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Author(s): Paul Russell

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HUME'S LUCRETIAN MISSION: IS IT SELF-REFUTING?*

In your well-marked footprints now I plant my resolute steps.

—Lucretius, *On the Nature of the Universe*

Hume's famous and influential contributions to the philosophy of religion pursue two broad themes that have deep links with his general sceptical and naturalistic commitments throughout his philosophy as a whole.¹ The first is his sceptical critique of the philosophical arguments and doctrines of various (Christian) theological systems. The second is his naturalistic account of the origins and roots of religion in human nature. Taken together, these two themes serve to advance Hume's "Lucretian mission," which was to discredit and dislodge the role of religion in human life. In this paper I consider the criticism that Hume's entire Lucretian mission is fundamentally misguided and misconceived as judged in terms of *his own* claims and hypotheses concerning religion. More specifically, it may be argued that if Hume is right about the foundations of religion in human nature and the human predicament, then his Lucretian mission is neither wise nor achievable. His project is, in other words, both theoretically self-refuting and practically self-defeating. Drawing from Hume's writings on this subject, I will suggest a set of replies and responses to these criticisms.

1. Scepticism, Naturalism, and Hume's Philosophy of Irreligion

Most commentaries on Hume's philosophy of irreligion focus their critical attention on Hume's sceptical arguments against religious philosophy and its associated doctrines. Generally speaking, less attention has been paid to Hume's naturalistic arguments concerned with the origins and consequences of religious belief, as primarily presented in his *Natural History of Religion*. More importantly, little attention has been paid to the *relationship* that holds between these two main components of Hume's

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Lucretian mission. The relative neglect of this issue needs to be corrected, as it may be argued that there exist significant “tensions”—if not outright inconsistencies—between, on one side, Hume’s aim to use sceptical philosophical *arguments* to discredit and dislodge the role of religion in human life and, on the other side, his historical and psychological claims about the way in which religion is rooted in human nature and is in some sense *natural* to us. This problematic relationship between these two key components of Hume’s philosophy of irreligion serves to generate serious doubts about *both the wisdom and effectiveness* of his Lucretian mission. Indeed, if the criticisms raised are well-founded, Hume’s overall approach and position on this subject must be judged fundamentally flawed.

According to Hume, the only feature that all religions have in common is that there exists some invisible, intelligent power in the world (NHR, 144). Moreover, even this very minimal (shared) belief is not entirely universal or an “original instinct” (e.g., unlike attraction between the sexes) and for this reason, he claims, religious principles must be judged “secondary” to human nature (NHR, 134; cp. NHR, 184). Hume contrasts minimal belief of this general kind with what he calls “genuine theism.” The genuine theist believes that there exists some invisible, intelligent power who is the *creator* and *governor* of this world (NHR, 145). One question of fundamental importance for Hume’s philosophy is what basis there is for “genuine theism” and whether beliefs of this kind arise from reason or some other source. Clearly it is Hume’s position that the various forms of “genuine theism,” as we discover them in the major monotheistic religions that exist in the world, arise not from reason but from other aspects of human nature. This is, indeed, the central theme of the *Natural History of Religion*.

Whatever perspective we may have on Hume’s philosophy in general, it is plain to see that his stance toward orthodox religion of the monotheistic variety is one that is (almost) wholly *critical* or *negative* in character. On even the most modest and limited interpretation, Hume’s aim is to discredit religion, so conceived, in all its aspects: its philosophy, doctrines, institutions, and clergy. The position taken is one of *systematic hostility*. For this reason it is highly misleading to present Hume’s philosophy of irreligion as simply “sceptical” or “agnostic,” as these terms are inappropriately neutral and fail to capture Hume’s *practical* intent to constrain—if not eradicate—the role of religion in human life.

As we have noted, Hume's philosophical approach to religion has both a sceptical and a naturalistic dimension. In the *Treatise*, the first *Enquiry* and the *Dialogues* he presents a series of sceptical arguments that aim to show that religion lacks any adequate foundation in *reason*. Given this, however, we need some alternative explanation of how it is that religion arose and why it is so prevalent in human life. In the *Natural History of Religion*, as well as several of his other works, Hume provides an explanation for this.³ He approaches religion as just another form of natural phenomena, which has its own relevant set of causes and effects. The details of Hume's account of the origins and causes of religion are very familiar. According to Hume, "polytheism or idolatry was, and must have been, the first and most ancient religion of mankind" (NHR, 135).⁴ What are the sources of polytheistic belief? Our human fears, hopes, and anxieties about future events, in so far as they may affect our happiness and welfare, combined with our ignorance of the causes that govern these events, produces in the "ignorant multitude" (NHR, 135, 141) a belief that these events depend upon invisible, intelligent agents who may be influenced and controlled by means of prayer and sacrifice. As a result of this process, as shaped by human fears and ignorance, the world becomes populated with human-like invisible, intelligent beings that are objects of our worship. According to Hume, the same general dynamics propel us into monotheism.

The forces propelling us to believe in intelligent, invisible power in the world are, Hume maintains, inherently unstable. More specifically, we find an opposition between, on one side, our need to anthropomorphize these gods, so we can "address" and control them; and on the other side, our tendency continually to "magnify" these gods in the process of worshipping and placating them. The latter propensity leads, Hume argues, to one, dominant God, whose attributes become greater and greater until eventually this God is regarded as infinite and incomprehensible (NHR, 155). At the end of this process, we arrive at an "abstract" God that corresponds with the conception of God suggested by philosophy, although shaped by the same principles of fear and ignorance that originally gave rise to polytheism. However, because this abstract God is too remote for the vulgar, who need some image of God (for the purpose of worship), there is also a tendency "to sink again from theism to idolatry" (NHR, 158–59). So go, according to Hume, the unstable dynamics of religious

belief as we discover them in human nature. Reason has little or no influence over this process, except to provide “cover” and “credibility” to beliefs that originate in human weaknesses and vulnerabilities.⁵ It is, nevertheless, a plain mistake to suppose that the source of religion—be it polytheism or monotheism—rests with reason. This is the primary lesson of Hume’s *Natural History of Religion*.

2. *Why Discredit what Is “absolutely requisite to the well-being of mankind”?*

Although Hume denies that religious belief (much less “genuine theism”) is universal or an “original instinct,” he does describe it as having roots in human nature and the human predicament that are more or less universal and make it a *natural propensity* for human beings and their societies. Moreover, several of Hume’s observations about the functional role of religion in human life suggest that, contrary to some of his other remarks, religion may be *justified* in these terms. The analogy with Hume’s own account of justice brings this out.⁶ In *Treatise* 3.2, Hume famously provides an account of justice that presents it as a product of “artifice or contrivance, which arises from the circumstances and necessity of mankind” (T, 3.2.1.1 / 477). According to Hume, human beings establish conventions regarding both property and promises that are developed and arrived at as a solution to problems of social cooperation and conflict that we encounter in social life. Hume identifies two circumstances that force human beings to *create* the conventions or rules of justice as a way of promoting and maintaining peace and social cooperation. The first of these is internal to human nature itself. This is our inherent “selfishness and limited generosity” (T, 3.2.2.16 / 494). The other circumstance of justice has to do with our “outward” or external situation. We find that various possessions that we seek and enjoy are both scarce and easily transferred from one person to another (T, 3.2.2.7; 3.2.2.9; 3.2.2.17–8 / 487, 489, 495). In these circumstances, competition and conflict are inevitable and we require some remedy for this, otherwise we cannot secure any of the considerable advantages of society (T, 3.2.2.3 / 485–86).

The remedy, says Hume “is not deriv’d from nature, but from *artifice*; or more properly speaking, nature provides a remedy in the judgment and understanding, for what is irregular and incommodious in the affections” (T, 3.2.2.9 / 489—Hume’s emphasis). This “remedy” involves

“a convention enter’d into by all the members of society to bestow stability on the possession of those external goods, and leave every one in the peaceable enjoyment of what he may acquire by his fortune and industry” (T, 3.2.2.9 / 489). These conventions of justice, or rules that create and determine property rights within society, may vary greatly from one jurisdiction to another (EM, 3.35 / 197–98). It does not follow from this, however, that these conventions are in any way arbitrary or without their own relevant standard or principles of justification (T, 3.2.1.19 / 484). On the contrary, the relevant standard is provided by the *utility* of these conventions in so far as they provide an *effective remedy* to the problems what we have identified and described.

How are these observations about Hume’s theory of justice of any relevance to his critique of religion and his Lucretian mission? The answer to his is that there exists a significant analogy between justice and religion *as Hume describes them*. Moreover, this analogy may be taken to show that religion can be justified along similar lines as those that Hume uses to explain the *legitimacy* and *necessity* of conventions of justice and the practices and institutions associated with them. According to Hume’s account, religious beliefs and practices arise from two general circumstances. In the first place, there are the “internal” circumstances of our human nature that are relevant to the origins of religious belief. These include, in particular, fear, anxiety, hope, and ignorance. The other set of circumstances involve our “outside” or external situation. This is the human predicament or condition as it relates to our vulnerability to disease, famine, war, weather, and many other hazards of human existence that we have little control over and do not fully understand. Hume suggests that these circumstances present difficulties for us to which religion serves as a *remedy*. That is to say, religion serves to allay our fears, support our hopes, and provide us with some sense of control over events that otherwise surpass both our understanding and powers. To this extent religion serves the *important and essential purpose* of consoling human beings in difficult and trying circumstances that we all inevitably must anticipate and confront. From both an individual and social point of view, therefore, religion is a stabilizing and consoling force in human life. So considered, religion is a human artifice or invention that serves a crucial functional role and may, therefore, be judged as no less “justified” than the conventions of justice (which are also artificially created, variable, and

nevertheless directly responsive to basic human needs). This is a conclusion, the critic may argue, that we are driven to by way of Hume's own observations on this subject.⁷

We are now in a position to see what looks to be a serious weakness or vulnerability in Hume's Lucretian mission. Given Hume's own account of the origins of religion, and the obvious and significant analogy that holds between justice and religion, as Hume understands them, it is not at all clear why he should aim to *discredit* and *dislodge* religion and the (important) role it plays in human life. More specifically, there is no more reason, the critic may argue, to "disturb" or "undermine" religion in general, than there is to aim at disturbing or undermining the conventions of justice in general. While it may be granted that some religions—like some conventions of justice—fail to perform the sort of role that justifies them (i.e., providing consolation, stability, etc.) this is not an argument for getting rid of *all religion* (any more than it would be for getting rid of all conventions of justice). Hume has, therefore, provided us with an effective refutation of his own Lucretian ambitions. Moreover, this refutation of his own practical aims as regards religion does not in any way depend on refuting or responding to Hume's *sceptical* critique of religious philosophy. All that it relies on are the very set of *naturalistic* claims and observations that Hume has supplied us with himself concerning the origins and roots of religion in human life.

In the second *Enquiry*, Hume makes some passing remarks about the justice/religion analogy that indicate how he might respond to this criticism.⁸ He notes that his account of justice as artificial and variable in its particular forms leaves it open to the objection that justice may be regarded in the same way as philosophers "ridicule vulgar superstition" (EM, 3.36 / 198). The doctrines and practices of superstition are plainly variable and arbitrary (e.g., in their prohibitions concerning what we may eat, etc.), and so, too, are the restrictions and constraints of justice. The conventions of justice, therefore, also seem liable to the same ridicule and sceptical doubts. Hume says:

But there is this material difference between *superstition* and *justice*, that the former is frivolous, useless, and burdensome; the latter is absolutely requisite to the well-being of mankind and existence of society. When we abstract from this circumstance (for it is too apparent ever to be overlooked) it must be confessed, that all regards to right and property, seem entirely without

foundation, as much as the grossest and most vulgar superstition. Were the interests of society nowise concerned, it is as unintelligible why another's articulating certain sounds implying consent, should change the nature of my actions with regard to a particular object, as why the reciting of a liturgy by a priest, in a certain habit and posture, should dedicate a heap of brick and timber, and render it, thenceforth and for ever, sacred. (EM, 3.38 / 199—Hume's emphasis).

Hume is, evidently, alive to the significance of the analogy between justice and religion (superstition) and has something to say in defence of the utility of *justice*. However, his remarks about "superstition" still leave it unclear why its institutions and practices are not *also justified* given the (important) role that they play in human life. More specifically, contrary to Hume's remarks cited above, religion cannot be *entirely* "frivolous, useless and burdensome" otherwise, as he points out himself in the *Natural History of Religion*, we would have no relevant *explanation* for why it has arisen and is so prevalent in human society.

Clearly, then, something more needs to be said on Hume's behalf to explain why he pursues his Lucretian mission in the face of his own observations about our *natural human need* for religion. A reply may be provided for Hume (i.e., an "apology for Hume") using elements from his own writings and philosophical system. Let us begin by noting that Hume might well agree with Marx that religion is, indeed, "the heart of a heartless world."⁹ It does not follow from this, however, that religion is the *right or most effective* remedy for the kinds of human needs to which it is a response.¹⁰ From Hume's point of view, religion is not only not the right remedy, it may itself (as it often does) become an *obstacle* to the very sorts of remedies that we *really need* to ameliorate the human condition in face of the sorts of difficulties that give rise and momentum to the religious impulse. In so far as this is the correct analysis, religion may be compared to false or fraudulent "cures" for our medical needs. At best, these cures do little to help us. At worst, they stand in the way of genuinely effective remedies and may even make us sicker than we would be without them. Clearly this is exactly what Hume believes concerning religion in the form that we generally find it. Not only does it fail to make us healthy, it makes us *even sicker* (i.e., more fearful, more anxious, and less able to cope with the various challenges that we may face).¹¹

Consider again Hume's account of the two basic circumstances of religion. In respect of human nature and our vulnerability to fear and anxiety, we cannot do much to change these basic elements of life. However,

we can *improve* our lot in respect of the features of our condition that leave us vulnerable, fearful, and anxious about the future. What sort of remedies ought we to be looking for? In the first place, ignorance can be reduced through education, learning, and the advancement of knowledge. It is, therefore, essential to promote and encourage learning, as well as to direct our energies and investigations into areas where we can expect to advance our knowledge and understanding of the world (T, 1.4.7.12–4 / 271–73; EU, 1.12, 5.2, 12, 25 / 12.41, 162).¹² At the same time, when we use knowledge to increase our prosperity, and to produce wealth and goods that can satisfy our needs and alleviate our suffering, then clearly this will reduce and inhibit those fears and anxieties that arise with deprivation, famine, disease, and disaster. Beyond this, Hume also points out that the development of the arts and sciences, as well as commerce, requires conditions of “liberty.” This is, indeed, a recurrent theme throughout Hume’s writings.¹³ In order to encourage and promote knowledge and prosperity as a way of overcoming ignorance and deprivation, it is essential that society promotes and preserves the liberty of its subjects. All too often, Hume observes, religion becomes a significant *obstacle* to conditions of liberty and, thereby, a barrier to the goods and benefits that we secure from liberty. While religion may present itself in the guise of comforting and supporting humanity, its clergy, its churches, and its doctrines usually serve to *shackle us* and prevent us from taking the measures that are truly necessary to satisfy our needs and keep our fears and anxieties at bay.¹⁴ This is certainly one important message that Hume seeks to convey in the form of his Lucretian mission.

3. *Why Preach the Gospel of Scepticism to the “Vulgar Multitude”?*

Let us grant, for now, that Hume is right in maintaining that religion is not “absolutely requisite to the well-being of mankind” (and may well be “frivolous, useless, and burdensome”). This concession, the critic may argue, only postpones further difficulties that are internal to Hume’s Lucretian mission. Even if his mission is justified, in terms of the benefits that it aims to secure for humanity, the *method* that Hume employs in pursuit of these aims and objectives is called into question by his own commitments on this subject. More specifically, given Hume’s hypotheses and claims about the *foundations* of religion, his entire approach must be judged naïve and doomed to failure. In the *Natural History of Religion*, as well as in his other writings, Hume argues that religious belief is not root-

ed in reason or philosophical arguments of any kind. On the contrary, according to Hume, the evolution of religion depends on processes and forces that are unguided by reason (and generally result in beliefs that are *irrational* in character).¹⁵ However, if this is correct, then *philosophical arguments*, as well as complex psychological and historical theories about the roots of religion, will never be able to resist, much less eradicate, all religion from human life. The “ignorant multitude” will never be influenced by Hume’s writings. They have neither the leisure nor the ability to take in his message—however philosophically convincing and sound his arguments may be. Clearly Hume is not directing his work at a “popular” or mass audience. But if that is so, why should he waste his own time and energy pursuing his Lucretian mission using such an *inappropriate instrument*? In sum, if Hume’s account of the roots of religion is correct, then abstract philosophical arguments of the kind that he gives to the world can hardly serve the *practical* purpose that he aspires to. To use a method so unsuited to its end is, indeed, like “pretending to stop the ocean with a bullrush” (NHR, 166).

Are Hume’s writings on religion a useless and ineffective instrument for stemming the tide of “superstition”? Do his own observations about the sources and dynamics of religion discredit the method that he employs to achieve the goals of his Lucretian mission? In a number of contexts Hume shows that he is well aware that *philosophers* may be guilty of “enthusiasm” or “extravagance.”¹⁶ There are any number of philosophical doctrines and sects—such as the stoics and skeptics—who pursue (hopeless) aims and objectives that are easily defeated by more powerful principles in human nature. Caution, prudence, and modesty are required, therefore, in any undertaking as bold and ambitious as his Lucretian mission. Nevertheless, since Hume is one philosopher who is *particularly aware* of the limits of philosophy in human life, we should not be too quick to assume that he is naïve to this problem and the (practical) difficulties that he faces.

The strategy that Hume pursues by means of his writings on religion is *indirect* and (frankly) *elitist*. He is under no illusion that ordinary people (the “ignorant multitude”) will be converted to his irreligious principles by way of reading his difficult and complex philosophical writings. The emancipating effect of his work must reach these people by some other route. Hume aims to influence ordinary members of society indirectly by way of first reaching an educated and reflective audience who

have an established interest in these problems and the leisure and understanding to think about them.¹⁷ Furthermore, as Hume often points out, the first stage of his irreligious mission can only be accomplished in social circumstances or conditions where there *already* exists a tolerable degree of liberty (as was more or less the case in mid-18th-century Britain). It is Hume's aim to persuade his more enlightened readers of the narrow limits and weaknesses of the human understanding and, thereby, to turn their attention and energies to matters of "common life," where *real remedies* for improving the human condition can be found. This is, indeed, the primary aim and objective of Hume's various sceptical arguments as presented in both the *Treatise* and first *Enquiry* (as well as the *Dialogues*). (T, 1.4.7; EU, 1; 12).

Hume's ambition to turn our investigations and speculations away from problems well beyond the reach of human understanding (e.g., "the origin of worlds, and the situation of nature, from, and to eternity": EU, 12.25 / 162) and towards problems of "common life" serves the important purpose of placing a *check* on the religious impulse. More importantly, it secures this end, not only by (directly) discouraging speculations along these lines but also, more importantly, by encouraging *real improvements* in human knowledge that will, in turn, *dull* our (natural) propensity to superstition. That is to say, if Hume is able to redirect the intellectual energies and attention of the most able and gifted members of society to areas where they may make more effective contributions to knowledge, wealth, and human happiness, this process will itself weaken the very conditions that encourage and promote religion in society. Clearly, then, according to this view, Hume's strategy, as it concerns the *practical* aims and hopes of his Lucretian mission, is both indirect and elitist. He does not assume that there is any easy and direct way of converting the "ignorant multitude" by preaching the gospel of scepticism to them. Nothing about his Lucretian mission, as he pursues it, should lead us to suggest that he was so naïve as to suppose that his writings would somehow have the (magical) effect of directly engaging a mass, popular audience who would be convinced by his irreligious message and arguments.¹⁸

4. Is Hume Guilty of Irreligious "Utopianism"?

Even if Hume is justified in holding that he may have some degree of success in pursuing his Lucretian mission by means of his philosophical work, the critic may turn to another objection. Let us grant, says the

critic, that Hume's arguments and observations concerning religion may influence a select audience and eventually, by an indirect route, dull the forces that propel human beings into religion. Nevertheless, even on the most optimistic assumptions about how these results may be achieved, the same forces that Hume describes will return and propel us back into religious belief whenever ignorance and a lack of control over future events arouse our fears, hopes, and anxieties. The features of human nature and the human predicament that Hume identifies and describes as relevant here can never be *fully transcended*. It would be wild optimism to suppose otherwise—as wild as anything that Hume can find in the superstitions that he ridicules. Clearly, then, however accurate Hume may be about the unfortunate influence and consequences of religion, we cannot escape the fact that “the superstitious will always be with us.” In this way, we may take Hume's own naturalistic observations to show that superstition is really a kind of “original sin” in human nature—there is no hope of us entirely purging humanity of these propensities and tendencies. The *practical* aspect of Hume's Lucretian mission is, therefore, founded on delusion. Its aims and objectives are every bit as utopian as any fantasy or “golden age” proposed by the superstitions that he hopes to help us transcend.¹⁹ At least this must be true if Hume's own observations about the causes and dynamics of religious belief are generally correct.

The force of this criticism depends on a particular interpretation of Hume's *practical* aims and objectives as concerns his Lucretian mission. It presupposes that Hume's ambition (indirect though it may be) is to help humanity overcome its own religious propensities in the sense that we may ultimately *eradicate all forms and traces of religion* in human life. So conceived, the problem we face involves not simply sceptical doubts about the influence of *philosophy* in human life, but the very notion of creating or securing conditions which will (somehow) purge humanity of all its religious tendencies by fundamentally transforming the circumstances and conditions that create and fuel these tendencies. This is a project that seems to be every bit as utopian as aiming to transcend the need for distinctions of property or conventions of justice on the assumption that either human motivation can be radically altered and/or that our powers of wealth and production can be expanded to such an extent so that there exists no scarcity of goods in society. These are, however, by Hume's own

lights, vain and idle hopes. So, too, therefore, is his ambition to liberate humanity from the yoke of religion.

It is a well-known feature of Hume's political philosophy that he was sceptical of any and all extreme utopian schemes (cf. T, 3.2.5.9 / 521; EM, 3.24–27 / 193–94). In respect of human nature and the human condition, Hume was no extreme optimist, and he firmly embraced an outlook that we have no reason to expect that this world is capable of perfection, much less that it has been made for human happiness (NHR, 183; D, 114). Imperfection and some degree of suffering and unhappiness are, as Hume sees it, the natural and inescapable features of the world that all of us must live in. It is, therefore, quite alien to Hume's thought in general, and his Lucretian mission in particular, to present him as some sort of irreligious utopian who aims to free all humanity from all forms of religion. This is, indeed, to miss the *more specific* content and purpose of Hume's Lucretian mission.

Hume would certainly dismiss the ambition to "transcend all religion" as a hopelessly vain and unfortunate example of "philosophical extravagance." However, it does not follow from this, Hume would point out, that our only alternative in face of the causes and dynamics of religion is some form of "quietism" or passive acceptance. On the contrary, it is Hume's position that a practical attitude of this kind is *ethically* unacceptable. From one point of view, it is feeble and cowardly, and from another, it is confused and shows a misunderstanding of our practical options. Consistent with his more general philosophical outlook as it concerns the human condition, Hume is neither an extreme optimist (i.e., an "irreligious utopian") nor an extreme pessimist (i.e., fatalistic or passively resigned to the influence of religion in human life). The view that he embraces, considered as the practical aspect of his Lucretian mission, may be best described as "moderate optimism." It is, therefore, Hume's *moderate optimism* that we need to articulate and explain.

It is clearly Hume's view that the forces and dynamics of religion will always be with us. Moreover, since both human nature and the human condition are far from perfect, we must, on his account, reconcile ourselves to these inescapable features of human existence and society. Nevertheless, the *circumstances* of religion can certainly be *tamed* in the manner that we have already described. We have, therefore, no reason to despair or abandon all hope that we can *improve* our lives by *resisting* the

religious propensity in those forms that are most destructive and/or most influential in human life. As we have seen, and as history shows us, there are available *secular remedies* for many of the anxieties and vulnerabilities that encourage religion to evolve and prosper. This is a cycle of cause and effect in which human activities—including philosophical work—can have some significant impact and role to play. This does not commit us to the (wildly optimistic) view that these forces for superstition will somehow eventually altogether disappear from the face of the earth, much less that philosophy alone can bring this about. No sensible version of the Lucretian mission, in so far as it is guided by Hume’s own insights, can have this extreme end in view. It would more than suffice, for Hume to feel satisfied with his achievements in this area, if his philosophical work serves the purpose of simply holding back the (rising) tide of superstition in its *most pernicious forms*. Hopefully, through its successes, these efforts will encourage others to see the progress that can be made and encourage them to take up this cause. However, those following in the footsteps of Hume’s Lucretian mission, as described, must see their efforts to stem the tide of religion as an *ongoing, constant struggle*. It is not a process or project that can be carried through over a limited period, and then finally, when it secures its end, be set aside.²⁰

As I have explained, Hume’s observations concerning human nature and the human condition suggest that we must *always struggle* against the religious propensity. Since religion takes different forms that have different effects and consequences for human life and society, it is important to Hume’s Lucretian mission that we choose our targets carefully. Some forms of religion—and here Hume uses the expression “superstition” in a narrower and more specific sense—are especially destructive in their influence on human life.²¹ It is these specific forms of religion/superstition that Hume’s philosophy of irreligion is particularly directed against. It is Hume’s view that the major monotheistic religions—he has Christianity primarily in mind—typically take the form of *pernicious superstition*. His irreligious aims and objectives, therefore, pursue the more limited and modest end of putting a *check* on these *particular forms* of religion. As Hume was well aware, this is no easy task, so it is unwise and unnecessary to propose any larger or more ambitious goal for ourselves. In light of these observations, the sensible philosopher will confine his Lucretian mission within these particular bounds.²²

5. *Hume's Lucretian Mission in Life and Death*

My primary concern in this paper has been to consider the general objection that Hume's Lucretian mission is fundamentally self-refuting or self-defeating. It may be argued, for example, that Hume's own naturalistic commitments show that religion plays a valuable and essential role in human life and society—one that it is plainly unwise to disturb and dislodge. It may also be argued that if Hume is right about the natural roots of religion, then the method that he employs in pursuit of his Lucretian mission (i.e., abstract philosophical argument) is poorly chosen and displays a naïve form of "philosophical enthusiasm." Related to this point, it may also be argued that Hume's Lucretian mission manifests "utopian" ends that are impossible to achieve on his own principles. I have argued that in respect of all these charges, Hume is not guilty of any internal inconsistency.

Hume's Lucretian mission, I maintain, should be characterized as manifesting "moderate optimism." On one side, Hume does hold that there are features of human nature and the human condition that will always tend to propel us into religious beliefs of various kinds. Given the imperfect nature of the human predicament, it would indeed be extravagant and utopian to aim at *eradicating all forms of religion* from human life. However, this is not a (practical) objective that Hume aspires to or recommends—whatever *philosophical* doubts he had about religion in general. It is Hume's aim to target his irreligious efforts at the more destructive forms of religion, as judged by the moral standard of human happiness *in this world* (which is the only intelligible standard that is available to us). It is certainly true that most forms of Christianity that Hume is familiar with would fall into this destructive category.

Hume's Lucretian mission, although it plainly contains a significant *negative* message, has, nevertheless, a *positive* end in view. That is to say, Hume's aim is not simply to "unmask" and "debunk" religion. In itself, this is just a means to a further end. It is Hume's belief that religion, in the forms that he is primarily concerned with, serves as a barrier and obstacle to the kinds of secular remedies to our fears, anxieties, and hopes that give rise to religion in the first place. To the extent that we can remove religious barriers to education and knowledge, commerce and wealth, and liberty and tolerance, so to that extent we may expect to dull and weaken the *need* for religion in human society. Having said this, it is no part of Hume's message to hold out hope for a perfect world of human content-

ment where religion is wholly unnecessary and has no traction. From Hume's perspective, any irreligious program of this kind contains within itself flawed ingredients of religion.

Although the need and propensity to religion will always be with us (i.e., *qua* "original superstition"), Hume is no fatalist in face of these natural forces. By "unmasking" religion, both in respect of its absurdities and corrupting tendencies, we can help ourselves overcome many of the difficulties that we must inevitably encounter given the human predicament. To this extent Hume is an optimist. This optimism is checked, however, by an acceptance that this is an imperfect world in which we find ourselves to be vulnerable and limited beings. When we aspire to some state of perfection, Hume maintains, it is more likely that we will succeed only in making this an even *less* perfect world.²³ So long as we are willing to *live within human horizons*, and reconcile ourselves to the *imperfections of human existence*, we will, for the most part, secure a reasonable measure of happiness for ourselves and others. This is the central (positive) message of Hume's Lucretian mission.

When Hume was dying, his close and esteemed friend, Adam Smith, came to pay him a final visit. In a letter to William Strachan, Smith describes his last conversation with Hume. Hume told Smith that he had recently been reading Lucian's *Dialogues of the Dead*. Among the excuses that he said he might give to Charon, in order to postpone his departure before being ferried over the river Styx to Hades, Hume proposed the following:

But I might still urge, 'Have a little patience, good Charon, I have been endeavouring to open the eyes of the public. If I live a few years longer, I may have the satisfaction of seeing the downfall of some of the prevailing systems of superstition.' But Charon would then lose all temper and decency. 'You loitering rogue, that will not happen these many hundred years. Do you fancy I will grant you a lease for so long a term? Get into the boat this instant, you lazy loitering rogue.'²⁴

These remarks are very relevant to our discussion from several points of view. First, they indicate that the optimism with which Hume pursues his Lucretian mission is limited and moderate. On one hand, it is indeed Hume's aim "to open the eyes of the public" concerning "superstition," with a view to bringing about its "downfall." On the other hand, Hume qualifies these remarks to say that he is specifically concerned with "some of the *prevailing systems* of superstition." He has no general, open-ended

concern to liberate humanity from *all* forms of religion. Second, Charon's reply to his proposal reveals that Hume's moderate optimism on this subject is accompanied with a fair measure of pessimism, based on his recognition that the Christian religion is deeply entrenched in his own society (just as other forms of monotheism are deeply entrenched in other societies). Hume is, in other words, under no illusion about the difficulty of the task at hand, limited though it may be.

Paul Russell

*University of British Columbia
Vancouver, Canada*

NOTES

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1. References to Hume's writings are to *A Treatise of Human Nature* [T], ed. by D. F. Norton & M. J. Norton (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* [EU], ed. by T. L. Beauchamp (Oxford: Clarendon, 2000); *Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals*, edited by Tom L. Beauchamp (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998). I will also provide references to the Selby-Bigge/Nidditch editions of the *Treatise* and *Enquiries*. Following the convention given in the Nortons' *Treatise* (and Beauchamp's *Enquiry*), I cite Book. Part. Section. Paragraph, followed by page references to the Selby-Bigge/Nidditch editions. Thus T, 1.2.3.4 / 34: will indicate *Treatise* Bk. 1, Pt. 2, Sec. 3, Para. 4 / Selby-Bigge/Nidditch p. 34. Other references are to *Essays: Moral, Political, and Literary* [ESY], rev. ed. by E. F. Miller (Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Classics, 1985); *Natural History of Religion* [NHR] (1757) and *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion* [D] (1779) in: *Dialogues and Natural History of Religion*, ed. by J. A. C. Gaskin (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993); *The Letters of David Hume* [LET], 2 vols., ed. by J. Y. T. Greig (Oxford: Clarendon, 1932).

2. For a general survey of Hume's views on religion, see my "Hume on Religion," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*: (Winter 2005 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2005/entries/hume-religion/>; and also *The Riddle of Hume's Treatise: Skepticism, Naturalism and Irreligion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007). In my "Hume on Religion" (sec. 10) I argue that Hume's views on this subject are best characterized as "irreligious." As I explain below, the exact nature of Hume's practical aims, as regards his Lucretian mission, require further and careful interpretation.

3. In the *Treatise* Hume provides some brief accounts of the various psychological and "unphilosophical" features of the human mind that generate religious beliefs of various kinds (e.g., the association of ideas, the influence of the passions on belief, etc.). Similar observations are peppered throughout the first *Enquiry*.

4. Hume points out that not only does the evidence of history make this clear, we know as well that if theism, based on the (obvious and convincing) argument from design was the original form of religion, then it would be impossible to explain how polytheism could ever have arisen. Since the argument from design would continue to have the same force, we should not expect any deviation from it (NHR, 137).

5. See, e.g., Hume's remarks at EU, 1.11, 11.3 / 11, 133; and also NHR, XI.

6. Hume mentions this analogy at EM, 3.38 / 199. I discuss this passage further below.

7. There are, of course, some obvious differences between justice and religion. For example, the issue of truth and falsehood arises for religion in so far as it makes claims about the existence and attributes of various (invisible, intelligent) beings. However, as the critic sees it, this is not a factor that serves to undermine the relevance of the analogy. What really matters is the relevant functional role that religion plays (i.e., that it consoles, stabilizes, etc.) For these purposes, what matters is that the doctrines of religion are *believed* to be true—not that they are in fact true.

8. See, also, Hume's remarks at EU, XI. In this context, the criticism is made of Epicurus' sceptical views concerning God and a future state that, however sound they may be, they nevertheless have "dangerous consequences" for morality (EU, 11.28–29 / 147). Hume's answer to this objection rests, of course, with his defence of *secular* morality in the *Treatise* and second *Enquiry*. The difficulty raised, however, reaches well beyond the narrower problem of the morality/religion relationship. That is to say, even if moral life does not depend on religion, Hume's own analysis (i.e., in NHR and elsewhere) suggests that the role that religion plays is deeper and wider than this. Indeed, Hume's own account of the origins of religion does not place any particular weight on the role that religion plays in support of moral life and emphasizes, instead, the role that it plays in providing comfort and stability to human beings who are frail and vulnerable beings in an unpredictable and frightening world.

9. Karl Marx, *Writings of the Young Marx on Philosophy and Society*, ed. and trans. By L. D. Easton and K. H. Guddat (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1974), p. 251 ["Toward the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law: Introduction"].

10. In the passage cited above, Marx uses his famous analogy of religion as "the opium of the people." He continues: "The abolition of religion as people's *illusory* happiness is the demand for their *real* happiness. The demand to abandon illusions about their condition is a *demand to abandon a condition which requires illusions*. . . ." (Marx's emphases).

11. "Examine religious principles, which have in fact, prevailed in the world. You will scarcely be persuaded that they are any thing but sick men's dreams. . . ." (NHR, 184).

12. See, especially, Hume's remarks at T, 1.4.7.14 / 273: "For my part, my only hope is, that I may contribute a little to the advancement of knowledge, . . ."

13. See, e.g., T, Intro. 7 / xxi; EU, 11.2 / 132–33; ESY, 89f, 92, 113–15, 277f; NHR, 173–74.

14. See, in particular, Hume's observations about "superstition as an enemy to civil liberty" in his essay "Of Superstition and Enthusiasm"; and also his remarks about the clergy in a long footnote to his essay "Of National Characters" [ESY, 199n]. Also of relevance are Hume's remarks about intolerance and monotheism in NHR, 160f.

15. As already noted, this is a theme that features in the *Treatise* and first *Enquiry*, as well as, more prominently, in the *Natural History of Religion*.

16. See, e.g., T, 1.4.1.7; 1.4.7.13 / 183, 272; EU, 12. 22 / 159–60; EM, [A Dialogue] 53–57 / 341–43; D, 34–35; ESY, 140f, 169f.

17. One irony here, perhaps, is that Hume's most obvious and natural audience consists of religiously-minded people who can be persuaded to *alter* their beliefs by means of philosophical *argument* (otherwise why write for anyone?).

18. It is arguable that Hume's decision to "cast anew" his *Treatise* in the form of the two *Enquiries*, as well as to disown the *Treatise* on the ground that it was poorly presented, may well reflect his view that in the *Treatise* he had in fact targeted his audience *too narrowly*, given his *practical* aims and objectives *vis-à-vis* his Lucretian mission. (See Hume's remarks in his "My Own Life" [LET, I, 3] and his "Advertisement" to the 1777 edition of his *Essays* and *Treatises* [EU, p. 83 / 2].)

19. See Hume's remarks on the "golden age, which poets have invented" (T, 3.2.2.15 / 493f).

20. The moderate nature of Hume's Lucretian mission may be contrasted with the more utopian views of Karl Marx on this subject. Marx entertained the ("scientific") hope that one day, by means of a fundamental transformation of our powers of economic production, we will create a society in which the ideology of religion would fade away and disappear altogether. Whatever we may have to say about the merits of Marx's claims concerning religion, it is evident that Hume holds out no such hopes for us, and encourages no such (illusory) aims and objectives by means of his critique of religion.

21. For Hume, "superstition" has narrower and more specific connotations than "religion" as such. Religious belief that has its origins in "weakness, fear, melancholy, together with ignorance" is, on Hume's account, "the true source of superstition" (ESY, 74). He contrasts this with religion that is based in "hope, pride, presumption, a warm imagination, together with ignorance which is the root of "enthusiasm." Hume makes the point in his essay "Of Superstition and Enthusiasm" that these two forms of religion not only have different causes, they also have different consequences as well. Superstition is particularly connected with "priestly power," tyranny, and the destruction of civil liberty.

22. Hume's way of targeting "superstition," as opposed to more benign forms of religion, is consistent with the writings of Cicero on this subject. (The influence and importance of Cicero for Hume's philosophy—especially as it concerns religion—is widely recognized.) See, in particular, Cicero's remarks in *On Divination* [# 72], where he makes clear that although he aims to "uproot and destroy superstition," he does not aim to "destroy" religion in general. Cicero retains a more refined view of religion understood as belief "in the existence of some great and eternal Being, to whom mortals owe veneration and reverence." Clearly, from Hume's point of view, more refined forms of religion of this kind should not be confused with pernicious superstition.

23. See, e.g., ESY, 539: "There is another humour, which may be observ'd in some Pretenders to Wisdom, and which, if not so pernicious as the idle petulant humour above-mention'd [i.e., those who ridicule everything sacred and venerable], must, however, have a very bad effect on those, who indulge it. I mean that grave philosophic endeavour after perfection, which, under pretext of reforming prejudices and errors, strikes at all the most endearing sentiments of the heart, and all the most useful bypasses and instincts, which can govern a human creature. . . ."

24. LET, II, 451. On the details surrounding Hume's death (and his Lucretian attitude to it) see E. C. Mossner, *The Life of David Hume*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980), ch. 39.