants such a culture, education, and psycho-social predispositions?

The second has to do with the overall *form* of Hume's critique of religion, which I believe bears an important family resemblance to the type of critique proposed in the nineteenth-century by thinkers such as Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud. Hume's approach was not based solely on his critique and ultimate rejection of theistic arguments (an evidentiary examination), but depends equally on his theory of *how* religious beliefs are formed (their origin) and how the religious sentiments that sustain them *affect* the psychology and social/moral character of individual believers (their consequences). In particular, I will briefly compare Hume and Freud with regard to their respective assessments of the social function of religion as an "illusion," and whether this illusory status has negative or positive social effect.

The third has to do, finally, with the *implications* of Hume's critique of religion. In particular, Hume's arguments continue to pose a serious challenge to the positions taken in several schools of contemporary philosophical theology, two of which I will discuss below (liberal theology and process theology).

A. *Hume's Theory of Religious Belief*

I turn first to the question of the status of religious belief in Hume's philosophy. We have already looked at this question in a preliminary manner. The *Natural History* dealt with both the *origins* of religious belief (in the passions) and the *effects* of religious belief of behavior (which are primarily negative), while the

Dialogues dealt primarily with the *rational justification* of religious beliefs. What we must concern ourselves with now is a different, and specifically Humean question, namely, Can religious beliefs be assimilated to "natural" beliefs?

The term "natural belief" is not found in Hume's own writings but was coined by Norman Kemp Smith, in a well-known article, to designate a certain class of beliefs (such as causality, the self, the world) which, though they have no rational ground, can nonetheless be considered as "natural beliefs" because they are indispensable to human nature.[1] (Hume occasionally uses the terms "original instinct" or "natural instinct," though these are not synonymous with what Kemp Smith calls a "natural belief," whose terminology has found a permanent home in the literature on Hume.) The question before us is the following: Can the belief in God be classified as an essential "natural belief?" The secondary literature on Hume is divided on this question. R. J. Butler, in an influential article, "Natural Belief and the Enigma of Hume," has argued forcefully that the belief in an orderly universe stemming from an agent designer commonly called "God" is indeed, according to Hume, an essential natural belief.[2] J. C. A. Gaskin, in his book *Hume's Philosophy of Religion*, has argued that it is not.[3]

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[1] See Norman Kemp Smith, "The Naturalism of Hume" I and II, *Mind*, Vol. 14 (1905).

[2] R. J. Butler, "Natural Belief and the Enigma of Hume," *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie* (1960), pp. 73-100.

[3] J. C. A. Gaskin, *Hume's Philosophy of Religion* (Atlantic Highlands, N. J.: Humanities Press, 1988), chapter 6, pp. 108-119.

The difficulties in settling this point stem from the fact that one cannot simply rely on the discussions of religious belief given in the *Natural History* and the *Dialogues*, but must go on to interpret them in light of the larger theory of belief presented by Hume in the *Treatise*, in particular, as well as the *Enquiries*. My position, which I share with Gaskin, is that the belief in God is *not* a natural belief. To defend this position, I would like to sketch out briefly Hume's theory of belief, drawing primarily on the *Treatise*, since it is only with this theory in hand that we can comprehend why the belief in God cannot be a natural belief.[4]

Hume's starting point in the *Treatise* is the proposition that the mind, in itself, by itself, is nothing but a flux of perceptions—a collection of separate and distinct impressions and ideas. Hume initially uses the term "imagination" to designate, not a faculty, but precisely this fleeting collection of impressions and ideas. The imagination has the power to pass from one idea to another on its own, but it effects this passage by chance, indifferently, without constancy or uniformity.[5]

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[4] The discussion of Hume's theory of belief that follows is based in part on the analysis presented in an article by Daniel W. Smith entitled, "Associative Principles and General Rules: The Position of the "Standard of Taste" in Hume's Principles of Human Nature," unpublished manuscript (1993), Department of Philosophy, University of Chicago.

[5] *Treatise*, p. 193. Hume's philosophy, as Kant recognized, is a philosophy of the imagination: "the memory, senses, and understanding are therefore, *all of them* founded on the imagination, or the vivacity of our ideas" (*Treatise*, p. 265). Norman Kemp Smith, in *The Philosophy of David Hume* (New York: Macmillan, 1941), pp. 133-137, notes that Hume employs the term "imagination" in two ways: first, as the "vivacity of our ideas" (which is what we are referring to here); and second, as we shall see, as the "fancy," that is, a *faculty* of "feigning." On the first use, Hume writes that "the mind is a kind of *theatre*, where several perceptions successively make their appearance, pass, re-pass, glide away, and mingle in an infinite variety of postures and situations . . . [But] the comparison of the theatre must not mislead us . . . . *We have not the most distant notion of the place, where these scenes are represented, or of the materials, of which it is composed*" (*Treatise*, p. 253).

The imagination per se is not an entity or an arena, but a type of fiction or fantasy, which is used by Hume to designate a certain power or potentiality. The first pole of Hume's philosophical system could thus be characterized as a kind of *atomism*: sensible impressions and ideas are the atoms of the mind, the minimal and irreducible terms of Hume's analysis.

The second pole of Hume's philosophical system is what has been termed *associationism*, which demonstrates how *relations* are established between these terms by the understanding, which thereby achieve a coherence they lack in the imagination. Hume posits three principles of association—resemblance, contiguity, and causality—which organize ideas and impressions into a *system* or scheme, imposing on the imagination a uniformity and constancy it does not have in itself. The principles of association convert the world of the imagination into the world of human experience, the world of common sense, and the world of our common life. Without these principles of association, the imagination would never become a "faculty" of the mind, and the mind would never become a "human nature."

What is an associative relation? For Hume, an "association" is what makes us pass from a given impression or idea to an idea of something that is not presently given. For example, on seeing a portrait of Rebecca, I think of Rebecca who is not herself present (association of "resemblance"); when I have an impression of the Eiffel Tower, I think of the Louvre nearby (association of "continguity"). Such

relations are the effects of the principles of association, bringing a certain order to the ideas and impressions of the imagination. It is by means of these principles that the understanding corrects and limits the fictive expressions of the imagination, and gives to human nature its constancy.

Causality functions in Hume's work as a special type of relation, and it is this relation that lies at the basis of his theory of belief. Causality, as a relation, not only makes me pass from a given term to something that is not currently given, but to something that has *never* been given to me or even something that is not *giveable* in experience. For example, from signs I read in a book, I believe that a battle took place at the Alamo; having seen the sun rise a thousand times, I infer or assume that it will rise tomorrow; having seen water boil at 100 degree Celsius on numerous occasions, I infer that it necessarily boils at 100 degrees. Locutions like "tomorrow," "always," and "necessarily" express something that is not given in experience. Causality is thus a relation in which I go beyond what is given in order to infer and believe. This, then, is what lies at the root of Hume's theory of belief: In making a judgment, in forming a belief, I affirm more than I perceive. My judgment establishes a relation that goes beyond what is given in sensible experience.

Significantly, Hume's theory of belief cannot be captured in a crude form of empiricism. The empiricist thesis, put in a crude form, is that *knowledge is derived*

from experience: everything finds its origin in the sensible, and in the operations of the mind upon the sensible. Hume does not engage in this kind of reductionism. With respect to almost every complex belief that Hume considers (causality, the existence of the world, the self, and so on), the search for the linear path that would allow him to reduce an idea to its corresponding impression leads almost immediately to an impasse.[6] Instead, Hume attempts to analyze the more complex interrelations among principles that habitually bind together separate impressions and simple ideas in order to produce complex ideas which are not copies but inferences or beliefs, and which affirm more than is really given. The material origin of ideas (reduction to atomistic impressions), in other words, is insufficient to explain their *formation* (elaboration of associationist principles).

The principles of association, then, impose constant laws upon the mind which discipline the fictions of the imagination and, in the case of causality, provide a means of *extension* that allows the mind to go beyond what is given in experience. Hume explains this functioning of the causal relation in terms of *habit*. Experience itself merely presents to the mind a multiplicity of independent cases of constant conjunction (every time I see A, it is followed or accompanied by B). Habit is a principle by which the imagination establishes a union or temporal *synthesis* of

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[6]For instance, in his discussion of personal identity, Hume writes, "Nor have we any idea of the *self*, after the manner it is here explained. For from what impression cou'd this idea be deriv'd? . . . . Self or person is not any one impression . . ." (*Treatise*, p. 251).

these repeated cases (when A appears, I now *expect* the appearance of B). The role of the imagination in habit is to extract something *new* from a repetition, and what it extracts is a *belief*.[7] Hume in this way places belief at the base of the understanding.

However, on Hume's account the role of the principles of association goes beyond the operation of bringing an order to the impressions. Hume attempts to show that the imagination can in turn make use of the very principles that discipline it in order to circumvent these *same* principles and give them a new extension, thereby conferring upon its own beliefs and fictions a legitimacy that they do not possess in themselves. In other words, the imagination can make use of the principles of association to create *new types of fiction*. For instance, the imagination can form a belief rashly, on the basis of too few repetitions, which is one of the sources of prejudice and bigotry (from one or two encounters, I conclude that "an Irishman cannot have wit, and a Frenchman cannot have solidity"[8]).

Above all, in the case of *causality*, the imagination is capable of forging *fictive* causal chains, sometimes by confusing the accidental with the essential,[9]

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[7] "*Experience* is a principle, which instructs me in the several conjunctions of objects for the past. *Habit* is another principle, which determines me to expect the same for the future; and both of them conspiring to operate upon the imagination, made me form certain ideas in a more intense and lively manner, than other, which are not attended with the same advantages."

[8] *Treatise*, p. 146: we have a strong tendency to follow "general rules, which we rashly form to ourselves, and which are the source of what we properly call prejudice."

[9] For example, to a man afflicted with vertigo, "the [accidental] circumstances of depth and descent strike so strongly upon him that their influence cannot be destroy'd by the contrary [essential] circumstances of support and solidity, which ought to give him perfect security" (*Treatise*, p. 148.). Likewise, "we observe that the vigor of conception, which fictions receive from poetry and eloquence, is a circumstance merely accidental, of which every idea is equally susceptible; and that such fictions are connected with nothing that is real" (p. 631).

sometimes by substituting for a really observed repetition a merely spoken repetition that simulates its effect. Thus the liar, by repeating his or her lies, winds up believing them; the student believes in the ideas repeatedly presented to him or her through education; and even the philosopher, by dint of speaking of "faculties" and "occult qualities," believes that that these words "have a secret meaning, which we might discover by reflection."[10] All such feigned relations produce *illegitimate beliefs*. The imagination, in other words, can infer fictive relations, invoke false experiences, and produce beliefs by "a repetition, as is not derived from experience."[11]

On this point, Kant owes something to Hume: we are not simply led astray by error; we are steeped in *illusion*, disposed to illegitimate exercises of our faculties and illegitimate functionings of relations. Moreover, Hume's theory of belief here anticipates a feature that would become central to later critical theories such as Marx's—namely, the notion of *false consciousness*. Raymond Geuss, in his landmark book *The Idea of a Critical Theory*, has suggested that false consciousness can be understood in at least three ways—each of which can *mutatis mutandis* be applied to Hume's notion of false belief: (1) as *epistemically*

[10] *Treatise*, pp. 116-117, 224. For Hume, words in general have the effect of producing "counterfeit beliefs," "chimeras," which explains the power of eloquence and poetry, as well as the seductions of credulity and superstition, and makes the philosophical critique of language necessary (cf. *Treatise*, p. 123).

[11] *Treatise*, p. 140. "Habit not only approaches in its influence, but even on many cases *prevails over*, that which arises from the constant and inseparable union of causes and effects" (p. 116). "The custom of *imagining* a dependence, has the same effect as the custom of *observing* it would have" (p. 222).

false (insofar as, in Hume, it is derived from an erroneous application of the principles of association—which is the type of false belief we are referring to here); (2) as *functionally* false (insofar as, in Hume, the consequences of the belief sustains an unhealthy or undesirable state of affairs; and (3) as *genetically* false (insofar as it masks its genesis or origins, and obscures the reasons the subject is motivated to accept it—reasons which, for Hume, may lie in the subject's passions, dispositions, education, social circumstances, and so on).[12] The fact that each of these aspects of false consciousness, as set out by Geuss, are already present in Hume's notion of a false belief supports my contention—which I will explore further below—that Hume can be fruitfully read as a precursor to the critical theories of Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud.

How then can one *correct* such false beliefs or fictions? Such fictions, says Hume, can only be corrected by applying a second set of general rules, which Hume calls rules of *philosophical probability*. "All the rules of this nature," writes Hume, "are very easy in their invention, but extremely difficult in their application."[13] These rules (which, as Passmore shows, are in fact derived from Newton) allow the understanding to determine the real parts of Nature and experience, to determine "when objects *really are* . . . causes and effects to each other," and thus to separate

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[12] Raymond Geuss, *The Idea of a Critical Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

[13] *Treatise*, p. 175.

the accidental from the essential, to ascertain true "matters of fact."[14] It can then enumerate the relevant number of past instances, examine the proportions that exist between them, and finally, determine the resulting degree of quantitative probability (knowledge, proofs, probabilities as kinds of evidence). It is only through such a "calculus" of probabilities that belief can be maintained within the limits of the understanding, and habit within the limits of past experience.[15] Beliefs that pass the test of the calculus are what Norman Kemp Smith, in a famous article, has called "naturalized" beliefs.[16]

Thus, at the heart of Hume's theory of the understanding there lies a correction of general rules *by* general rules: on the one hand, there are *formative and extensive* rules that determine the exercise of causality relative to experience; and on the other hand, there are *corrective* rules that critique the illegitimate exercises of such extensions outside of experience by the imagination. As Hume puts it, "[t]he following of general rules is a very unphilosophical species of

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[14] *Treatise*, p. 173, 175 (in I, 3, 15: "Rules by which to judge of causes and effects"); cf. p. 149. See John Passmore, *Hume's Intentions* (New York: Basic Books, 1952), pp. 51ff.

[15]Cf. *Treatise*, Book 1, Part 3, Sections 11 and 12 (see esp. pp. 149-150). Only such a calculus can account for "the *reasons* which determine us to make the past a standard for the future, and the *manner* how we extract a single judgment from a contrariety of past events" (pp. 133-134).

[16] Norman Kemp Smith, "The Naturalism of Hume" I and II, *Mind*, Vol. 14 (1905).

probability; and yet 'tis only by following them that we can *correct* this, and all other unphilosophical probabilities."[17]

There is yet a third moment in this relation between the imagination and the understanding. In some of his most subtle and difficult analyses, Hume denounces the three great terminal ideas of metaphysics (Self, World, and God) as illegitimate beliefs that depend upon fictive functionings of relations. He attempts to argue that two of these illusions, Self and World, are *uncorrectable*, and in a certain sense inseparable from legitimate beliefs, indispensable to their organization, and thus are themselves a part of human nature. With respect to the concept of God, he reaches a different conclusion. For Hume, I would argue, the idea of God is formed through a *purely* fantastic use of the principles of association that is immediately illegitimate, such that the corrective work of the understanding in this case results in a *total* critique that allows nothing to subsist. In other words, in Hume's account, religious beliefs are *denied* rather than corrected, and Hume generally tends to exclude religion and everything connected with it (e.g., the "monkish virtues") from the realm of "common sense."

Hume's treatment of the notions of "world" and "self" is decidedly different from his treatment of religious belief.[18] Hume treats the idea of "World" as a *fiction that becomes a principle of human nature*, which must coexist with the other

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[17] *Treatise*, p. 150.

[18] See Book 1, Part 4, esp. Section 2, "Of Scepticism With Regard to the Senses," pp. 187-218. A fine analysis of these passages can be found in Livingston, *Hume's Philosophy of Common Life*, esp. Chapter 1, "Post-Pyrrhonian Philosophy," pp. 9-33.

principles. The fictions of continuity and distinction (upon which the idea of the Self also depends) *cannot* be corrected. The effect of the principles of human nature is to transform the mere *collection* of ideas in the mind into a *system*, a system of knowledge and the knowledge of objects. But the system will only be complete when we go beyond the intervals that interrupt our perceptions, and give to objects an idea that does not depend on our senses "by *feigning* a continued being, which may fill those intervals, and preserve a perfect and entire identity to our perceptions."[19] In other words, the system is achieved only when it is *identified* with the external World. But in becoming a principle, the fiction can neither be corrected nor destroyed by the reflections of reason: "We have no choice left," Hume concludes, "but betwixt a false reason and none at all."[20]

It is from this point of view that we must comprehend the complex "drama" of modern skepticism that Hume elaborates.

1. The first act of Hume's skepticism shows how the principles of human nature fix the imagination by "naturalizing" belief and placing it at the base of the understanding, that is, by defining knowledge as a *legitimate* belief (extensive general rules).

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[19] *Treatise*, pp. 207-208.

[20] *Treatise*, p. 268.

2. The second act consists in the discovery that the imagination can itself make use of those same principles both to legitimate its own fictions, and in the denunciation of the *illegitimate* beliefs that do not obey the productive rules of the understanding (corrective general rules, or the calculus of probabilities).

3. In the third act, finally, the fictions of World and the Self although illegitimate, are not subject to correction and become a condition for all possible legitimate beliefs. The seeming necessity or fundamental quality of such beliefs renders them invulnerable to skeptical analysis.[21] They are in this sense experienced as "natural."

With this theory of belief in hand, we are now in a position to understand why Hume does not and cannot assimilate belief in God to a natural belief. In the *Natural History*, Hume distinguishes two sources of the religious sentiment—(1) human passions, the events of life that are irreducible to unity, the succession of hopes and fears, which produce, by their reflection in the imagination, polytheism or idolatry, and (2) the observation of the unity of nature which, by another reflection, produces theism—and then goes on to argue that theism is a *correction* of idolatry, and brings religion back into the limits and conditions of its proper exercise. (The apparent contradiction here lies in the fact that Hume has already argued that it is precisely the conditions of a legitimate observation of nature itself which prevents us from extracting, by resemblance or by causality, the least conclusion concerning

[21] See *Enquiries*, p. 155n: The arguments of skepticism *"admit of no answer and produce no conviction.* Their only effect is to cause momentary amazement and irresolution and confusion."

God). In the *Natural History*, Hume then *appears* to be arguing that regardless of its origins, a belief in invisible intelligent power is both unavoidable and subject to a form of rational justification. Is Hume in fact arguing that the belief in God is an unavoidable "natural belief" like the belief in cause and effect or the belief in a unified self? I would argue that he is not.

What beliefs are qualified to be termed "natural beliefs," that is, beliefs that have no rational (i.e., probabilistic) ground, but which are nonetheless deemed to be indispensable? Commentators generally agree in isolating three candidates for such beliefs in Hume's work: causality, the world, and the self. These three beliefs apparently do not occupy the same status within Hume's overall theory of belief.

Causality is the "natural belief" that lies at the basis of our "common sense": causality is not something we find among objects but rather is a subjective principle of association, without which we would never have a "human nature" or go beyond the raw data of sensible experience (having seen the sun rise a thousand times, we now have the *habit* of expecting it to rise tomorrow). For Hume, causality is thus a natural belief that constitutes a fundamental *principle* of human nature. It is for this reason that Kant, following Hume, classified causality as a *category*, that is, a concept that constitutes a condition of possibility for our experience of any object whatsoever.

In turn, World and Self are also natural beliefs in Hume, but they have a different status than the belief in causality. They are in a sense, second order

"natural beliefs." As we have seen, belief in the World and the Self depend upon the fictions of *continuity* and *distinction*, which bestows an *identity* to the objects of our sensible impressions (as well as to our own identity as Selves) which is not given in the impressions themselves. World and Self are not *principles* of human nature; they are direct *fictions* of the imagination which can nonetheless be termed natural beliefs because they come to complete the system of knowledge that results from the principles of human nature.

The belief in God does not, in Hume's account of it, have the status of either a basic principle of human nature like cause and effect or a second order necessary fiction like the ideas of Self and World. In the *Natural History*, Hume *explicitly* avoids speaking of the belief in God as a natural belief. "The universal propensity to believe in an invisible, intelligent power," he writes, "if *not* an original instinct, is at least a general attendant of human nature."[22] And indeed, Hume poses the same question with regard to belief in God as he does to every other belief: Under what conditions is it a legitimate belief? And Hume provides a rigorous response to this question. Belief in God becomes legitimate only when we think of God as the *cause* of the principles of human nature themselves, in other words, as the idea of an *accord* between human nature and Nature itself. (Hume, of course, can go no farther than to simply *posit* this idea of an accord. The audacity of Kant's

[22] *Natural History*, 75, emphasis added.

"Copernican Revolution" lies in the fact that he makes this accord depend entirely on the subjective principles of our own thought: Nature *must* be subject to *our* categories of thought, thereby making the object revolve around the subject, and giving the idea of God an entirely different status.)

This is the conclusion of the last paragraph of the *Dialogues*, spoken by Philo:

> If the whole of natural theology, as some people seem to maintain, resolves itself into one simple, though somewhat ambiguous, at least undefined proposition, *that the cause or causes of order in the universe probably bear some remote analogy to human intelligence*: If this proposition be not capable of extension, variation, or more particular explication: If it afford no inference the affects human life, or can be the source of any action or forbearance: And if the analogy, imperfect as it is, can be carried no further than to the human intelligence; . . . what can [a man] do more than give a plain, philosophical assent to the proposition, as often as it occurs.[23]

This is the sole content, in Hume's philosophy, of a legitimate belief in God: the belief that "the cause or causes of order in the universe *probably* bear *some* remote analogy to human intelligence." Any other content given to the belief in God is purely fictive, illusory, and illegitimate.

What is the nature of this belief? Hume is explicit: such a belief in God is *not* a natural belief, in the way we have defined it; rather it is a *rational belief.* Gaskin gives two persuasive reasons why belief in God is not a natural belief: (1) it

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[23] *Dialogues*, XII.

is not universal, and (2) it is not requisite for participation in the daily affairs of life. As Gaskin writes, "Assent to the existence of God in this sense carries no duties, invites no action, allows no inferences, and involves no devotion."[24] On the contrary, the text makes it clear that Philo is assenting to an *argument*, and the assent he is giving to the belief in God is a "plain, *philosophical* assent." This is the language of judicious philosophical evaluation, and the resulting belief is clearly a rational belief. But it is a rational belief so hedged by doubts, restrictions, and ambiguities that both the religious man and the speculative atheist can be brought to give their assent to it. It is merely the assent of a reasoning mind of the *probability* that the cause of the principles of human nature *perhaps* bears some *remote* analogy to the cause of order in Nature.

There are, then, only *two* types of natural belief in Hume: the natural belief in causality, which is a principle of human nature; and the belief in the World and the Self, which are direct fictions of the imagination that nonetheless remain unavoidable. Belief in God, by contrast, is not a natural belief in Hume. *Either* it is a pathological fiction produced by the imagination (whether this belief is produced directly, or through a misuse of the principles of association), *or* it is a purely rational, speculative, and metaphysical belief in the accord of human nature with Nature itself.

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[24] Gaskin, *Hume's Philosophy of Religion*, p. 126.

Once again, we here come up against Hume's complete rejection of religious belief, which never finds a legitimate place in the shared world of our "common sense," but is instead relegated to the pathological or the metaphysical. As Terence Penelhum puts it: "The forces that impel us to adopt the beliefs of common life are found in all men, whereas those that lead us into metaphysics or into religion are found only in *some* men. Metaphysics is a relative rarity, indulged in only by philosophers. Religion is not a rarity in the same way, but the forces that produce it are *pathological* forces, such as the superstitious fear of the unknown, and fortunate men in civilized communities can be free of them."[25]

B. *Hume's Relation to Critical Theory*

Let me turn now to the second aspect of Hume's thought which has contemporary relevance, an aspect that concerns the *form* of Hume's critique of religion. Hume's philosophical writings embody, at least in a germinal way, two critical approaches to religion which are influential both in secular scholarship and in popular attitudes. The first approach, characterized by the work of twentieth century analytic philosophers, attempts to understand religion in terms of its *truth value*, and attacks religious beliefs on the grounds that they are rationally indefensible. The second approach, common among social scientists,

[25] Terence Penelhum, *God and Scepticism* (Dordrecht: Reidel, 1983), p. 127.

may imply that religious beliefs lack truth value, but tends to understand religion principally in terms of its *origin*, *function*, and *consequences*.

The aim of this second critical approach is not so much to show that belief cannot be rationally justified; rather it is to explain away religion as being symptomatic of unhealthy social and psychological conditions. Because of his important interests in the limits of reason and his rigorous skeptical attack on natural religion, Hume is commonly identified with the first type of critique. Hume is not often associated with the second type of critique, the paradigmatic examples of which appear in the nineteenth century works of Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud. The thesis I would like to put forward is that Hume to some extent *anticipated* this approach to religion in the *Natural History*, or at the very least paved the way for it. Whatever *historical* links there may be between Hume's critique and the nineteenth-century critiques, what I would like to emphasize are the important *conceptual* links between their respective approaches to the critique of religion.

It is in this sense that the *form* of Hume's critique of religion can be seen as a precursor to the nineteenth-century critiques offer by Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud. As I noted in my introduction, Paul Ricoeur once suggested, famously, that these three thinkers attacked religion in a new kind of way because they were able to create a new kind of hermeneutic of religion, which Ricoeur calls a

"hermeneutics of suspicion," and which was quite different from the critiques of religion rooted in British empiricism.[26] They did not approach the topic of religion by disputing the so-called proofs for the existence of God, nor did they attempt to argue that the notion of God is a meaningless concept. Rather, they invented a mode of critique in which religious beliefs were seen to be symptoms of more profound, but hidden, wishes and fears. Religion is an "illusion" (as distinct from a mere "error," in the epistemological sense), and it is the illusory status of religion that prevents its true meaning from being revealed to the observer. What is required, then, is a method of *decipherment*, a reductive hermeneutics that would reveal and clarify the underlying determinants of religious belief. As Ricoeur writes, "Their hermeneutics may be thought of as both a philology and a 'genealogy.' They are philological in that they are modes of exegesis or interpretation aimed at discovering the true text beneath the distortions of illusion. They are 'genealogical' in attempting to trace the origin of the conflict between instincts and counter-instincts that results in the distortion of reality."[27] The fact that Nietzsche called the real origin of religion the "will to

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[26] See Paul Ricoeur, "Religion, Atheism, and Faith," in *The Religious Significance of Atheism* (New York and London: Columbia University Press, 1969).

[27] Ricoeur, p. 62.

power," and Freud called it the "libido," is incidental to the fact that they both critiqued religion by developing a genealogical hermeneutics of suspicion.

My contention is that Hume's critique of religion belongs to this same tradition of the hermeneutics of suspicion, insofar as he traced religion to the human passions of hope and fear. In this sense, he is perhaps closest to Freud in his understanding of religion, and for this reason a brief examination of Hume's and Freud's respective understandings of religion may help illuminate both the uniqueness and fecundity of Hume's writings on religion.

The principal way in which Hume and Freud are related in their understanding of religion has to do with the way each approaches the subject. Though Hume's primary focus on the design argument in the *Dialogues* is very different from Freud's understanding of religion as an illusion, Hume's concern for the origins of religion and its psychological motives and social consequences in the *Natural History* is an initial step in the direction of Freud—and a large one at that.

Freud's understanding of religion encompasses two phases. First, he was struck by the resemblance of obsessive acts of neurotic individuals in the rituals and practices of religious groups. He formulated this comparison originally in the early paper "On Obsessive Acts and Religious Practices," and then set to explain

the fact in *Totem and Taboo*.[28] Secondly, Freud was concerned with the fact that religious beliefs, regardless of the fact that they could be neither verified or falsified, continued to exercise a strong hold on civilization. He addresses this question straightforwardly in *The Future of An Illusion* and in the final chapters of the *New Introductory Lectures*.[29] I will not comment on the phylogenic theory of religion Freud develops in *Totem* and *Taboo* except to note that regardless of Freud's attempt to show its compatibility with theory announced in *The Future of an Illusion* there seems to remain a certain tension. The first work understood religion as a defense mechanism designed primarily to cope with guilt from the original act of patricide; the second work understood religion as a response to the experience of helplessness. The two claims are not entirely compatible within Freud's system.

In his later work, Freud understands religious beliefs as "illusions," and he defined an illusion as a belief about the world which is motivated to fulfill a wish or desire. The strength of an illusion is proportionate to the strength of the wishes or desires to which it poses a response. The wishes and desires which religion answers are strong ones. They include the desire of persons to be protected from

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[28] Sigmund Freud, *Totem and Taboo: Some Points of Agreement between the Mental Lives of Savages and Neurotics*, trans. James Strachey (New York: W. W. Norton, 1950).

[29] Sigmund Freud, *The Future of An Illusion*, trans. James Strachey (New York: W. W. Norton, 1961); *New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*, trans. James Strachey (New York: W. W. Norton, 1965).

the terrors of nature, the desire to be relieved from the anxiety of fate and death, and the desire to be compensated for renunciation of instincts and selfishness in order to survive in society. The first two of these desires resemble Hume's claim that illusion is motivated principally by fear of unknown natural forces and fear of death. The third task of religion as Freud understands it, is a moral one: to provide a moral authority which assures that, in exchange for the suppression of egoistic instincts, human beings will at least be rewarded with a just afterlife. Freud finds all of these desires rooted in the longing for the father as protector and understands religion ultimately as an expression of a civilization not yet capable of detaching from the pleasure principle.

The feature of Freud's account which distinguishes his view from Hume's, however, concerns the relation of religion to *morality*. Both Freud and Hume believed that civilization could learn to do without religion. However, Freud believed that religion had played a *positive* role in the maintenance of the moral order, and that indeed the origin of religion and morality stem from the same act of patricide. But the third task of religion as Freud states it is to provide an authority to morality and law which makes civilization possible for forcing a renunciation of the instincts. Put simply, for both Hume and Freud, religion is an illusion. For Freud, however, religion is in some sense a *positive* illusion, insofar as it is an act of sublimation that makes civilization possible. For Hume, by

contrast, religion is a *negative* illusion that has few if any redeeming social or "civilizing" features.

On this point, the primary difference then between Freud's and Hume's conception of the function of religion concerns their understanding of human nature. Hume believed that the natural impulses of human beings were *benevolent* and *sympathetic*, and that their natural instincts guided them to proper conduct—but that religion corrupted these impulses and replaced them with others (e.g., the desire for immortality). Freud, on the other hand, maintained that human beings were essentially *egotistical* and that the very possibility of a peaceful social existence required prohibition which restricted the individual's natures desires. Religion could serve the purpose of an authority and could thereby constitute a positive influence on society by sanctioning those prohibitions which were critical to the development of society in the internalization of the super ego. However, Freud also believed that reason and the reality principle could and ought eventually to replace religion as the basis for morality. Freud's solution was to educate persons to reality.

Both Hume and Freud, in short, believed that religion originated in irrational sources, though Freud went further in explaining the psychological mechanisms of these sources. Furthermore, both thinkers believed that reason was the slave of natural passions. Freud, however, maintained that reason ought

not to be the slave of the passions, because chief among such passions were the selfish and egotistical instincts, which are socially destructive. Even though it was illusion, religion nonetheless helps to keep the egoism of individuals in check in order to enable future maturity of society. For Hume, by contrast, the basic passions were the good passions of benevolence and sympathy. Religion, which is rooted primarily in the passions fear and hope, necessarily obscures the good passions, and as such has *no* beneficial social effect. For Hume, as we have seen, the social effects of religion are entirely negative.

Beyond its similarities to Freud's work, Hume's critique of religion, as we noted above, embodies a feature that is generic to critical theories as a whole, namely, the notion of *false consciousness*. Raymond Geuss, in his book *The Idea of Critical Theory*, provides an analysis of the notion of false consciousness that is helpful for assessing Hume's relation to critical theory. According to Geuss, the term "false consciousness" refers to a system of beliefs that are deemed false by virtue of one or more of the following characteristics: (1) "some epistemic properties of the beliefs which are its constituents;" (2) "its functional properties;" or (3) "its genetic properties." To say that a form of consciousness is false in virtue of its epistemic properties means that the beliefs in question are grounded in an epistemological mistake. A form of this error which is commonly associated with ideology in the pejorative sense occurs when a subject falsely

attributes a natural and independent state of existence to activities, objects, or relations which are the results of his own productive activity. In terms of its functional properties, a form of consciousness may be false if it serves to legitimate or in some way sustain an unhealthy or undesirable state of affairs. The functional properties of an ideology might refer to a supporting role, or a fostering role, or a stabilizing role, or some combination of similar elements. Lastly, a form of consciousness may be considered false due to its origins, that is, according to its historical causes and the kinds of interests it serves.

Though Geuss does not elaborate the use of these defining qualities in the programs of various individual thinkers, he suggests that thinkers such as Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud each employ a theory of ideology that makes use in differing degrees of all three of these conceptions of false consciousness. Hume's theory of religion, especially the one developed in the *Natural History*, likewise employs a notion of false consciousness that encompasses each of these three meanings.

Hume's projectionist account of religion shares with that of Feuerbach, Marx, and Freud the principle that the God of classical theism is a product of the human imagination that entails some degree of alienation. The alienation occurs not in the moment of projection or investment of human attributes but in the subject's failure to recognize that the object of his devotion is an extension of his own consciousness. In this sense, theism is said to involve a form of

consciousness that is false insofar as it is predicated on the false attribution of independent existence to a thoroughly dependent concept.

Beyond this aspect of false consciousness, Hume's theory of religion reflects the epistemic type of falsity referred to in Geuss's typology. For Hume, one of the false epistemic properties of religious beliefs is the notion that religious beliefs derive from rational reflection on the nature of the universe, when in fact they arise as a function of the imagination and the principles of association as animated by the passions of fear and hope. There is then a mistake going on in the believer's understanding of the derivation of his belief.

The "functional" notion of ideology or false consciousness that Geuss delineates is less pronounced in Hume's work, especially when compared with Marx's program in which religion has, as one of its chief defining roles, the role of legitimating the social and economic status quo. In some of Hume's work, religion is depicted as serving a function of legitimating political and social interests. However, more often than not, this function is characterized by Hume as a conscious utilization of religion by the clergy to serve their political interests.[30] As such, Hume's notion that religion serves a political ideology presumes a degree of conscious manipulation.

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[30] For further discussion of this point in Hume's work, see Appendix B to this dissertation. Hume's comments in *The History of England* often take this approach.

There is, however, an additional sense in which religion serves a "false" function in Hume's account, and that is with respect to its moral consequences. For Hume, as for Nietzsche, religious belief partakes of a certain falsity by subverting human nature, and one way this occurs in Hume's account is by the establishment of a false motivation for morals. As I have already noted in my discussion of Hume's relation to Freud, Hume saw religion as superimposing a set of motives for human conduct that resulted in a subversion of the natural tendencies conducive to moral conduct. For Hume, religion is false not only because it imposes an artificial set of motives that are conducive to immoral conduct, but because it is falsely represented to the believer (and by the believer) as the sole authority and guarantor of morality.

Finally, a consciousness may be characterized as false by virtue of the kinds of interests it serves. This notion is again illuminated by the similarities between Hume's theory and that of Freud. Religion is defined by both Hume and Freud in terms of its capacity to satisfy certain wishes that originate out of a state of dependency and ignorance. Both thinkers depict religion as providing a false answer to these basic human needs, though on Freud's account the consequences of this falsehood are less pernicious than those portrayed in Hume's work.

C. *Some Implications for Contemporary Theology*

Even if, as I have argued, Hume's critique of religion cannot be reduced to his evidentiary arguments against religious beliefs, these arguments themselves nonetheless continue to pose a strong challenge to contemporary theological reflection. Two of the most difficult issues for philosophical theologians of this century have been: (1) the problem of making sense of the notion of God's transcendence; and (2) the problem of "psychologisim," that is, whether religion is best understood as a product of the human psyche having no objective basis beyond the human subject.

Hume's critique, perhaps better than any other, combines these two challenges. In the *Dialogues*, Philo shows, in a devastating fashion, what happens when a religious philosopher attempts to make God's existence intelligible using secular conceptual categories. The idea of God that Philo and Cleanthes appear to agree on is void of any significant content beyond features of the natural world and human experience. The more philosophically rigorous theologians are in their attempt to justify a religious dimension to human experience, the less distinctive this religious dimension becomes.

The second problem—the problem of psychologism—is raised by Hume's theory of religion in the *Natural History*. The problem is this: many persons confess an experience of some dimension beyond human experience. This

experience has been called different things—for example, "the feeling of absolute dependence," the *mysterium tremendum*, and so on. But what is central to this feeling is a security of something beyond us, which is responsible for our destiny and the destiny of the world in general. The question posed by Hume, Freud, and Feuerbach—and indeed by any projectionist theory of religion—is whether such an experience bears witness to anything more than certain propensities of the human psyche.

Without adjudicating the defensibility of psychological reductionism, it is at least important to acknowledge that the idea of religion as a purely human construct, and that all talk about God is really talk about ourselves, is a seductive and forceful one in our age. Hume does not prove or even seek to prove that God does not exist outside the imagination, but his theories do instill such a suspicion in persons who have long since quit using God as an authority in many aspects of their daily lives.

In the last analysis, the impressiveness of Hume's critique stems from Hume's ability to develop both of these issues—the problem of transcendence and the problem of psychological reductionism—in an artful and forceful manner. There is perhaps no single thinker who brings these distinctively modern strains of criticism together so forcefully, and certainly none who has done so with such elegance. Moreover, by combining these aspects of secular criticism, Hume's

thought remains a viable source for evaluating twentieth-century theological enterprises. In what follows, then, I would like to submit two contemporary theological perspectives to a kind of Humean critique. My aim here is not to make any definitive judgments with regard to any of these positions. Rather, I would simply like to put them into dialogue with Hume, as if he were their contemporary, and to submit them to the types of anti-theistic arguments presents in Hume's works, in order to see how each position mutually enlightens and challenges the other.

1. *God as an Immanent "Process" (Process Theology)*

The version of philosophical theology that Hume took most seriously was the one articulated by his character Cleanthes, who represented the eighteenth-century empirical tradition. Although the Design Argument, as it was then formulated, is of less influence today, the empirical tradition in theology was reinvigorated in this century by the world of Alfred North Whitehead. Versions of "process theology" grew out of Whitehead's work in metaphysics in such books as *Science and the Modern World* and *Process and Reality*.[31]

As a scientist inspecting the universe, Whitehead claims to have found an order in the world, which in turn implies the existence of an ontological principle.

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[31] Alfred North Whitehead, *Science and the Modern World* (New York: Free Press, 1925); and *Process and Reality* (New York: Macmillan, 1929).

Whitehead's cosmology focuses on the theme of "relationship." To understand this order and its nature of relationship, we must examine Whitehead's model for interpreting the universe. He maintains that the world operates in the manner of an *organism* rather than a machine. For Whitehead, "the concept of order of nature is bound up with the concept of nature as the locus of organisms in process of development."[32] Whitehead rejects the materialistic, mechanistic view of nature which has served as the dogma of science for the seventeenth-century through today. To entertain the notion that the world is composed of minute and static particles of matter, which in some way combine together to form objects, is for Whitehead a highly abstract way of looking at nature. To hold that the world is mechanistic in its process merely compounds this abstraction.

Whitehead contends that in actuality the universe cannot possibly operate like a machine, since such a view of the universe is irreconcilable with the concept of evolution. He notes that a machine is a closed unit—a fixed mechanism—while the universe is ever-evolving in a open-ended process, which continually produces the "new." Furthermore, he recognizes that the very concept of a machine implies that the world, if it is a machine, lacks its own creative capacity and cannot develop itself, that is, it is dependent on outside sources for maintenance. Does the world work in a machine-like manner? Does the shedding

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[32] Whitehead, *Science and the Modern World*, p. 73.

of a dog's fur in warm weather or the growth of a new tail on a lizard point to the universe as an externally maintained machine? Whitehead thinks not. Instead, these seem to indicate an *internal* means by which organisms operate in and compensate for their environment. In Whitehead's perspective, the universe and its constituents in some way have an internal creative character. They can to a degree maintain themselves; and most importantly, each constituent of the universe contributes to its own environment and is thus inevitably involved in a process of self-actualization.

Whitehead therefore contends that the universe is composed not of static particles but of interrelated constituents which he terms "actual occasions" or "events," which act roughly on the plan of an organism. An actual occasion is connected to other such "events" by its own selective process, whereby it achieves self-satisfaction or "concretion." This selective process entails a "prehension." Prehension is the process where one occasion takes account of or "prehends" other such occasions. It is important to note that prehension does not suppose consciousness. Whitehead uses the word "prehension" for "*uncognitive* apprehension" and by that definition means "an apprehension which may or may not be cognitive."[33] Thus prehension, as a basis for a selective process, occurs at all levels of nature, from atoms to conscious beings. This idea of uncognitive

[33] Whitehead, *Science and the Modern World*, p. 69.

apprehension might be illustrated by the way in which mercury takes account of or "prehends" heat, or by the way oxygen molecules attach themselves to hydrogen molecules while rejecting other molecules. Eventually, new occasions are made through this process; water, for example, is the concrete new occasion derived from hydrogen and oxygen, which have prehended and selected each other. Prehension, in this sense, leads to concretion.

The idea of a selective process which leads to concretion presupposes an aim or inherent purpose. When a group of occasions select each other and are bonded together according to their inherent aims, a harmony is reached, a concretion is attained, and a limitation imposed. The principle of concretion entails self-fulfillment, whereby the inherent aim is achieved. This concrete actual occasion is not alien matter in the universe, but a unique individual, transformed through natural process into a fully realized state. Furthermore, it owes its origins to a relationship, and at the same time participates in new occasions. In other words, every new concretion, derived from a selective process, embarks on a selective process of its own to form yet another occasion. The outcome of Whitehead's notion of interrelated special occasions is a perspective which depicts the world as one of reciprocal relationships: the environment, as a body of innumerable interrelated actual occasions, is necessary for a concretion and the rise of a unique occasion. Each new occasion, in turn, is

an element contributing to the environment. Thus, the unique and solitary arise from relationship and simultaneously participate in relationship.

Now Whitehead claims that there is an ontological principle at work in this dynamic process, which for him represents "God." In Whitehead's view, it seems that God is what lures all occasions to their concretion by providing an aim to each event. Whitehead refers to God as "the Principle of Concretion."[34] God is the dynamic principle at work in the material process. In the unique aims inherent in all occasions, there is a manifestation of the Divine.

In Whitehead's thinking, God has three natures. First, in His "primordial" nature, He is not actual, nor is He limited; rather, He is the eternal component of the entire occasion. He is that potential which enables the establishment of concretion. Second, in His consequent nature, He is fully actual and limited, for as a finite actuality, He must necessarily be limited or concrete. In His third aspect, finally, which Whitehead calls the "superjecture nature," God is mutually dynamic, growing with the universe and at the same time luring it on. He gives each occasion its subjective aim and is therefore luring it to a purpose. He ensures the uniqueness of actual occasions and with that develops harmony. Thus, for Whitehead, God is the dynamic crux of order and process in the universe.[35]

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[34] Whitehead, *Science and the Modern World*, p. 174.

[35] I have obviously summarized Whitehead's complex cosmological position, which is presented more fully in *Science and the Modern World*, chapters 1 through 6.

Certain contemporary theologians, such as John Cobb, have made use of Whitehead's philosophy in developing their theology. While the proponents of process theology hold various and diverse positions, I would like to focus on the conviction—which many process theologians share with Whitehead—that God can be reinterpreted as an immanent theistic "process." Here, I would simply like to respond to some more obvious possibilities of a "process" reading of the *Dialogues*. In particular, I would take issue with any attempt to derive a notion of an immanent theistic dimension from Philo's responses to Cleanthes. For Philo does seem to endorse Cleanthes' assumption of an orderly universe.[36] This "concession" as Cleanthes puts it, may lead some to argue that Philo's arguments effectively discredit only a particular *orthodox* notion of God as a transcendent and purely detached deity, yet nonetheless leave the path open for an *immanent*, process notion of God. From my reading, however, Philo's most complete expositions of his position and his encapsulating statements have aimed at *precluding* any possibility of establishing a clearly defined theistic dimension.[37] In Philo's claims, there is no evidence to support the hypothesis of a source or power beyond nature itself, and indeed his arguments are designed to discredit such a proposition as an unfounded assumption.

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[36] *Dialogues*, V, 3.

[37] See especially *Dialogues*, XII, 33.

As we have seen, Philo has in places given Cleanthes' teleological argument the benefit of "process" possibilities, shifting the terms of the analogy from a mechanistic model of the universe to a biologically oriented characterization (see Parts VII and VII). He likens the universe to a vegetable and considers "the ancient system of the soul of the world."[38] Yet here his antagonistic purposes become immediately evident. In the speeches which follow he does not employ these suppositions to argue for the possibility of a spiritual lining to nature or of an all-pervasive principle of Process. Rather, he uses the analogy of vegetation to discredit the theistic hypothesis as an extraneous construct, and as a "hypothesis attended with no advantages."[39] From this perspective, Philo's arguments appear in line with the thrust of modern and contemporary secular challenges which focus on the seeming emptiness of theistic ontologies.[40]

This attitude associated with Philo's response is developed into a poignant theme in the final dialogue where the dispute is moved to a problem of *language*, and where Philo attempts to dissolve the point of controversy between theists and atheists into a problem of verbal ambiguity.[41] As I have previously suggested,

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[38] *Dialogues*, VII, 1.

[39] *Dialogues*, VIII, 4.

[40] Moreover, the hardest question for Cleanthes is likewise the most formidable problem for process theology, namely, how to account for evil, pain, and suffering as an aspect of Divine Providence.

[41] For a more detailed discussion of this point, see Appendix A.

Philo uses this approach to challenge the distinction of any dimension beyond the observable natural world. This attempt at a reduction goes undetected by Cleanthes, who assumes that Philo is doing just the opposite. For Cleanthes, Philo's insights into the controversy between atheists and theists are a confirmation that any failure to acknowledge the reality of a Divine being must be founded on a misunderstanding of human experience and a misrepresented notion of this being. He has argued that no man of common sense can honestly live from a posture of serious doubt on this point. Thus, as he perceives it, Philo's words in Part XII of the *Dialogues* reveal the truth of the theistic dimension and the confusion which obscures its recognition and acceptance. In his true sentiments, Philo has all the while held the reversed suspicion that the theistic interpretation is unfounded empirically and that it is extraneous to an explanation of natural order.

These dynamics of the conversation reveal an interesting parallel to the debate surrounding more recent attempts to understand the meaning of God, and lead to a further consideration of the meaning and significance of the terms "common sense" and "human experience."

2. *God as the "Ground" of Meaning (Liberal Theology)*

The second type of theological argument I would like to consider is one that engages in an analysis of "common human experience" and that is associated with a certain type of liberal theology. The term "liberal theology" has been used

to cover a broad range of subjects, and I do not wish to enter the fray of debate over what counts as "liberal." I am simply using the term to refer to a tradition of theological reflection which perceives as a principal part of its task some effort to make the Christian tradition accessible to a predominately secular culture (what Tillich termed the method of correlation). Indeed, there are two primary traits I would like to isolate out of the various strands of liberal theology: first, the conviction that theistic interpretations of human experience are more adequate than nontheistic accounts; and second, the conviction that there are some rational standards which both theists and nontheists share that can be used as a means of resolving disputes over the reality of a transcendental being, dimension, or power.[42]

A particularly rigorous defense of this theological perspective is exemplified in the work of Schubert Ogden, whose argument for the "reality" of God embodies elements of both process philosophy and phenomenological inquiry. I will examine Ogden's argument at some length here, not only because it is an exemplary case of a certain strand of liberal theology, but also because it

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[42] Various "post-liberal" or "post-modern" models of theological reflection have emerged over the past three decades, that purport to be less vulnerable to the types of criticism that have been leveled at liberal theology. Although it is beyond the scope of this dissertation to evaluate post-modern models of theology from a Humean perspective, I believe that Hume's philosophy of religion as I have interpreted it reveals some difficulties or disadvantages of post-modern theology that deserve serious consideration. I have briefly suggested some of the possible implications of Hume's philosophy of religion for post-modern approaches to theology in Appendix C to this dissertation.

presents a strong challenge to the type of interpretation of the nature of religious belief offered by Hume.

In his influential essay "The Reality of God," Ogden advances an argument for the reality of God which is very different from the empirical arguments for God's existence that Hume attacks.[43] Proceeding from an ontological or metaphysical inquiry into common human experience, Ogden seeks to establish God as the necessary condition or "ground" of a basic trust in the meaningfulness of human existence which is implicit in our moral judgments, scientific theories and every day reasonings. His argument can be summarized in the following way: An analysis of our moral and scientific discourse discloses certain limiting questions—questions about the meaningfulness of human life. The function of religious language is to answer these by providing reassurance or confidence that our moral decisions have "unconditional significance" and that our scientific knowledge is grounded in a predictable natural order. The fact that religious language reassures us of the significance of our moral practices and scientific enterprises presupposes a prior assurance or confidence in the meaningfulness of our existence. "Logically prior to every particular religious assertion is an original confidence in the meaning and worth of life, through

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[43] Schubert M. Ogden, "The Reality of God," in *The Reality of God and Other Essays* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1977).

which not simply all our religious answers, but even our religious questions first become possible or have any sense."[44] The term "God" is to be understood as the ground of this confidence or basic trust. In Ogden's own words, "I hold that the primary use or function of 'God' is to refer to the objective ground in reality itself of an ineradicable confidence in the final worth of our existence."[45]

There are some important corollaries of this argument. The first is that all persons, whether they know it or not, are theistic insofar as their language and conduct implies a basic trust in the meaningfulness of life which, when properly understood, is either an aspect of that reality called "God" or implies some ground called "God" (Ogden equivocates on this important distinction). Consequently, Ogden accuses atheistic existentialists such as Sartre of maintaining a logically inconsistent ontology. A second corollary is that nontheistic theories of morality are similarly inconsistent and inadequate. Ogden writes: "The characteristic deficiency of all nontheistic moral theories is that they leave the final depth of morality itself utterly unillumined. Although they may well focus our moral action and the immanent standards by which it is governed, they fail to render at

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[44] Ogden, "The Reality of God," p. 34.

[45] Ogden, "The Reality of God," p. 37.

all intelligible the underlying confidence and its transcendent ground in which our moral activity, as our life generally, actually has it roots."[46]

If Hume's critique of religion is what I have said it is, what might he have to say to Ogden's argument and its corollaries? One obvious way to answer this question is to read Hume as a logical positivist who would dismiss at the outset Ogden's argument in virtue of its metaphysical or ontological character. The argument might go like this. The proposition "God is real" has the same grammatical form as the proposition "God exists." Both are synthetic propositions because they purport to give information about a state of affairs about the world. However, because such propositions about God can neither be verified or falsified by sensory experience, they lack the capacity to be either true or false and are more properly speaking pseudosynthetic statements and in this case are meaningless. Though this type of response may be a legitimate extension of Hume's epistemology, it does not accurately represent his actual approach to theistic arguments. As Robert Fogelin has noted in his book on Hume's skepticism, Hume does not follow a positivistic procedure in his evaluation of the argument from design.[47] He does not consider the notion of God meaningless, but

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[46] Ogden, "The Reality of God," p. 40.

[47] Robert Fogelin, *Hume's Skepticism in the Treatise of Human Nature* (Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985), p. 8: "The ostensible (and I think real) conclusion of this work [the *Dialogues*] is that evidence for the existence of anything like a traditional deity is negligible. There is no suggestion that the notion of such a deity is unintelligible."

instead takes the design argument seriously as stating something which might be open to confirmation. Therefore, his claim is not that the proposition "God exists" is unjustifiable, but that it may turn out to be unjustified. It may be that Hume would draw the positivist conclusion after he analyzed the argument, but I think it worth exploring the nature of his response to Cleanthes as a suitable way of understanding his response to Ogden. How is this possible in view of the dissimilarities between Ogden's argument and the argument from design?

Ogden's argument is in some sense an argument from experience, albeit a broader notion of experience than sensory experience. It proceeds from an analysis of subjective experience to a claim about the conditions which make this experience intelligible. His claim is that some reality which transcends human experience is logically necessary to make intelligible the basic trust in the meaningfulness of life. Cleanthes' argument proceeds from observations about the order or design in nature to a claim about what might account for such observations. His claim is that the notion of a Designer is inescapable to any person of common sense and that a skeptical argument such as Philo's can produce no conviction to the contrary. Philo's overall response to Cleanthes is, as I understand it, that the notion of God which Cleanthes attempts to infer from observation of natural order adds nothing of an explanatory power or human

consequence to the initial fact of that order which it seeks to explain. It is a notion of God void of any distinctive content.

Philo's response to Cleanthes could be modified into a plausible response to Ogden. If our moral, scientific, and religious discourses exhibit an underlying trust or basic confidence in the meaningfulness of human life, the notion of God that Ogden claims to be necessary as a means of making this experience intelligible *adds nothing to the experience itself.* We may ask both of Cleanthes' argument, as an argument from sensory observations, and of Ogden's argument, as an argument from phenomenological reflection, what in their respective notions of God is in any way distinguishable from the facts they seek to explain or make intelligible. That Ogden goes on to articulate the nature of God's reality in terms of a principle of process or process itself further highlights this problem. For to identify God with the principle of process is in a way to identify God with the principle of order within the universe—a principle Philo and Hume might well acknowledge. And this further begs the question of whether "God" refers to anything distinguishable from the natural order. In sum, both arguments would fail on Hume's terms because both seek to account for aspects of experience (as this term is broadly defined) by positing some transcendent source or ontological principle which when carefully scrutinized is reducible to the very aspects of experience it is supposed to account for. In this respect Ogden's argument from

inner experience fares no better than Cleanthes' argument from sensory experience.

It might be objected that I have created some artificial lines of similarity between these arguments which are misleading and which neglect their principal points of difference. After all, Ogden claims not that God's reality can be established as a contingent *matter of fact*, but that His reality is *logically* necessary to make intelligible common human experience. However, it needs to be made clear that the notion of logical necessity invoked here cannot be the same as that of an analytic truth. From the fact that persons exhibit a basic trust it does not follow as a logically necessary conclusion that this trust has some ground or source beyond itself. The only legitimate question is whether the notion of common human experience which Ogden elaborates *requires for its coherence* a "ground" called God. One point to be gleaned from Hume's writings, I would suggest, is that the notion of God as a ground of basic human trust has no content beyond that trust itself which could provide some added degree of coherence.

There are two further lessons which emerge from Hume's critique which are of relevance to Ogden's argument. First, it becomes clear in both the *Dialogues* and in the *Natural History* that Hume is interested not only in challenging the validity of theistic arguments, but in coming up with some explanation of why some persons find them persuasive. His answer as made out

from the *Dialogues* and the *Natural History* is that a philosophically-minded theist may be inclined to evaluate experience differently than a nontheist. A mind "seasoned" with religion may be inclined to perceive the universe as the work of a Divine Author, and he may view the arguments which attempt to establish this proposition as incontestable. A nontheist might view the same facts differently, failing to see the necessity of a theistic explanation.[48] Philo's success in deceiving his two companions is in part due to his ability to state his arguments in such a way that Cleanthes will understand them as support for some version of theism, even though they are intended to undermine his theistic position. The fact that Cleanthes remains convinced that any man of common sense cannot honestly deny that the design of nature bespeaks of an intelligent Designer is attributable to his faith predisposition and not to the plausibility of his argument. Ogden's claim that a theistic ontology is implied in human experience, and that Sartre's existentialist analysis is incoherent by virtue of its failure to recognize a theistic foundation, would strike Hume as a case in which a theist has read God's reality into common human experience. And, he would argue, I think, that Sartre's reading of these same facts—the nature of common human experience—is not in some way logically incoherent because it lacks any reference to God. In short,

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[48] A similar point is made persuasively by John Wisdom in his well-known parable of the gardener.

Hume could argue that Ogden's notion of God is a way of interpreting human experience which cannot be justified on purely *rational* grounds.

Second, suppose that Hume's understanding of the origin of religion amounts to the view that God is a product of the human imagination. Perhaps in this case, Hume's response to Ogden would be like that of Nietzsche or Freud, namely that the confidence we characteristically exhibit in the face of limiting questions is a strictly human creation—that there is no ground to it or dimension which transcends it. That we are inclined to posit such ontological principles as a symptom of our inability to recognize and cope with certain aspects of our situation. In Sartre's language, such belief reflects a human tendency to live in "bad faith" as a means of escaping a disquieting freedom.

Hume's critique of religion does not directly pose these sorts of challenges to a theologian like Ogden, and the line of response I have attributed to him shows a conspicuous disregard for his empiricism insofar as it assumes that he might recognize some broader characteristic of experience revealed through a phenomenological analysis as a legitimate basis for knowledge. However, I do not think that his critique of theology can be overturned by a facile rejection of logical positivism. The principles Hume develops in the *Dialogues* and the arguments he allows Philo to develop there pose a general challenge to any effort such as Ogden's which seeks to justify an ontological principle which is in any

significant way distinguishable from the physical world. Furthermore, the principles Hume develops in the *Natural History* raise the disturbing possibility that religious experience is reducible to certain functions of the human psyche. At the very least, any attempt to show that religion is grounded in the experience of some transcendent dimension must address these sorts of Humean challenges.

One final point. It might be objected that these "Humean challenges" miss the point of Ogden's position, since Ogden's arguments are *a priori* and Kantian, and Hume's arguments are *a posteriori* and empiricist. But this would be a simplistic contrast. Kant himself admitted his enormous debt to Hume—a debt that went far beyond having Hume awaken him from his "dogmatic slumber." Moreover, the relationship between empiricism and Kantianism is far more complicated than it is often presented in manuals in the history of philosophy (which often portray Kant as a kind of synthesis of empiricism and rationalism).

The aim of Kant's transcendental project was a critique of transcendence (the term "transcendent" means the opposite of "transcendental," which according to Kant is synonymous with "immanent"), and he accordingly distinguished between three types of concepts: (1) concepts (such as "table") which provide legitimate knowledge insofar as they synthesize our intuitions or perceptions, and do not go beyond the subject's immanent field of experience; (2) the *categories* (such as "causality"), which are concepts that are applicable to any object

whatsoever, and thus constitute the condition of possibility for experience in general; and finally (3) the *transcendental Ideas* (such as the Soul, the World, and God), which are concepts that refer to objects *outside* of experience, and as such are illegitimate concepts that lead us into the illusions of transcendence.

It should be clear from our discussion above that Kant's identification of the three transcendental Ideas as the Soul, the World, and God (in the "Transcendental Dialectic" in the *Critique of Pure Reason*) is derived almost directly from Hume.[49] Kant argues, for example, that we can *think* the Idea of the World as the "totality of what is," but we can never *know* the object that corresponds to it, since we can never be presented with a sensible intuition of is. The World is thus an Idea to which no object corresponds, and when we pose questions concerning this non-existent object ("Did the world have a beginning or did it exist eternally?"), we are led into hopeless and insoluble antinomies.

Now the notion of "the meaning and value of life," it seems to me, has exactly the same status. It was introduced into philosophy by Nietzsche, who clearly indicated its problematic status as an Idea whose object lies outside experience:

> One must by all means stretch out one's fingers and make the attempt to grasp this amazing finesse, *that the value of life cannot*

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[49] Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Norman Kemp Smith (New York: St. Martins Press, 1969).

> *be estimated* . . . . Judgments, judgments of value, concerning life, for it or against it, can, in the end, never be true: they have value only as symptoms, they are worthy of consideration only as symptoms; in themselves such judgments are stupidities.[50]

This was already the sense of Pascal's wager: what is at stake in the wager is not the existence or non-existence of a transcendent God, but rather the difference in the modes of life of those who believe and those who do not, modes which can only be evaluated symptomatologically. For Ogden to say that "an original confidence in the meaning and worth of life" is logically prior to every particular religious assertion in fact amounts to saying that such a "confidence" characterizes the mode of existence of the person capable of making the religious assertion, whatever it may be. Hume would say that such a person gives assent to this confidence because of his religious education; Nietzsche might characterize such as person as a slavish or reactive type, governed by the affect of *ressentiment.* If Ogden were content with such a characterization of his position, he would no doubt consider himself a member of the tradition of critical theory in which I have placed Hume alongside Marx, Freud, and Nietzsche.

But Ogden takes a further step which, in accordance with Kant's own criteria, is illegitimate. He holds that the term "God" refers to "the objective ground *in reality itself*" of this ineradicable confidence in the meaning and value

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[50] Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, in *The Portable Nietzsche*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Viking, 1968), "The Problem of Socrates," section 2, p. 474.

of life, thereby suggesting that "God" is the *a priori* condition of possibility for our scientific practices and moral practices. From a strict Kantian viewpoint, this claim is illegitimate for an obvious reason: *neither* the claim that "life has meaning and value" *nor* the claim that "life has no meaning or value" (a position Ogden attributes to Sartre) could ever have "an objective ground in reality itself" for the simple reason that, as Nietzsche pointed out, judgments concerning the value and meaning of life can be neither true nor false *because they have no object*. Such claims are exactly parallel to the claims that "The world had a beginning" and "The world has always existed": they are antiomies that lead us to false problems and metaphysical illusions precisely because the Idea they refer to (the world) has no object. For a Kantian, the only thing that we can say *a priori* is that Life (as this term is used by Ogden) is a problematic and transcendent Idea. We have no way of knowing *a priori* whether life is meaningful or meaningless, any more than we can know *a priori* whether the world had a beginning or has existed eternally.

As such, "confidence in the meaning and worth of life" could never be a constitutive *a priori* condition of possibility, at least for a Kantian. Ogden suggests, for example, that this confidence provides a ground for our belief in a predictable natural order, and hence is a ground for our scientific enterprises. But again, from a Kantian viewpoint, Ogden moves far beyond the limits of

reason in making this claim. The science needs no more than the *categories* to go about its business; the category of causality is sufficient—and *a priori* necessary—to ground our belief in predictability. The meaningfulness of life is an important question, but it is not needed to make our experience intelligible; it is not a constitutive category but a problematic Idea. What the Ideas provide for us, by contrast, are "foci" outside experience, or "horizons" at the limit of the field of experience immanent to the subject, which allow us to *systematize* the results of our scientific undertakings, so as to approach a comprehension of the *totality* of the World. But the World here remains an *Idea* (the produces illusions whenever we believe that there is an object that corresponds to the Idea), and not an *a priori* category. The notion of Life has the same "problematic" status. For Kant, Ideas are never and can never be directly applicable to objects of experience (applying them to experience is what leads us into illusion); they only apply to the concepts of the understanding; as such, they are never *a priori* conditions for experience. Ogden seems to have committed a fundamental Kantian error, mistaking an Idea for a category. Kant's entire transcendental project was aimed at trying to get reason to *free itself* from the illusions it falls into when it erroneously ascribes an object to what is merely an Idea. And in fact, Ogden essentially admits the anti-Kantian thrust of his argument when he

says that this objective ground is *transcendent*, since the goal of the critical project was to dispel the illusions produced by transcendence.

At best, Ogden is on more solid Kantian ground when he speaks about grounding *morality* in his "original confidence." For even Kant, after allowing himself the luxury of denouncing the transcendent Ideas in the first Critique (the speculative or constitutive viewpoint), was still willing to resurrect each of them in the second Critique and to give them a moral determination (practical or regulative viewpoint). In this sense, Ogden could perhaps posit his "confidence in the meaning and value of life" as a transcendental Idea that serves as a regulative principle or postulate of morality—a claim that could no doubt be contested on much the same grounds as Kantian ethics have been contested. Such a contestation, to be sure, lies beyond the scope of this dissertation. The fact remains that aspects of Ogden's position are indefensible on purely Kantian grounds. To the degree that Kant's Dialectic was derived directly from Hume's theory of belief—and in particular Hume's recognition of the peculiar nature of our belief in causality, the self, the world, and God—Hume's reflections on transcendence and on the nature of religious belief will continue to pose a challenge to the claims of liberal theologians such as Ogden.

D. *Concluding Comments*

My aim in discussing these theological positions has been primarily to demonstrate the continuing importance of Hume's philosophy of religion for contemporary discussions by focusing on its relevance for some specific issues that are currently being debated in the field. In this regard, I have tried to treat Hume as a *contemporary*, that is, as a philosopher whose work has a continuing currency in the contemporary era, and not simply as a representative of the Enlightenment era or a paradigmatic representative of empiricism. Perhaps more than any other philosopher, Hume analyzed the nature of religious belief in a way that brought to light its multifaceted character, examining not only its rational justification, but also its origin, its consequences, and its relation to other types of belief. For this reason, he is a philosopher that should be read and reread by anyone interested in the claims of philosophical theology.

Beyond highlighting the breadth and continuing relevance of Hume's philosophy of religion, I have tried to show in this dissertation how Hume's writings embody two different types of critique of religion. The first is an Enlightenment type of critique that focuses on the rational justification of religious belief. This type of critique is developed most fully by Hume in the *Dialogues*. In my reading of the *Dialogues*, however, I tried to go beyond the usual approach to the text, which focuses primarily on Hume's philosophical

analysis of natural theology, in order to contextualize this analysis in terms of Hume's literary style and philosophical psychology. The *Dialogues* is not merely a great work of philosophy of religion; it is also a great work of literature. Moreover, much of its strength both as literature and philosophy lies in the forcefulness by which Hume portrays the disagreements among his different characters. As such, Hume's *analysis of religious belief* must be read alongside his *psychology of religious disputes*, which in turn requires at least some interpretation of the complex *literary techniques* Hume employs in his writings.

In a different direction, Hume's Enlightenment critique of religion may also be interpreted within Hume's more general theory of belief. In particular, I have examined the question of whether religious beliefs (or rather, the belief in God) can be assimilated to what Kemp Smith has called a "natural belief," that is, a belief that is rationally unjustified but is nonetheless inevitable to our human nature and necessary for our "common life." I have argued that, for Hume, the belief in God is *never* a natural belief. Rather, it is either a pure *fiction* of the imagination, produced by an illegitimate application of the principles of association, or a purely metaphysical or *rational belief,* which has none of the moral characteristics usually associated with religious beliefs.

This analysis of religious beliefs helps to explain how Hume's writings come to embody a second type of critique of religion—a type of critique usually

associated with "critical theory" or the "hermeneutics of suspicion" developed by Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud. This type of critique is concerned less with the rational basis of religious belief than with the social and psychological *functions* of religious belief—its origins in the passions (of fear and hope), and its social and psychological effects (which Hume sees as primarily negative effects). This aspect of Hume's thought is embodied most succinctly in the *Natural History*, a work whose importance has sometimes remained overshadowed by the attention given to the *Dialogues*. Because of this, Hume has not often been recognized as a precursor to the "critical" or socio-psychological approach to religion that became dominant in the nineteenth- and twentieth-centuries—a neglect I have tried to rectify here. For Hume, the question of the rational justification of religious belief is never separated from the question of the socio-psychological origins and consequences of religious belief.

Indeed, I would argue that most previous interpretations of Hume's critique of religion have tended to be too limited, focusing almost exclusively on the first type of critique, that is, on Hume's arguments about the belief in God and the belief in miracles. The arguments presented in such interpretations are almost purely *evidentiary*, intending to show the such beliefs have little probability. But Hume himself shows that the debunking of *arguments* for a belief does not necessarily count against the belief itself. At one level, Hume holds that religious

beliefs—such as the belief in God as an invisible and intelligible power—are untenable, that is, they are not establishable by reason. At a more profound level, however, Hume shows that religious beliefs have a psychological and socializing function, and that their origin must be sought, not in reason, but in the passions of human nature. In this sense, Hume offers a kind of *genealogical* account of the religious passions, which can be traced back to the fundamental natural impulses that are universal.

Hume's greatness—and his continuing relevance—lies in the way in which he combined these two types of critique creating a rich basis for modern religious thought that goes well beyond any single academic approach to the subject of God and secularity.

APPENDIX A

A COMMENT ON PHILO'S LINGUISTIC ARGUMENT

In Part XII of the *Dialogues*, Philo appears to seek some reconciliation with Cleanthes, and concede some degree of legitimacy to the latter's experimental theism. The argument as it is recast by Cleanthes in Part XII is, like the version in Part III, heavily dependent on the notion that it is impossible for a reasonable person to deny the analogy between the universe and a machine, and therefore impossible to resist the idea that the causes of the universe likewise bear some resemblance to those of a machine.

> I shall further add, said Cleanthes, to what you have so well urged, that one great advantage of the principle of theism is that it is the only system of cosmogony which can be rendered intelligible and complete, and yet can throughout preserve a strong analogy to what we everyday sense and experience in the world. The comparison of the universe to a machine of human contrivance is so obvious and natural, and is justified by so many instances of order and design in nature that it must immediately strike all unprejudiced apprehensions and procure universal approbation. Whoever attempts to weaken this theory cannot pretend to succeed by establishing in its place any other that is precise and determinate: It is sufficient for him if he starts doubts and difficulties; and, by remote and abstract views of things, reach that suspense of judgment which is here the utmost boundary of his wishes. But, besides that this state of mind is in itself unsatisfactory, it can never be steadily maintained against such striking appearances as continually engage us into the religious hypothesis. A false, absurd system, human nature from force of prejudice, is capable of adhering to with obstinacy and

> perseverance, but no systems at all, in opposition to a theory supported by strong and obvious reason, by natural propensity, and by early education, I think it absolutely impossible to maintain or defend.[1]

Philo does not register his approval with all that is said here, and indeed he could barely do so after showing it exceedingly easy to deny the analogy Cleanthes touts here as self evident. However, Philo does appear to concur with Cleanthes' assessment that a total suspense of judgment concerning the origins of the universe is not honestly possible. Accordingly he seeks to show that the dispute between atheists and theists is merely verbal: both accept though to different degrees, a remote analogy between the universe and "other operations of nature and, among the rest, to the economy of human mind and thought." Philo here poses an interestingly ambiguous question?

> Where then, cry I to both these antagonists, is the subject of your dispute? The theist allows that the original intelligence is very different from human reason; the atheist allows that the original principle of order bears some remote analogy to it. Will you quarrel, Gentlemen, about the degrees, and enter into a controversy which admits not of any precise meaning, nor consequently of any determination?[2]

According to Philo both the theist and the atheist must affirm the existence of an "original principle of order." Their disagreement concerns how to characterize

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[1] *Dialogues*, XII, 5.

[2] *Dialogues*, XII, 7.

this principle, and in specific, the degree of resemblance between this principle and the human mind. Philo offers this analysis to Cleanthes as support for the proposition that a suspension of judgment concerning the origins of the universe is not honestly possible, and intends, so it seems, to propose that there really are no serious atheists among persons of common sense.

I would argue, however, that there is a serious obstacle to interpreting these passages so charitably. Philo characterizes the quarrel as a meaningless one and indeed it appears to be since the mere affirmation that the causes of the universe bear a remote resemblance to "mind" or "thought" the degree of similarity being incapable of "any precise meaning" or "any determination" can provide no substance to theism. When Philo poses the question "where . . . is the *subject* of your dispute?", one is apt to suspect that he is pointing out, in ironic fashion, the absence of *any* "subject" or substantive conception of God in Cleanthes' version of theism. This reading is arguably borne out by Philo's subsequent speeches, which are aimed at further divesting Cleanthes' hypothesis of any religious benefits by showing its lack of any consequence for morality. To make his hypothesis intellectually respectable/supportable, Cleanthes has to concede any content to the hypothesis that could possibly give it any religious significance.

APPENDIX B

HUME ON THE THEOLOGICAL USES OF PHILOSOPHY

In the *Natural History*, Hume makes an observation regarding the relationship between philosophy and theology.[1] He contends that there is a tendency among theologians to press philosophical arguments into the service of Church doctrine or religious ideas. Conversely, he suggests that "speculative reasoners naturally carry on their assent, and embrace a theory, which has been instilled in them by their earliest education." Thus, he writes, "philosophy will soon find itself unequally yoked with her new associate [theology]; and instead of *regulating* each principle, as they advance together, she is at every turn perverted to serve the purposes of superstition."[2]

In these passages, we encounter a theme that is subtly woven throughout the *Dialogues*, as well as the *Natural History* concerning the effects of religious education on personal disposition and philosophical reasoning. To recall it briefly, a most important key to understanding the *Dialogues* on my reading is the fact that the entire conversation between Demea, Philo and Cleanthes begins and ends with a discussion about methods of education, and the means of assuring that

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[1] See *Natural History*, Chapter 11.

[2] *Natural History*, 54.

religious belief will not be eroded by secular philosophy. Demea advocates seasoning young minds with a just sense of piety while simultaneously pointing out the limitations of philosophical reasoning. Philo feigns agreement with Demea only to refine certain skeptical arguments for use against Cleanthes and ultimately against Demea himself.

On my reading of the *Dialogues*, this theme of education and the relation of religious beliefs to philosophical arguments is significant not only as a literary device, but as an illustration of the way in which religious beliefs influence the outcome of philosophical arguments. The disagreements between Demea, Cleanthes and Philo are in the end rooted in differences of disposition and the unique way in which each of the parties has unconsciously pressed philosophical principles into theological service. Hume identifies this unconscious interplay between religion and philosophy in his *National History*, and develops his understanding of this interplay dramatically in the *Dialogues*.

In addition to his observations of the unconscious relations between religious belief and philosophical reasoning, Hume perceives and often remarks on a *conscious* effort to misappropriate philosophical principles for theological ends. In the *Dialogues*, Philo, at crucial points in the conversation, provides a polemic against the political intentions of Church authorities in their appropriation of philosophical principles. The notion of "priestcraft," which he articulates in

Part I, is reiterated at the close of Part XI, where Cleanthes accuses Demea of allowing Philo the upper hand by espousing unsophisticated principles similar to those of "divines in ages of stupidity and ignorance." Philo interjects, cautioning Cleanthes against a misunderstanding:

> Blame not so much . . . the ignorance of these reverent gentlemen. They know how to change their style with the times. Formerly, it was a most popular theological topic to maintain that human life was vanity and misery and to exaggerate all the ills and pains which are incident to men. But of late years, divines, we find, begin to retract their position and maintain, though still with some hesitation, that there are more goods than evils, more pleasures than pains, even in this life. When religion stood entirely upon temper and education, it was thought proper to encourage melancholy; as indeed, mankind never have recourse to superior powers so readily as in that disposition. But as men have now learned to form principles and to draw consequences, it is necessary to change the batteries and to make use of such arguments as will endure at least some scrutiny and examination. This variation is the same (and from the same causes) with that which I formerly remarked with regard to skepticism.[3]

Throughout the *Dialogues*, Demea has maintained the earlier tactic of "exaggerating all the ills and pains which are incident to men." By contrast, Cleanthes has ably adopted the more recent method of "making use of such argument as will endure at least some scrutiny and examination." Philo cautiously avoids accusing his friends of calculated efforts at utilizing philosophical principles to sustain a hegemony of religious belief, but his remarks

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[3] *Dialogues*, XI, 20.

about "priestcraft" nevertheless appear designed to further render the theological methods of his friends suspect.

APPENDIX C

A COMMENT ON POST-MODERN THEOLOGY FROM A HUMEAN PERSPECTIVE

Certain "post-liberal" or "post-modern" styles of theological reflection have emerged over the last three decades. The theological models I have in mind reject "foundationalism" and are predicated on some version of cognitive relativism, which denies the existence of neutral (frame independent) rational standards for adjudicating between conflicting systems of belief. Some theologians have seen such developments in epistemology as an opportunity to insulate theology from philosophical criticism, arguing that the lack of objective standards for evaluating basic systems of belief forecloses on the possibility of adjudicating disputes between religious and non-religious persons.

Post-liberal theologies have attempted to avoid the defect of liberal theologies by adopting the position that all knowledge concerning the meaning and origins of life is relative to the belief system of a particular normative community. Within the language and values of a particular community, religious language is intelligible and religious beliefs, justifiable. All knowledge is context bound in this manner such that there are no objective or frame-transcending standards by which to adjudicate disputes arising from conflicting bodies of community standards. On the basis of something like this theory, certain

theologians and philosophers have argued that there is no rational means of resolving disputes over the nature and existence of God.

The distinguishing feature of this theological perspective is the idea that the truth of religious claims is relative to a particular community of persons whose cognitive picture of the world depends upon some notion of God for its coherence. On this view, disputes between theists and nontheists are symptomatic of conflicting world views and cannot be rationally resolved unless there are elements common to both of those world views which could provide a standard for adjudication. All standards for evaluating religious and moral claims are considered in some sense local. Something like this view is developed in the works of Wittgensteinian philosophers such as D. Z. Phillips,[1] and in the theological work of Paul Holmer[2] and George Lindbeck.[3]

Hume's understanding of the nature of disputes between theists and atheists is in harmony with that of post-liberal theology insofar as both perceive such disputes to have their origins in fundamental differences of world view. However, Hume's psychological explanation of religion (and reductionistic

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[1] D. Z. Phillips, *Religion Without Explanation* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1976); and *Belief, Change, and Forms of Life* (London: Macmillan, 1986).

[2] Paul Holmer, "Wittgenstein and Theology," in *New Essays on Religious Language*, ed. Dallas M. High (New York: Oxford University Press, 1969).

[3] George Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1984).

theories of religion in general) provide a counter explanation for religious belief which implies that theistic world views are in some sense false and therefore *inferior* to purely materialist explanations. I believe there are two ways in which post-liberal theologies are possibly vulnerable to reductionistic theories of religion such as Hume's.

First, it is arguable that the theistic explanation of religion is simply less plausible than a non-theistic explanation. The relativist counter argument that plausibility of cosmologies is context bound is not adequate. For, a reductionist might accept a holist theory of knowledge and yet argue that his materialist account of religious belief is superior to theistic accounts by virtue of its greater compatibility with scientific and moral beliefs held by believers and nonbelievers alike. The argument in short, is that materialist explanations of religion better cohere with the scheme of belief systems contemporary persons (both religious and non-religious) rely upon in their every day lives, and are, on the basis of this greater degree of coherence, rationally superior to religious accounts.

Secondly, it is arguable that a post-modern theology which understands religious beliefs as a function of culturally relative linguistic structures, is by its very nature reductionistic insofar as it denies the meaningfulness of the term "God" outside of a humanly constructed framework. (Most theists would certainly deny that "God" has no referent beyond the cognitive and linguistic

systems they inhabit and employ.) If this latter criticism is valid, Hume's theory of religion is compatible with that which implicitly underlies post-liberal theology, and both are nontheistic and reductionistic.

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