

Hume's Historical Critique of Religion

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Stephen R. Grimm
University of St. Michael's College, Toronto School of Theology
Master of Arts in Theology
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[M.A. Thesis Abstract]

I argue that Hume's critique of religion can be divided into rational and historical parts. Because Hume privileges other faculties of belief, especially common life beliefs, above reason, according to the logic of Hume's own system the historical critique is more basic than the rational. To be effective, the historical critique must demonstrate that religious beliefs corrupt the naturally benevolent tendencies of groups and individuals, that they poison common life. In my thesis I explore Hume's use of this tactic, especially as it appears in his six-volume History of England. If we are convinced that Hume has proven his point, then it does not follow that religious beliefs are irrational (strictly speaking), but that they should be excluded from society because of the division and ill-will which they promote. For Hume, religious groups should be treated with as much respect as the body treats a potentially lethal disease.

Contents

| | | |
|-------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------|
| I. | Introduction | 3 |
| II. | Three Theological Interpretations of Hume | 12 |
| | A. Hume as Sceptic | |
| | B. Hume as Naturalist | |
| | C. Hume as Philosopher of Common Life | |
| | D. The Limitations of these Views with Regard to Hume's Critique of Religion | |
| III. | Hume's Historical Critique | 27 |
| | A. Negative Effects on Society | |
| | B. Negative Effects on Individuals | |
| | C. The Cases of More and Becket | |
| IV. | The Relationship between Common Life and Philosophy | 45 |
| V. | Conclusion | 50 |
| | Bibliography | 53 |

I. Introduction

Hume's critique of religion is generally regarded as the most devastating on record. His *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, in particular, have served as the basis for countless atheistic strategies since they were published in 1779.¹ Yet more recently, theologians themselves have turned to Hume's writings to help conduct the defense of religion, and there are even some who believe that, at heart, Hume was a believer – a fideist of sorts who could write with utter sincerity at the conclusion of the *Dialogues* that, "To be a philosophical Sceptic is, in a man of letters, the first and most essential step towards being a sound, believing Christian."²

Considered carefully, however, I believe it can be shown that the traditional view of Hume is in fact correct – that, in the blunt words of Anthony Flew, "David Hume (1711-1776) was a complete unbeliever, the first major thinker of the modern period to be through and through secular, this-worldly, and man-centered."³ Yet while it is true to say that Hume was an unbeliever, the more theologically pressing question lies in determining just what sort of unbeliever he was. Why, in other words, did he feel that religious claims were not worthy of belief? Some object to religion because they see it as immature wish fulfillment, some because they think it lacks compelling evidence or proof, some because they find it hypocritical and divisive. But what were Hume's difficulties?

¹ Even setting aside the use of Hume's critique by atheists *per se*, it is clear that the impact of his thought on the development of theological reflection has been considerable. As J.C.A. Gaskin notes, "Hume's undermining of the traditional rational grounds for belief in God was so thorough that once his position had been absorbed into the mainstream of European thought (via, among others, d'Holbach, Kant, and Shelley) a fundamental reappraisal of the nature of religion commenced. Thus first Schleiermacher (1768-1834) and later Kierkegaard (1813-55) sought to make religion rely less on evidence and reason and more upon feeling, subjective experience, and faith." Gaskin, "Hume on Religion," in *The Cambridge Companion to Hume*, ed. David Fate Norton (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 338.

² David Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, ed. Richard Popkin (Indianapolis, Ind.: Hackett, 1980), 89.

In this essay I shall argue that Hume's objections to religion can be divided into two distinct parts; one of which is concerned with the *rational* failings of religion and the other its *historical* failings.⁴ It is, as it were, a double-fisted attack. By means of his rational critique, Hume attempts to show that traditional 'proofs' for the existence of God (such as the argument from design and the ontological argument) are either inconclusive or flawed, while with his historical critique he attempts to show that religion has acted throughout history as an overwhelmingly negative force within society.

Although Hume intends the two parts of his critique to work in tandem, it is possible to treat the rational and historical elements separately because they rely on different styles of argumentation and appeal to different sorts of evidence to make their claims. For example, in the *Dialogues* Hume argues that the ontological proof for the existence of God is not valid because, if one understands the meaning of the term 'necessity,' it is impossible to say that any being *necessarily* exists. As Hume, under the guise of the character Cleanthes, writes,

Nothing is demonstrable, unless the contrary implies a contradiction. Nothing, that is distinctly conceivable, implies a contradiction. Whatever we conceive as existent, we can also conceive as non-existent. There is no being, therefore, whose non-existence implies a contradiction. Consequently there is no being, whose existence is demonstrable.⁵

As we can see, Hume's case here rests on an analytic appraisal of language, combined with a strict empiricism – this is the sort of objection which I am calling 'rational.' To draw attention to the historical failings of religion, however, he makes his case in a very different manner: viz., by pointing to incidents throughout history in which religious groups have acted as a negative influence. To support his case in this regard, Hume appeals not to an analysis of language but

³ Anthony Flew, *David Hume: Writings on Religion* (La Salle, Ill.: Open Court, 1992), vii.

⁴ I take the *Dialogues* to be the most sophisticated expression of Hume's rational critique and *The History of England* to be the fullest expression of the historical critique. I shall attempt to justify these choices below.

rather to historical cases in which religious groups seem to have been the direct cause of division and bloodshed – the Hundred Years War, for example. In making this distinction within his overall critique of religion, however, I do not mean to suggest that historical arguments are not rational, or, vice versa, that history does not shape our understanding of rationality; rather, I am stating simply that the sorts of *evidence* which the two sub-critiques invoke to support their claims are significantly and interestingly different.

Although Hume develops both critiques of religion at length throughout his writings, until recently his rational critique has monopolized the scholarly debate, whereas his historical critique has gone largely unappreciated.⁶ I believe this uneven treatment is both unsatisfying and out of step with the basic principles of his larger philosophical project, yet one must also admit that it is quite natural that Hume's scepticism should have heretofore been the focus of philosophers and theologians who regard rational proofs for the existence of God as an essential part of the case for religion. Are the objections convincing or not? Does there remain compelling proof for the existence of God or doesn't there? For many thinkers, these questions must be answered before they can proceed to consider secondary, perhaps even lesser, questions such as the social and historical significance of religion.

Yet while the study of Hume's rational critique is undoubtedly important, I would like

⁵ *Dialogues*, p.55.

⁶ It is understandable that philosophers would be reluctant to dip into Hume's hundreds of pages of historical writing, especially when his philosophical writing is itself so provocative. Yet in the course of my research I was surprised to learn that even those professional historians who have studied the *History of England* in depth have tended to overlook the severe anti-religious polemic which underlies that work, instead focusing their attention on more politically oriented questions of whether or not the *History* betrays a Whig or Tory bias. According to Victor Wexler, for example, "The reader will not find [in the *History of England*] an analysis of Hume either as a social historian or as a historian of religious ideas... Hume failed to treat religion as a legitimate motive in influencing the course of English history, although he had to concede that, from time to time, it contributed to such events as the seventeenth century civil war." Wexler, *David Hume and the History of England* (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1985), ii.

to argue that his historical critique holds a more central place in Hume's overall analysis of religious belief than such a one-sided treatment suggests. More ambitiously still, I shall attempt to demonstrate that, according to the principles of Hume's own system, his historical critique is the *more* devastating and even the *more* fundamental of the two. To draw upon the earlier metaphor of Hume's 'double-fisted attack,' while the rational critique might succeed in temporarily chastening believers' faith in the confidence of their claims, it is the duty of his historical writings to deliver the irrecoverable blow.

In arguing that Hume's historical critique is more fundamental, the crucial phrase is "according to the principles of his own system." For, certainly, there are those who would maintain that Hume's rational critique is sufficient in itself to destroy the credibility of religious belief. "If," they might reasonably ask, "we are persuaded that Hume's rational critique in the *Dialogues* successfully invalidates traditional proofs for the existence of God, then what else remains to be shown? Surely beliefs that are not accountable to reason should not be thought of as beliefs at all, but rather fictions, sick men's dreams."

Such a position, however, should not be attributed to Hume, for one crucial reason: Hume does not believe that reason is the ultimate arbiter of truth. Instead, he is convinced that the motives of belief are more varied and must be attributed to a range of causes other than reason – such as nature, imagination, custom, and education. As John Biro writes,

Hume's general answer to questions about how we come to have the various beliefs we have is that they are the products of a non-rational faculty. He labels this faculty variously as the 'imagination,' and an 'instinct,' or by what sometimes seems to be the name of its product, 'habit' or 'custom.' The faculty in question is defined by a certain 'propensity' to form ideas and beliefs. Some subtle differences between this varying terminology notwithstanding, this faculty is contrasted with reason.⁷

⁷ John Biro, "Hume's New Science of the Mind," in *The Cambridge Companion to David Hume*, ed. David Fate Norton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 39.

I will explore Hume's reliance on these 'non-rational' faculties in greater detail later on, but for the present I will simply suggest that such a reliance raises huge questions about the self-sufficiency of his rational critique of religion. For if these other faculties are, in fact, privileged over reason in Hume's system, then destroying the credibility of rational proofs for the existence of God does not therefore necessarily invalidate religious belief as a whole. According to the logic of Hume's system, there may very well exist other, perfectly acceptable, faculties that instill in us a natural or instinctive desire for God. And this is precisely what many believers would like to argue.

If Hume is successfully to oppose this alternative defense of religion – a defense which his own epistemological system allows – then he must adapt his critique. He must somehow demonstrate not only that religious beliefs are incapable of rational proof, but more importantly that they do not satisfy the high expectations these *other* faculties, which generate instinctive and pre-rational 'natural beliefs.'⁸

How, though, does one go about proving that religion should not be accepted as a 'natural belief'? For if these beliefs truly are instinctive and *prerational*, then *ipso facto* reason cannot be used to discriminate between 'good' instincts and 'bad.' Some have suggested that if a belief (e.g., the love of progeny) is universally accepted across cultures, then it is a natural belief – a fixed element of our common life. But if universal acceptance is the criterion, then religion certainly could claim to enjoy such a status; after all, one would be hard pressed to discover a society, 'advanced' or otherwise, which has not been strongly influenced by religious beliefs of some kind. Hume, however, objects to this line of argument, denying that

⁸ The term 'natural belief' is very important here – it includes epistemological beliefs such as causation and the continued existence of the external world apart from perception, but it also includes moral beliefs such as the

simply because a belief is common, perhaps even universal, it is therefore true.

His grounds for this objection are historical in nature. According to Hume, in order to determine the truth of a commonly held belief, or a 'natural belief,' we must consider the effect this belief has on both the individual and the larger community. We must ask questions like the following: Does this belief contribute to the flourishing and happiness of society, or does it promote division and hatred? Does it encourage benevolence and generosity of spirit in the individual, or does it encourage self-absorption and meanness?

For Hume, religion stands on the negative side of both of these alternatives, and his *History* is replete with examples that support this view. Armed with such evidence, Hume feels justified in stating that religion has no right to a place in the privileged class of natural or common life beliefs. Against those who would argue that the universality of religious belief is evidence of its truth, Hume's response is that, yes, it is common – but it is common in the same sense that disease is common throughout the human species. Simply because disease, like religious belief, has always been a part of the human condition does not mean that we should not do everything in our power to limit its influence, even if history teaches us that it cannot be decisively destroyed.

Because the success of Hume's critique lies in his ability to demonstrate the negative influence of religious groups throughout history, my primary focus will be his *History of England*; it is only within the context of such a large, sweeping work (it occupies six volumes) that the overall effect of religious groups on common life can be assessed.⁹ To wit, although there are certainly instances of bad, even wicked, governments throughout history, it does not

love of progeny. Its prominence within Hume's thought was first emphasized (rightly, I believe) by Norman Kemp Smith, whom we shall discuss below.

⁹ David Hume, *The History of England*, 6 vols. (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1983).

make sense to infer that people should live without a government of some sort. Why?

Because the historical evidence suggests that human beings cannot prosper outside of organized society, and that the abuses are the exceptions rather than the rule. In the *History of England*, however, Hume develops the opposite case against religion. Arguing that in episode after episode religious groups have acted contrary to the good of society, Hume feels entitled to say that religion should not be welcomed within common life.

By attending primarily to the *History*, however, I do not mean to imply either that the *Dialogues* contain no criticism of the historical and social influence of religious groups (for surely they do), or that the principles of the rational critique of religion as developed explicitly in the *Dialogues* and implicitly in such works as *The Treatise on Human Nature* never manifest themselves in the *History*. On the contrary, I believe that many of the conclusions of the earlier, rational critique find their way into his historical writings. Thus, in trying to understand why religious groups allegedly have acted in such a frenzied, hateful manner throughout history, Hume often turns to his epistemological insights into the nature and limits of the human mind for an explanation. The following passage from the *History* is typical of the way in which Hume combines these two critiques, the rational and the historical. He writes,

The practice of persecution is the scandal of all religion, and the theological animosity, so fierce and violent, far from being an argument of men's conviction in their opposite sects, is a certain proof, that they have never reached any serious persuasion with regard to these remote and sublime subjects. Even those, who are the most impatient of contradiction in other controversies, are mild and moderate in comparison of polemical divines; and wherever a man's knowledge and experience give him a perfect assurance in his own opinion, he regards with contempt, rather than anger, the opposition and mistakes of others. But while men zealously maintain what they neither clearly comprehend, nor entirely believe, they are shaken in their imagined faith, by the opposite persuasion, or even doubts of other men; and vent on their antagonists that impatience, which is the natural result of so disagreeable a state of the understanding.¹⁰

¹⁰ *History*, 3:431.

'Commentary' sections such as these often follow Hume's more straightforward account of lurid episodes in ecclesiastical history. His method is to abstract from these episodes to make larger statements about the *odium theologicum* in general, and in particular as it disrupts the naturally benevolent instincts of mankind.¹¹ But, again, the *evidence* for these generalizations is necessarily historical in nature.

Because I would like to argue for the importance of history in Hume's critique of religion, it may seem a bit puzzling that I have chosen to focus on his *History of England* as my primary text, rather than what might seem like the more logical candidate: his *Natural History of Religion*. This approach, I confess, is not ideal, for many of Hume's most stimulating observations about "the origins of religion in human nature,"¹² and the importance of religion in the formation of a believer's identity and sense of self, are to be found here. In a work of larger scope I would indeed attempt to address these questions in depth, but within the limits of this thesis I will only have the opportunity to refer to them in passing, as they serve to embellish claims which are made in the *History of England* itself.

Furthermore, although the question of the social influence of religion is treated in *The Natural History*, I think it is fair to say that it is not the focus of that work (which, as I have suggested, is more concerned with the *psychological* question of what motivates a person to believe; according to Hume, "The anxious concern for happiness, the dread of future misery,

¹¹ In his *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, Hume advances the claim that the most basic social instincts of mankind are motivated not by self-love but by benevolence. In this, he consciously opposes Hobbes. I shall comment on the importance of Humean benevolence when I address his opposition to the claim that religion has a beneficial effect on social morality because it stays our basic, brutish instincts. On the contrary, Hume argues, our basic instincts are healthy and altruistic, and religion only serves to pervert them. I illustrate this fact by using some examples of individuals within the *History*, such as Thomas More and Thomas à Becket, whom Hume believes were embittered and twisted by their religious beliefs.

¹² David Hume, *The Natural History of Religion*, in *David Hume: Writings on Religion*, ed. Anthony Flew (La Salle, Illinois: Open Court Press, 1992), 105.

the terror of death, the thirst for revenge, the appetite for food and other necessities.”¹³). The issue of how this religious belief then exhibits itself within the concrete events of history is not considered in detail. For the fully developed answer, Hume asks that we turn to the *History of England*.

¹³ *Natural History of Religion*, 114.

Chapter II **Three Theological Interpretations of Hume**

To help situate our own study, it will first benefit us to consider the various ways in which Hume's philosophical project has been interpreted. Throughout this overview, I shall pay particular attention to the ways in which these changing views of his general philosophical project have in turn influenced our understanding of Hume's religious critique. Following the shifts in Humean scholarship, my analysis is divided into three parts: Hume as Sceptic, Hume as Naturalist, and Hume as Common Life Philosopher.¹⁴ In tracing these shifts, I am necessarily selective, treating only the most influential commentators in each category: philosophers such as Rudolf Carnap and A.J. Ayer (Hume as Sceptic) and Norman Kemp Smith (Hume as Naturalist). We shall see that gradually scholars have begun to view Hume less as a one-dimensional sceptic and more as a constructive philosopher in his own right. Although this renewed appreciation of Hume's constructive philosophy is justified, we shall see that some of the conclusions which religious thinkers have drawn from this philosophy – for instance, that Hume is a believer – are highly questionable.

Hume as Sceptic

For many contemporary philosophers, however, it is still strange even to suggest that Hume's work can be fairly interpreted in a variety of ways, positive as well as negative. For them, Hume's twofold role in the history of philosophy is unusually clear: (1) Hume carried the empiricist premises of Locke and Berkeley to their logical, and hence utterly sceptical,

¹⁴ Although it would be an exaggeration to call these groups 'schools' of interpretation, there clearly have been marked developments in the Humean literature. As Selby-Bigge observes, Hume's 'unsystematic' way of thinking paradoxically lends itself to those who would attempt to tie up all the loose ends in Hume and present one overarching *intention*: "Hume says so many different things in so many different ways and different connexions, and with so much indifference to what he has said before, that it is very hard to say positively that he taught or did not teach this or that particular doctrine... This makes it easy to find all philosophies in Hume

conclusions, and (2) upon reading Hume's sceptical arguments, Kant was finally roused from his "dogmatic slumbers," thus inaugurating a new direction in philosophical thought. In this scheme, Hume is seen as the prankster who attempted to destroy the pretensions of metaphysics -- a philosopher, indeed, who was so superficially clever that he thought he could use rational arguments to destroy the credibility of reason itself. Ultimately, however, the textbooks teach us that Hume was too clever for his own good, and he thus had to give way to the hero of the piece, Kant, who was able to restore our faith in reason and rebuild our bridge to the external world.¹⁵

The endurance of this claim can be attributed to a number of factors. For one, Hume undoubtedly *was* a very destructive, even flamboyantly destructive, anti-metaphysical thinker. And, to be sure, he had a gift for articulating provocative arguments, as can be vividly seen in the passage that brings his *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* to a close.

When we run over libraries, persuaded of these principles, what havoc must we make? If we take in our hand, any volume; of divinity or school metaphysics, for instance; let us ask, Does it contain any abstract reasoning concerning quantity or number? No. Does it contain any experimental reasoning concerning matter of fact and existence? No. Commit it then to the flames: for it can contain nothing but sophistry and illusion.¹⁶

Of course, statements like these inspire responses. Unfortunately for Hume, one of his harshest critics in the 19th century, T.H. Green, also happened to be the editor of Hume's collected works. As an idealist, indeed as one of the men most responsible for promoting the theories of Kant and Hegel throughout Britain, Green felt obliged to append a critical

or, by setting up one statement against another, none at all." L.A. Selby-Bigge, intro to *Hume's Enquiries*, 2nd edition (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1963), vii.

¹⁵ As D.C. Stove writes, "Some of the great philosophers are makers, others are breakers." He then goes on to say that Spinoza, Leibniz, and Kant are taken to be makers and that most of us would name David Hume as the breaker *par excellence*, the sceptical philosopher "whose *forte* consists in casting doubt on accepted beliefs by exposing the weakness of accepted inferences." D.C. Stove, "Hume, Kemp Smith, and Carnap," *Australian Journal of Philosophy*, 55 (1977): 189.

commentary to his edition of Hume's *Treatise* which was almost as long as the work itself.¹⁷

And, doubtless, few authors have suffered from a less sympathetic editor, as evidenced by a typical gloss from Green on a passage from the *Treatise*: "Here, then, as elsewhere, the embarrassment of Hume's doctrine is nothing which a better statement of it could avoid."¹⁸

According to Green, Hume is instructive only because he shows us precisely where a faithful adherence to empiricism leads: detached from objects, detached from the self, detached from the truth. And such was the influence of Green's critique, that for many twentieth-century students of philosophy it seemed as if they were introduced to Hume for no other purpose than to learn to refute his sceptical claims.¹⁹

Perhaps because of Hume's reputation as an iconoclast, Carnap and the founders of the Vienna Circle looked to him to endorse the Logical Positivist views they were promoting at the turn of the twentieth century. They were not disappointed. In Hume's writings, especially the first book of the *Treatise*, the Positivists discovered powerful arguments to bolster their anti-metaphysical stance. There, in Hume's famous distinction between *relations of ideas* (the propositions of logic and pure mathematics) and *matters of fact* (empirically verifiable statements), they saw an ancestor of their own division of knowledge into *analytic* and *synthetic*, and implicit support for the conclusion that the only proper task of philosophy is

¹⁶ David Hume, *Enquiry Concerning the Human Understanding*, ed. L.A. Selby-Bigge (Oxford: Clarendon Press), 165.

¹⁷ Barry Stroud insightfully notes, "The view of Hume as a purely negative philosopher... part of which was started in Hume's own day, was strongly encouraged by nineteenth century historians of philosophy who saw all intellectual changes as necessary stages in a predetermined process of the unfolding of something called History or the Absolute." Stroud, *Hume* (Routledge: London, 1977), 1.

¹⁸ T. H. Green, *Hume and Locke* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1968), 183. In the *Treatise* passage in question, Hume is denying that impressions (in his technical sense) necessarily correspond to external objects.

logical analysis. "The opinion that metaphysical propositions have no sense because they do not concern any facts has already been expressed by Hume," Carnap writes. "We agree with this view of Hume, which says -- translated into our terminology -- that only the propositions of mathematics and empirical science have sense, and that all other propositions are without sense."²⁰

Accordingly, when A.J. Ayer sought to introduce the doctrine of the Logical Positivists into the English-speaking world with his work *Language, Truth, and Logic*, he likewise solidified the Positivists' grip on Hume's thought. As Ayer, later in life, reflected upon the major influences on his thought, he wrote,

If I were asked now [1986] to name the philosophers who have had the strongest influence upon me, I should cite Bertrand Russell and David Hume. Apart from my later works, I sometimes think of *Language, Truth, and Logic* itself as being no more than Hume in modern dress.²¹

And what sort of dress was this, we might ask? Like the Positivists of the Vienna Circle before him, Ayer held that Hume's most significant contribution to philosophy lay in his arguments against all things metaphysical. With Carnap, he found in Hume's distinction between relations of ideas and matters of fact a two-pronged fork upon which metaphysical statements could be skewered. As Ayer asks rhetorically, "What is this [Hume's distinction] but a version of our own thesis that a sentence which does not express either a formally true proposition or an empirical hypothesis is devoid of literal significance?"²² Consequently, when Ayer applies this

¹⁹ As T. E. Jessop notes, "When the influence of Kant and Hegel made its belated impression in Britain, Hume again became a major butt of attack, with the significant difference that his idealist critic, T. H. Green, collaborated in the republication of Hume's works. As an undergraduate I was required to read Hume in order to refute him." T.E. Jessop, "Some Misunderstandings of Hume," in *Hume: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. V.C. Chappell (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1966), 36.

²⁰ Rudolf Carnap, *Philosophy and Logical Syntax*, trans. George Rolf (London: Kegan Paul, 1935), 35.

²¹ A.J. Ayer, *Logical Positivism in Perspective*, ed. Barry Gower (Totowa, New Jersey: Barnes and Noble Books, 1987), 24

²² A.J. Ayer, *Language, Truth, and Logic* (New York: Dover, 1939), 54.

extreme empirical standard to traditional metaphysical discourse, he finds statements and systems which are neither true nor false but, rather more pointedly, meaningless.

As one might expect, Ayer finds such meaninglessness to be particularly rampant in religious thought. "It will be found that much of what ordinarily passes for philosophy is metaphysical according to this criterion," he writes, "and in particular, that it can not be significantly asserted that there is a non-empirical world of values, or that men have immortal souls, or that there is a transcendent God."²³ For Ayer, such claims are meaningless because our knowledge derives from empirically verifiable impressions only, and Ayer defies anyone to cite impressions that could plausibly have generated ideas of an immortal soul or a transcendent God. Again, the man whom Ayer thanks for inaugurating this critique is Hume.

Hume as Naturalist

In 1941, however, Norman Kemp Smith authored a work, *The Philosophy of David Hume*, that was to change the face of Hume studies dramatically.²⁴ Kemp Smith initiated this shift by, among other things, doing something quite simple: he paid serious attention to more than the infamous first book of Hume's *Treatise*. In so doing, he sought to find a coherency to the work as a whole, a perspective from which the second and third books of the *Treatise* could be seen to relate to, and even build upon, the allegedly devastating skepticism of the first book.²⁵ For Kemp Smith, this perspective was what he called 'naturalism,' a term which in its Humean context means that where reason fails to find any logical necessity for holding a

²³ Ayer, *Language*, 31.

²⁴ Norman Kemp Smith, *The Philosophy of David Hume* (London: Macmillan, 1949).

certain belief (such as the existence of the external world), nature steps in and compels us to believe regardless.

According to Kemp Smith, the *Treatise*, when viewed as a whole, advances an 'argument' that, paradoxically, is both more skeptical and at the same time more constructive than thinkers such as Carnap ever imagined. More skeptical, because unlike the Logical Positivists and their specific concern with destroying the credibility of metaphysics and enhancing the claims of science, Hume argues in the *Treatise* that *reason itself* is inherently limited, and perhaps even inherently flawed. Kemp Smith maintains that as the reader follows Hume through his attempt to chart the 'mental geography' of the understanding -- its limits, basic laws, etc. -- by the time Hume concludes the first book both he and the reader are near despair. "Hume's purpose, from the start, is to give prominence to the negative consequences of Locke's doctrine of ideas, and to push them as far as they can be made to go," Kemp Smith writes. "The more negative their character, the more evident must it become that 'ideas' cannot afford a sufficient basis for belief, and that belief must therefore be accounted for in some other, very different, manner."²⁶ According to Hume, if reason is left to its own resources, if our beliefs are the products of reason acting and judging alone, then not only are the principles of metaphysics groundless, but so as well are such basic human beliefs as the necessary connection between cause and effect. Where the Positivists claim that reason cannot demonstrate (i.e., deduce from experience) the claims of metaphysics, Hume goes one

²⁵ That the importance of reading the entirety of Hume's *Treatise* still has not caught on with many philosophers, even those who would likely consider themselves 'Humeans,' can be seen by the fact that many full-length books still focus on scepticism of Book I in isolation: e.g. Oliver A. Johnson, *The Mind of David Hume: A Companion to Book I of A Treatise of Human Nature* (Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 1995); David Pears, *Hume's System: An Examination of the First Book of His Treatise* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990); and other works that do not explicitly mention Book I in the title but in fact treat it exclusively, such as Wayne Waxman, *Hume's Theory of Consciousness* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

²⁶ Kemp Smith, 12.

step further and claims that reason cannot even justify its own first principles. “The understanding, when it acts alone, and according to its most general principles, entirely subverts itself, and leaves not the lowest degree of evidence in any proposition, either in philosophy or common life.”²⁷

Indeed, in the stunning penultimate section of the first book of the *Treatise*, Hume presents an argument which would be the *pièce de resistance* of any skeptical conversation: viz., the claim that reason can produce definitive proofs that reason itself is intrinsically faulty.²⁸ Having reached such a point, however, Hume pauses dramatically, as he steps back to evaluate the damage he (or, more accurately, reason acting autonomously) has done.

Before I launch out into those immense depths of philosophy, which lie before me, I find myself inclined to stop a moment in my present station, and to ponder that voyage, which I have undertaken, and which undoubtedly requires the utmost art and industry to be brought to a happy conclusion... My memory of past errors and perplexities, makes me diffident for the future. The wretched condition, weakness, and disorder of the [rational] faculties, I must employ in my enquiries, encrease my apprehensions. And the impossibility of amending or correcting these faculties, reduces me almost to despair, and makes me resolve to perish on the barren rock, on which I am at present, rather than venture myself upon that boundless ocean, which runs out into immensity.²⁹

²⁷ David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), 267.

²⁸ Hume’s argument on this score is not very easy to follow. It is based on the relatively innocent observation that in our everyday reasoning (for example, calculating large sums) we occasionally err. Yet, if we can all admit that we *occasionally* err, then in considering the truth of any given act of ratiocination, we must therefore always acknowledge a certain probability (however small) of error. According to Hume, it is only *reasonable* (i.e., consistent with experience) to do so. But as soon as we acknowledge such a probability, Hume claims, we are inevitably led down a path of total skepticism – and the doubt which we originally acknowledged to be *reasonable* has now brought us to a point where no judgment, however allegedly in accord with reason, can be trusted. Hume writes, “When I reflect on the natural fallibility of my judgment, I have less confidence in my opinions than when I only consider the objects concerning which I reason; and when I proceed still further, to turn the scrutiny against every successive estimation I make of my faculties, all the rules of logic require a continual diminution, and at last a total extinction of belief and evidence” (Hume, *Treatise*, 182). Robert Fogelin, for one, admits that such an argument strains credulity: “The human mind buckles under the complexity of such a proposition.” (Fogelin, “Hume’s Scepticism,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Hume* [Cambridge University Press: New York, 1992], 103.) Even if this “reason versus reason” argument is not successful, however, I believe that Hume’s other sceptical arguments against causation, etc., are enough to destroy the kind of rational dogmatism advanced by some of his immediate predecessors and contemporaries such as Samuel Clarke, against which he is reacting.

²⁹ *Treatise*, 264.

Here we see a state of doubt and near desolation very like Descartes's at the outset of the *Meditations*. But there is at least one major difference: whereas Descartes's doubt focused on the credibility of his senses and imagination, Hume has reached a point where reason itself, or at least reason's ability to guide us adequately through the world, must be doubted.

According to Hume, however, where reason is unable to substantiate itself -- to defend the coherence of basic cognitive acts like induction -- 'nature' takes over. As Annette Baier, acknowledging her debt to Kemp Smith, puts it, "At the conclusion of Book One, Hume enacts for us the turn he wants us to imitate, a turn from a one-sided reliance on intellect and its method of proceeding to an attempt to use, in our philosophy, all the capacities of the human mind: memory, passion, and sentiment as well as a chastened intellect."³⁰ The refined skeptical reflections that might engage the philosopher in his or her study immediately fall away when he or she is called to participate in the world. Hume writes,

Most fortunately it happens, that since reason is incapable of dispelling these clouds, nature herself suffices to that purpose, and cures me of this philosophical melancholy and delirium, either by relaxing this bent of mind, or by some avocation, and lively impression of my senses, which obliterate all these chimeras. I dine, I play a game of back-gammon, I converse, and am merry with my friends; and when after three or four hours amusement, I would return to these speculations, they appear so cold, and strained, and ridiculous, that I cannot find in my heart to enter into them any farther.³¹

Where reason stutters and stops, the necessities of life force us to act and believe. According to Kemp Smith, what emerges from Hume's skepticism is not paralysis, but rather a loosely knit group of what he terms 'natural beliefs' (Kemp Smith's term, not Hume's) which allow us to navigate through the world -- beliefs such as the necessary connection of cause and effect

³⁰ Annette C. Baier, *A Progress of Sentiments: Reflections on Hume's Treatise* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), 1.

³¹ *Treatise*, 269.

and the existence of the external world.

As theologians have taken note of Kemp Smith's naturalist interpretation of Hume, they have been especially drawn to the idea of irreducible 'natural beliefs.' The reason for this should be quite obvious. If it is true that reason is not the ultimate arbiter of belief – if, rather, beliefs are generated by instincts and sentiments which we can recognize by the fact they are universally present in all ages and cultures – then it should follow that religious beliefs are appropriately natural. For what man or woman does not at some point have at least the suspicion that there is a providential power which directs the world? Terrence Penelhum has dubbed this way of interpreting Hume's religious critique the "Parity Argument" -- that is, if core religious beliefs and core secular beliefs are *both* rationally unjustifiable, then one cannot offer 'rational' arguments for favoring the secular. Hence, there exists a logical parity between them. Penelhum writes,

When the Skeptic challenges [secular natural beliefs], we cannot rebut his criticisms and prove to him that the same effect must follow from the same cause, or that we are right to believe in the distinct and continued existence of objects of perception, or that we retain our identity through the whole course of our lives. If we presuppose these things, we can make progress in science, history, and social relationships, but our experience in these realms will not provide philosophical justification for the beliefs it presupposes.... [Similarly] religious beliefs cannot get adequate philosophical justification: neither the a priori arguments of the meta-physicians, nor the a posteriori mode of argument embodied in the Argument from Design, are sufficient for this. And yet it is also, I believe, recognized by Hume that if one presupposes the existence of the Christian God, with his omnipotence, omniscience, and love, many traditional theological inferences, and many religious interpretations of nature and history, can readily be made.³²

More recently, scholars such as Stanley Tweyman and Beryl Logan have continued to

³² Terrence Penelhum, *God and Scepticism* (London: MacMillan, 1975), 131-2.

elaborate on the structure of this parity argument.³³ Tweyman in particular has detailed the qualities which both secular natural beliefs and religious natural beliefs share – their universality, their ability to allow us to act purposefully in the world, and so on. But setting aside the question of whether or not religious beliefs qualify as natural beliefs, at the very least Penelhum has shown that Hume’s case against religion, based upon his own sceptical principles, cannot rest solely on religion’s lack of rational justification.³⁴

Hume as Philosopher of Common Life

Kemp Smith’s ‘discovery’ of the positive, constructive aspects of Hume’s thought – most notably the Humean natural beliefs that defy skeptical arguments – inspired others to read Hume again in a new, more sympathetic light. The most important of these modern efforts can be traced to Donald Livingston, beginning with his work *Hume’s Philosophy of Common Life*.³⁵ Like Kemp Smith before him, Livingston has enhanced our understanding of Hume by giving serious attention to more than the first book of the *Treatise* – not merely to the remainder of his philosophical writings, but more importantly, to his six-volume *History of England* and his dozens of essays on political and economic topics, the work which in fact constitutes the largest portion of Hume’s corpus. In this historical and practical portion of his

³³ Stanley Tweyman, *Scepticism and Belief in Hume’s Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* (Dordrecht: Martinus Nijhoff, 1986). Beryl Logan, *A Religion Without Talking: Religious Belief and Natural Belief in Hume’s Philosophy of Religion* (New York: Peter Lang, 1993).

³⁴ J.C.A. Gaskin, for one, has strongly objected to the claim that religious beliefs should be classed within the category of natural belief. He persuasively argues against such an inclusion by noting that in *The Natural History of Religion* Hume indicates that religious beliefs are not properly universal: “The belief of 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.” (David Hume, *The Natural History of Religion*, in *David Hume: Writings on Religion*, ed. Anthony Flew [La Salle, Illinois: Open Court, 1992], 107.) As such, although they are certainly influential, religious beliefs do not share the same immunity from scepticism as other ‘basic survival beliefs’ such as causation and the existence of the external world. (J. C. A. Gaskin, *Hume’s Philosophy of Religion*, 2nd edition [MacMillan Press: London, 1988], 108-119.)

work, Livingston argues, Hume's project was almost entirely constructive. Due to Hume's lack of faith in the ability of reason, he is convinced that we are utterly dependent for our beliefs on the social and political structures of common life, which in a sense manifest, order, and codify our natural sentiments. If these social and political structures are thus acknowledged to be normative, what emerges, according to Livingston, is the strange-seeming portrait of Hume as a *social conservative*, deeply interested in questions of social and political legitimacy. He writes, "In Hume's philosophy we find a conceptual structure designed to rebut revolutionary thought and capable of explaining in broad outline the conservative view of legitimate social and political order."³⁶

Livingston therefore expands upon the work of Kemp Smith, adding an historical element to our understanding of what Hume means by natural beliefs and sentiments. Although Livingston agrees with Kemp Smith that for Hume the first principles of action and belief are not the product of an autonomous rationality, deciding in isolation which of our beliefs are properly reasonable and which are not, he thinks it false to portray these Humean first principles as simply thrust upon us by nature or instinct. Instead, according to Livingston, Hume's overriding aim is to explain the ways in which these beliefs and sentiments display themselves in the events of everyday life – or, to use Hume's favorite phrase, in the course of

³⁵ David Livingston, *Hume's Philosophy of Common Life* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1985).

³⁶ Livingston, 310. So influential has Livingston's interpretation proven that in a new collection of conservative political writings from Princeton University Press edited by Jerry Muller and aptly entitled *Conservatism*, Hume is given top billing in the subtitle: *An Anthology of Social and Political Thought from David Hume to the Present*. In Muller's introduction to a selection of Hume's essays, he writes: "Hume's political writings present a logic of conservatism clearly distinguished from orthodoxy and based upon the utility of historically developed institutions... In his first book, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, Hume explored the limits of what abstract philosophy could provide, while suggesting a more historical and empirical direction for the human sciences." (Jerry Muller, *Conservatism: An Anthology of Social and Political Thought from David Hume to the Present* [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997], 33.) I think it is fair to say that a generation ago, without the benefit of Livingston's pioneering research (which Muller footnotes extensively)

common life. Above all, Livingston believes that Hume favors a description of human action and belief which is based on linguistic agreement and shared convention, developed slowly over time and based on pragmatic considerations, rather than on a system in which reason dictates *a priori* the standards of morality and belief. It follows from Livingston's position, of course, that understanding the conventions of the day, the explicit or assumed standards of common life, would have been of paramount importance to Hume. Though reason has an important part to play in Hume's account, it must operate only *within* the confines of common life; it cannot legitimately criticize the order as a whole or speculate meaningfully about "ideal" societies or philosophical systems.³⁷

Such a view has serious implications for Hume's critique of religious belief, but Livingston considers them only briefly. Remaining faithful to his thesis, Livingston claims that it is over-hasty to portray Hume as an agnostic, or even as a non-Christian. He writes,

We must be very clear that the oppressive character of modern religion is not due to its religious content; it is not because the religious thinker speaks of the sacred or the divine that his thought is oppressive, it is the false philosophical content of his thought that is oppressive... Hume could have no objection to a Christianity purged of its false philosophical content. His position seems to be that of the Athenian in the *Enquiry* who attacks 'the religious philosophers' not 'the tradition of your forefathers, and doctrine of your priests (in which I willingly acquiesce).'³⁸

Hence Livingston believes that as a social conservative and 'philosopher of common life,' Hume is reluctant in the extreme to abandon a practice or custom (in this case, religious worship) which is so strongly interwoven into the social fabric not merely of his own day but of every society on record. Although he might have found the metaphysical speculations of

into Hume's historical writings, to have suggested that Hume deserves such a prominent place among conservative thinkers would have seemed almost ridiculous.

³⁷ Livingston, 321.

³⁸ Livingston, 78. The *Enquiry* Livingston refers to here is the *Enquiry Concerning the Human Understanding*, 135.

theologians empty and foolish, Livingston's Hume could not so readily discard the "tradition of your forefathers," precious to the community and the individual alike.

Working from Livingston's interpretation, which emphasizes the importance of history and tradition in Hume's work, in his book *David Hume and the Problem of Reason* John Danford addresses the religious implications of this view at greater length.³⁹ Along with Livingston, Danford believes that Hume's intent was to safeguard the customs and standards of common life against the claims of an allegedly autonomous reason. As he applies this theory to Hume's critique of religion, Danford likewise finds the customary view of Hume as agnostic to be mistaken. He writes,

Those who advance this claim typically read Hume as solving a personal problem by liberating himself from all religious convictions and thus showing others the way to a mitigated skepticism or agnosticism. Nothing but our own predispositions compels us, however, to understand Hume's undertaking in these ways.⁴⁰

According to Danford, if we free our minds of these unspecified 'predispositions' we will be able to see that Hume is here once again defending the inherited wisdom of common life -- in this case the age-old belief that popular piety and fear of the gods is the backbone of a moral, just society.⁴¹

Thus Hume's *Dialogues* (together with the dialogue comprising chapter II of the *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*) can be read as a forewarning of the dangers of scientific reason as later exposed by Kant and Nietzsche. If this view is correct, we may describe the *Dialogues* as an attempt to restore the theological-political teaching of ancient political philosophy [viz., that piety supports morality].⁴²

Again, even in the face of some of Hume's blatantly anti-religious statements (which we will

³⁹ John Danford, *David Hume and the Problem of Reason* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990).

⁴⁰ Danford, 168.

⁴¹ Danford believes this claim to be best illustrated by Cicero: "I do not even know, if we cast off piety towards the gods, but that faith, and all the associations of human life, and that most excellent of all virtues, justice, may perish with it" *De Natura Deorum*, ch. 2; cited in Danford, 165.

⁴² Danford, 170.

encounter below), Danford remains convinced that Hume accepted the Christianity of his day, believing that Hume's commitment to common life is more deeply rooted than his occasional accusations of religious hypocrisy. Thus when discussing the *Dialogues*, Danford argues that religion belongs among the inviolable elements of common life: "The central theme of part 1 [of the *Dialogues*] is the relation of reason or scientific skepticism to common life, which includes religious belief as well as accepted opinions of all kinds."⁴³ According to Danford, the logic of the case is clear: because virtually everyone in eighteenth-century Scottish world was religious, Hume, despite his concern about the abuses and hypocrisy of religion, could not help but affirm the greater wisdom of this commonly held belief.

The Limitations of these Views with Regard To Hume's Religious Critique

While all three of the dominant camps of Humean interpretation that we have just surveyed – Hume as Sceptic, Hume as Naturalist, and Hume as Philosopher of Common Life – are very helpful with regard to certain aspects of Hume's thought (e.g., his empiricism, his scepticism regarding reason), my goal is to show that none of them adequately describes Hume's *religious* critique. In particular, though I accept the claims of Hume's Naturalist and Common Life interpreters who show that he is much more interested in constructive arguments than in sceptical pranks, I do not believe it is correct to say that religious beliefs have a place in his constructive project.

The flaw in their analysis of Hume's religious critique is one not of logic but rather of omission. In other words, their argument is correct as far as it goes: because Hume feels that non-rational faculties such as passions and sentiments alone can motivate our actions, it does not follow that religion is discredited when rational proofs for religion are discredited. Indeed,

⁴³ Danford, 175.

the dominant role of religion throughout history, in particular as it has shaped the structures of common life, provides us with very compelling evidence for its truth.

This line of argument overlooks an important fact, however, because it assumes that Hume attacks religion on only one level – the level of rational demonstration. But if we take seriously Hume’s claim that belief is constituted by more than merely reason and argument – that there is also the historical influence of common life to be considered – then it follows that for Hume to destroy the credibility of religious belief he must also prove that religion does not contribute to and enhance common life, but in fact corrupts it. He must show that, far from binding together society as he knows it, religion *perverts* the most humane and benevolent aspects of society. In his historical writings, he attempts to do just that, and this historical critique of religion is left quite untouched by his scepticism with regard to reason.

Chapter III Hume's Historical Critique

Although jabs at religion pervade the *History*, it is possible to divide these attacks between those which are aimed at *groups* and those which are aimed at *individuals*. Both attacks ultimately teach the same lesson – that religious beliefs corrupt society – but they make their case in slightly different ways. The basic distinction between the two is this: when Hume focuses on the negative effects of religious belief on groups (or sects), he attempts to show that these groups invariably divide society into warring, violent factions; when he focuses on the negative effects of religious belief on individuals, his concern is to show that this belief cripples a person's natural, benevolent, and, most importantly, *external* orientation towards the rest of mankind. Opposing this external orientation, the demands of religious belief force a person to turn inward, rejecting the interests of society as a whole for the sake of a deluded sense of private, internal righteousness. Again, the point Hume is trying to make in both instances is the same: viz., that society suffers when religious groups are allowed any influence whatsoever. For him, society manages to be humane, benevolent, and tolerant despite the influence of religion, not because of it.

The Negative Effects of Religious Belief on Society

One of Hume's favorite pieces of 'evidence' that he uses to demonstrate the harmful effects of religious groups is the seemingly endless, *irresolvable* nature of theological controversies. If these issues were capable of being settled, Hume claims, they certainly would have been by now. Instead, they remain forever a source of contention and ill will. Why? Building on the rational critique which was so attractive to the Logical Positivists, Hume maintains they do so because there is no neutral, verifiable data to which warring parties might

appeal in order to resolve the argument. One camp's vague speculations battle against those of another, with no neutral facts between them. Moreover, according to Hume the disputed questions which typically cause the deepest divisions amongst religious groups are often the most frivolous. Hume's *History* is full of such examples, and he takes a contemptuous pleasure in detailing the debates he finds so patently absurd.

From the outset of the *History* Hume showcases the way in which theologically disputed questions have plagued society, distracting it from more pressing, genuine concerns. Thus in the very first chapter he recounts the story of Rome's original contact with the natives of Britain, which one might reasonably have expected to be contentious, as both struggled either to maintain or to acquire land and authority. In this encounter, however, "besides the usual avidity of men for power and riches, frivolous controversies in theology were engendered by it, which were so much the more fatal, as they admitted not, like the others, of any final determination from established possession."⁴⁴ While wars over lands and riches might result in a lamentable amount of bloodshed, they are capable of resolution, of "final determination" – eventually one side emerges with the land, the riches. Not so, Hume claims, with theological controversies. The issues which bred the most profound hatred and ill will between Roman and Briton seem incredibly insignificant in retrospect: for example, questions such as specifying the appropriate shape of the monk's tonsure or pinpointing the precise day of Easter. According to Hume, upon settling the Romans were horrified to learn that the Britons celebrated Easter on the first Sunday after the full moon in March, instead of waiting till the following Sunday, and even worse that their monks shaved the fore-part of their head from ear to ear, instead of making the tonsure on the crown of the head, in circular form.

⁴⁴ *History of England*, 1:53.

In order to demonstrate the righteousness of their position and “to render their antagonist odious,” the Romans accordingly fired back that their monks’ tonsures symbolically imitated the crown of thorns worn by Christ at his passion, whereas the Briton’s design was invented by Simon Magus, the proto-heretic. The Britons, apparently, were undeterred, and in response argued that their custom was the more ancient, and thus the more sacred, of the two. Hume concludes his account of this dispute thus:

These controversies had, from the beginning, excited such animosity between the British and Romish priests, that, instead of concurring in their endeavors to convert the idolatrous Saxons, they refused all communion together, and each regarded his opponent as no better than a Pagan. The dispute lasted more than a century; and was at last finished, not by men's discovering the folly of it, which would have been too great an effort for human reason to accomplish, but by the entire prevalence of the Romish ritual over the Scotch and British.⁴⁵

This early example, arguably the first extended narrative in the *History*, sets the tone for an ongoing pattern of religious disputes: because opponents cannot appeal to, or agree upon, any common, verifiable facts, these arguments fester until one side defeats the other by nothing more profound than strength of will.

While specific controversies such as the shape of the tonsure or the date of Easter were resolved by one side coercing the other by force to accept its opinions, Hume insists that religion generates as many new disputes as it resolves old ones. Even as England grew in civility (by some standards), the populace was always liable to drop all its most pressing material concerns to obsess once more over the role of the cross in baptism, or the propriety of kneeling at the sacrament and bowing at the name of Jesus. In a story that Hume must have especially savored, he tells of a congress convened by twelve Anglican bishops and twelve Presbyterian leaders, with the hope of resolving such “weighty” issues. The “ignorant

⁴⁵ *History of England*, 1: 53.

multitude,” noting the gathering of these learned and holy men, attended to the proceedings with great hope – surely if such eminent persons set their minds to resolving these problems, the clear truth would emerge. To the astonishment and dismay of the people, however, the religious leaders emerged from the conference “more inflamed than ever, and more confirmed in their several prejudices.”⁴⁶ Commenting upon the general futility and the pettiness of these debates, wherein a garb, a gesture, or even a grammatical distinction could lead to such intractable problems, Hume can only pity their participants, who “no longer had recourse to contempt and ridicule, the only proper method of appeasing them.”⁴⁷

To say that religion merely wastes its time with details, its votaries continually debating the most frivolous points of the law, would make it seem almost comedic; one could well imagine a stage production of overly scrupulous theologians arguing passionately about the appropriate times for fasts, the necessary lengths and colors of certain vestments, etc. – much like Aristophanes’ sendup of Socrates in his play the *Clouds*. Speaking as an historian, however, Hume notes that laughter is not an appropriate response to these controversies. As he writes, “Generally speaking, the errors in religion are dangerous; those in philosophy only ridiculous.”⁴⁸ Instead of occupying themselves on the fringes of the world of common life, like strange sideshows at a circus, religionists feel the need to monopolize the spotlight. They demand the attention and even the obedience of all spectators.

But why, to go further, do religious beliefs dominate the public mind and incite terrible violence? For Hume, the answer to this question ties into his thoughts about the imagined, fictional world of religious belief. Again, Hume’s critique of reason teaches us that the

⁴⁶ *History of England*, 6:170.

⁴⁷ *History of England*, 5:11.

⁴⁸ *Treatise*, 271.

understanding has certain limits, dictated by experience (which includes both empirical fact and the inherited wisdom of common life). If one does not have verifiable evidence to support one's claims, one should be silent. Yet religion ignores these warnings. It purports to speak knowingly, even infallibly, about topics such as tonsures, the date of Easter, and the propriety of kneeling and standing during worship. As a result, the mind, forced to accede to claims that it suspects are fundamentally meaningless, becomes twisted, perverse, and irascible. As we noted at the outset, but which merits noting once again, Hume is convinced that "While men zealously maintain what they neither clearly comprehend, nor entirely believe, they are shaken in their imagined faith, by the opposite persuasion, or even doubts of other men; and vent on their antagonists that impatience, which is the natural result of so disagreeable a state of the understanding."⁴⁹

Hume's *History* thus teaches that an empty belief system is a naturally hostile and violent belief system. As far back as the classical communities of Greece and Rome, he claims, religion was regarded not as a moral anchor, but rather as the source of unnatural and harmful division within the community -- a blight to ancient rulers.⁵⁰ Such inherent conflict inspired Hume to develop the idea of 'faction' as a key interpretative category throughout his historical and political writing. "As much as legislators and founders of states ought to be honored and respected among men, as much ought the founders of sects and factions to be detested and hated; because the influence of faction is directly contrary to that of laws," he writes.

"Factions subvert government, render laws impotent, and beget the fiercest animosities among

⁴⁹ *History of England*, 3:431.

⁵⁰ According to Hume, however, these officials, concerned only with the good of the state, soon learned, "by fatal experience, and after spilling an ocean of blood in those theological controversies, that the evil was of a peculiar nature, and was thus enflamed by violent remedies, and spread itself more rapidly throughout the whole society." *History of England*, 5:130.

men of the same nation, who ought to give mutual assistance and protection to each other. And what should render the founders of parties more odious is, the difficulty of extirpating these weeds, when once they have taken root in any state.”⁵¹

For Hume the intensity of religious frenzy runs so deep that even ‘modern’ societies which should know better, having the benefit of the scientific method and no longer as ignorant about natural processes, repeatedly succumb to religion’s violent influence. As the *History* progresses, Hume continues to draw special attention to events such as the Puritan revolution, with the refrain that the faction-begetting influence of religion is the source of virtually all of the bad will among the parties involved.⁵² A paradigmatic instance of religion’s disruptive power is seen in Hume’s retelling of the controversy between the Huguenots and Catholics of France.

The father was divided against the son; brother against brother; and women themselves, sacrificing their humanity as well as their timidity to the religious fury, distinguished themselves by acts of ferocity and valor. Wherever the hugonots prevailed, the images were broken, the altars pillaged, the churches demolished, the monasteries consumed with fire: Where success attended the catholics, they burned the bibles, re-baptized the infants, constrained married persons to pass anew through the nuptial ceremony: And plunder, desolation, and bloodshed attended equally the triumph of both parties. The parliament of Paris itself, the seat of law and justice, instead of employing its authority to compose these fatal quarrels, published an edict, by which it put the sword into the hands of the enraged multitude, and empowered the catholics every where to massacre the hugonots.⁵³

In passages such as these Hume lays aside his ironic detachment for a moment and allows us to

⁵¹ David Hume, “Of Parties in General” in *David Hume: Essays Moral, Political and Literary*, ed. Eugene Miller (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1985), 54.

⁵² Thus, for instance, during the reign of Charles I, Hume writes, “On account of these religious controversies [such as the placement of the rails around the altar, the bows exacted on approaching it, and the use of the cross in baptism], were the popular leaders content to throw the government into convulsions; and to the disgrace of that age of this island, it must be acknowledged, that the disorders in Scotland entirely, and those in England mostly, proceeded from so mean and contemptible an origin.” (*History of England*, 5:303.) And during the Puritan revolution, Hume reaffirms, “Religion can never be deemed a point of small consequence in civil government: But during this period, it may be regarded as the great spring of men’s actions and determinations.” (*History of England*, 6:86.)

see his naked contempt for the destructive power of religion. Here, to be sure, the controversies of religion are far more than ridiculous; they are vicious, inhuman.

Confronted with these historical examples of religious hysteria, Hume is prompted to ask further questions about the nature of religious belief. For if it is simply the case that religious claims are rationally empty, then it is difficult to explain the intensity of their effects. Emptiness or ignorance alone does not motivate one to act, especially not in such a focused, frenzied manner. Hume, though, believes that the study of history suggests an explanation, again related to his rational critique: viz., because religion cannot define itself with reference to anything positive (or 'real'), it can only define itself negatively, via opposition. Religionists believe what they do *because they hate what their rivals believe*. Properly speaking, therefore, religious belief, is a product not of the understanding at all, but rather of a desire to protect one's group identity.⁵⁴ While the understanding idles and chafes because it has no empirical facts to occupy its attention, the passions (such as hatred, anger, and fear) focus against the enemy. And because rival religious groups are operating according to the same principle of opposition, the religionist's position becomes fortified, as it were, against the external threat. He or she becomes even more convinced – fanatically, passionately convinced – than before.

And so every successive age suffers from this entrenched religious "malady," which, according to Hume, "seems almost incurable."⁵⁵ Thus, for example, lest his Protestant readers think that only Catholics were capable of Inquisition-style persecution, he emphasizes that the

⁵³ *History of England*, 4:55.

⁵⁴ The importance of religion in shaping British 'identity' has been explored insightfully by the historian Janet Colley: "It was not primarily the law that made Protestantism and anti-Catholicism such powerful and pervasive emotions, however. Official intolerance, like mass intolerance, was rooted in something far more intangible, in fear most of all, and in the way Britons chose to remember and interpret their own past. For large numbers of them, time past was a soap opera written by God, a succession of warning disasters and providential escapes which were acted out afresh every year as a way of reminding themselves who they were." (Janet Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation 1707-1837* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 19.)

same pattern continued unabated after the English Reformation.

Though the Protestant divines had ventured to renounce opinions, deemed certain during many ages, they regarded, in their turn, the new system as so certain, that they would suffer no contradiction with regard to it; and they were ready to burn in the same flames, from which they themselves had so narrowly escaped, every one that had the assurance to differ from them.⁵⁶

Here again, as he catalogues the violent acts of the Protestants, Hume declares that religion can sustain itself only by engaging in conflict and denunciation. There is no suggestion of the Protestants pausing to reflect on the providential character of their newly won rule, of the goodness of their principles and doctrines; rather, to sustain their reign, they have but one option: to attack immediately. Only by drawing attention away from the intellectually hollow center of its belief system can religion flourish, according to Hume.

Because of this, Hume reasons further, religions are necessarily absolutistic.⁵⁷ If a religious group were to admit that its grasp of truth was less than complete or that a rival belief system might be partially correct, it would encourage its supporters to consider the nature of the evidence each side invokes to support its claims. And because the evidence is absent, nonexistent, the trance that binds believers would be broken; the understanding would be freed from the coils of the passions. If religion is to survive, therefore, it must deal in absolutes, non-negotiables – you are either for us or against us – as Hume suggests by means of the following image.

Two men travelling on the highway, the one east, the other west, can easily pass each other, if the way be broad enough: But two men, reasoning upon opposite principles of religion, cannot so easily pass, without shocking; though one should think, that the way

⁵⁵ *History of England*, 3:366.

⁵⁶ *History of England*, 3:366.

⁵⁷ Elsewhere in the *History* he notes, “In tracing the coherence among the systems of modern theology, we may observe, that the doctrine of absolute decrees has ever been intimately connected with the enthusiastic spirit; as that doctrine affords the highest subject of joy, triumph, and security to the supposed elect, and exalts them, by infinite degrees, above the rest of mankind.” (*History of England*, 5:131)

were also, in that case, sufficiently broad, and that each might proceed, without interruption, in his own course. But such is the nature of the human mind, that it always lays hold on every mind that approaches it; and as it is wonderfully fortified by an unanimity of sentiments, so is it shocked and disturbed by any contrariety. Hence the eagerness, which most people discover in a dispute; and hence their impatience of opposition, even in the most speculative and indifferent opinions.⁵⁸

Among other things, this ‘parable’ teaches us that in the course of normal debate, say in a court of law, where two sides differ over their interpretation of a case (the relative importance of various pieces of evidence, possible motives of the accused, etc.), there is room for honest disagreement. One is able to concede that one’s grasp of the object is not complete, and that the other’s opinion may have merit. In religious disputes, on the contrary, this is not a viable alternative, for the two sides cannot even agree upon the *object* under discussion – there is no ‘hard evidence’ to be found. One side uses a certain combination of scripture and tradition to support its views about the divinity, and the other side supplies its own. Neither accepts the validity of the other’s evidence, and thus there is not room enough on the “highway” for them to disagree amicably. They must clash.

According to Hume, behind all this aggression, stoking the passionate hatred of believers, lie priests and theologians. Motivated by material self-interest and especially by a desire to create and sustain their reputation, these groups vigilantly foster the ignorance of the laity. Thus Hume comments in his *Natural History of Religion*,

For besides the unavoidable incoherence, which must be reconciled and adjusted; one may safely affirm, that all popular theology, especially the scholastic, has a kind of appetite for absurdity and contradiction. If that theology went not beyond reason and common sense, her doctrines would appear too easy and familiar. Amazement must of necessity be raised: Mystery affected: Darkness and obscurity sought after: And a foundation of merit afforded to the devout votaries, who desire an opportunity of subduing their rebellious reason, by the belief of the most unintelligible sophisms.⁵⁹

⁵⁸ “Of Parties in General,” *Essays*, 60.

⁵⁹ *Natural History of Religion*, 151.

In *The History of England*, Hume goes further still, arguing not merely that religious claims are intentionally vague, intentionally inaccessible, but also that by means of this impenetrable vagueness the clergy seeks to stir up the most violent tendencies in the faithful. “Each ghostly practitioner, in order to render himself more precious and sacred in the eyes of his retainers, will inspire them with the most violent abhorrence of all other sects, and continually endeavor, by some novelty, to excite the languid devotion of his audience,” Hume writes. “No regard will be paid to truth, morals, or decency in the doctrines inculcated. Every tenet will be adopted that best suits the disorderly affections of the human frame.”⁶⁰

Of course, it is difficult to imagine that Hume actually knew clergy who conformed to this extreme picture – who were in fact so *intentionally* manipulative, so *intentionally* hate-mongering. Instead, he would probably claim that they were themselves victims of some previous dissimulation, of some person who long ago claimed to speak authoritatively about the wishes of God in order that his or her own desire for power might be satisfied. But the clergy, and theologians in general, have ever since recognized the privileged nature of their position and have fought to perpetuate their control over believers. Thus he writes,

Few men can bear contradiction with patience; but the clergy too often proceed even to a degree of fury on this head: Because all their credit and livelihood depend upon the belief, which their opinions meet with; and they alone pretend to a divine and supernatural authority, or have any color for representing their antagonists as impious and profane. The *Odium Theologicum*, or *Theological Hatred*, is noted even to a proverb, and means that degree of rancour, which is the most furious and implacable.⁶¹

⁶⁰ *History of England*, 3:135. The image that emerges from Hume’s description of the relationship between the clergy and the laity thus resembles George Orwell’s *1984*. As we recall, in that work the goal of the reigning government, Oceania, was raw power. In order to make its citizens as intellectually submissive and docile as possible, the government hit upon the idea of engaging in a state of constant but ever-changing war, the implicit rationale being that if a system is intellectually untenable, if there is nothing positive to believe in, one must redirect the passions of the citizens *against* something – an enemy. If one cannot be satisfied with what one is, one can at least hate what one is not. The true business of the clergy then, as with Orwell’s government, is to promote the ignorance and fuel the hatred of the people. Only by vilifying the opponent is their own status secured.

⁶¹ “Of National Characters.” *Essays*, 201.

It is this clerical lust for control and domination, according to Hume, which helps to account for the violent character of religious groups throughout the ages.

That said, it would be inaccurate to suggest that Hume's historical critique of religion boils down to a run-of-the-mill anti-clericalism. As we have shown in the preceding sections, for Hume the violent character of religious groups derives primarily from the fact that religious claims force the understanding to surpass its natural limits. This has two important consequences: first, the understanding feels uncomfortable and irascible, coerced by custom and fellow believers into accepting as truth that for which it has no evidence; and second, it must define itself in a negative way by vilifying its rivals, because it has no foundation in positive and verifiable data. As a result, when considering Hume's uncharitable (to say the least) depiction of priests, clergymen, and theologians, it is important to note that he does not feel they *invented* religious antagonism; rather, it is more accurate to say that he thinks they amplified the violent tendencies inherent in all religious belief. For Hume, religious belief is fundamentally flawed in itself; priests simply exploit these flaws, encouraging the ignorance and submission of the laity for their own personal gain.

The Negative Effect of Religious Belief on Individuals

The believer, of course, could at this point respond that the historical examples Hume dwells on are cases of *abuse*, not indicative of religion as it is typically practiced. Secular governments have been guilty of as much, if not more, violence and persecution in their day, yet one does not hear Hume suggesting that all governments should be disbanded. Indeed, the believer might well ask, "Where are the countless examples of compassion and heroism throughout religious history? Why is there no mention of the men and women who have been

motivated by religious principles to sacrifice their own interest for the good of others or society as a whole?" The believer, in fact, could persuasively respond to Hume's critique by pointing out that a society totally lacking in spiritual values would be necessarily superficial and materialistic, lacking in conscience and decency. In sum, not a very desirable society at all.

Hume, not surprisingly, begs to differ, maintaining that such religious examples of sacrifice and compassion occur *despite* the influence of religion, not *because* of it. Hume's argument here depends on what he calls the *natural sentiments* of human nature (a close cousin of 'natural beliefs,' which we discussed earlier). By natural sentiments, Hume means those innate faculties whereby a person is able to make what today we would call judgments of value, both ethical (the ability to distinguish goodness from wickedness) and aesthetic (the ability to distinguish beauty from ugliness). Of course, Hume acknowledges that these judgments can be more refined or less refined, that the 'vulgar' might hold one thing to be good and beautiful, while the 'elite' would deem it horrible and ugly (and vice versa), but at root, he maintains, all groups within society (and indeed all cultures) are propelled by a certain natural attraction towards good and beautiful things and a repulsion towards their opposites. Hume claims that these distinctions of value arise spontaneously in all societies and follow remarkably similar patterns. "That all moral affection or dislike arises from this origin, will surely be allowed by any judicious enquirer," he writes, referring to natural sentiments. "Had nature made no such distinction, founded on the original constitution of the mind, the words honourable and shameful, lovely and odious, noble and despicable, had never had place in any language; nor could politicians, had they invented these terms, ever have been able to render them intelligible, or make them convey any idea to the audience."⁶²

⁶² *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, 214.

Significantly, and in conscious opposition to Hobbes, Hume argues that self-love is *not* the most basic of these natural sentiments – the secret source, as it were, of all belief and action. That is, Hume holds that individuals do not judge a certain object or state of affairs to be good or beautiful for the sole reason that it furthers their own interests (although in any given case it may well coincide with them). Rather, Hume asserts that *benevolence* and what he terms *sympathy* are at the root of all sentiments, and therefore we instinctively praise, and deem to be good, those actions that best protect the livelihood of the society as a whole.⁶³

For Hume, the most powerful evidence of this native benevolence is the existence of moral distinctions in every language and hence in every society – distinctions which invariably praise actions that contribute to the well-being of society and censure those that do not. After citing historical examples to support his case, Hume closes with another memorable image:

There seems here a necessity for confessing that the happiness and misery of others are not spectacles entirely indifferent to us; but that the view of the former, whether in its causes or effects, like sun-shine or the prospect of well-cultivated plains, (to carry our pretensions no higher), communicates a secret joy and satisfaction; the appearance of the latter, like a lowering cloud or barren landscape, throws a melancholy damp over the imagination. And this concession being once made, the difficulty is over; and a natural unforced interpretation of the phenomena of human life will afterwards, we may hope, prevail among all speculative enquirers.⁶⁴

To suggest otherwise, Hume claims, would be to ignore the obvious sympathy we feel towards

⁶³ For the importance of sympathy in Hume's thought, see Knud Haakonssen, *The Science of a Legislator: The Natural Jurisprudence of David Hume and Adam Smith* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), chapter 2. In her excellent short work, *The Enlightenment*, Dorinda Outram makes the interesting point that although Hume's claims about the naturally benevolent disposition of mankind may seem innocuous enough, for Christians they in fact represent a threat perhaps as weighty as any of Hume's attacks. "Throughout the century, while philosophes preached the natural goodness and perfectibility of man, orthodox theologians continued to emphasize his innate sinfulness, due to the sin of Adam, and to thunder about the divine retribution which would surely follow sinners after death. The problem raised here was a deeper one than that of maintaining clarity in the mind of the average believer. It returned to a central tenet of the Christian religion, the divine nature of Christ, and the necessity for his sacrifice on the Cross to redeem man from the sinful condition into which Adam's disobedience had thrown him. If man was not in fact innately sinful, what need to believe in Christ." Dorinda Outram, *The Enlightenment* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 41.

our fellows as well as our inclination to praise those who act for the common interest.

Although we may well disagree about what the good of society consists of, and although it is certainly true that Hume was no Pangloss, oblivious to the selfish desires that lie in the hearts of human beings and mix with these feelings of benevolence, nevertheless Hume feels that all things being equal a person is inclined to wish his fellow human being well, regardless of whether his self-interest is at stake.⁶⁵ Such a position is perhaps just as revolutionary as Hume's skeptical arguments about induction, for in defining our natural sentiments so positively, Hume might very well have been the first modern thinker to attempt to divorce benevolence and altruism from religious belief of any kind.

According to Hume, religious belief in fact perverts a person's natural tendency to promote social well-being. In opposition to the natural virtues of benevolence and fellow feeling – traits which are all oriented externally, towards society – Hume believes that religion instead cultivates “monkish virtues” within the believer.

And as every quality, which is useful or agreeable to ourselves or others, is, in common life, allowed to be a part of personal merit; so no other will ever be received, where men judge of things by their natural, unprejudiced reason, without the delusive glosses of superstition and false religion. Celibacy, fasting, penance, mortification, self-denial, humility, silence, solitude, and the whole train of monkish virtues; for what reason are they every where rejected by men of sense, but because they serve to no manner of purpose; neither advance a man's fortune in the world, nor render him a more valuable member of society; neither qualify him for the entertainment of company, nor increase his power of self-enjoyment? We observe, on the contrary, that they cross all these desirable ends; stupefy the understanding and harden the heart, obscure the fancy and sour the temper. We justly, therefore, transfer them to the opposite column, and place

⁶⁴ *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, 244.

⁶⁵ Later in the *Enquiry* Hume writes on this ‘mixture’ of benevolence and self-interest in particularly memorable terms: “It is sufficient for our present purpose, if it be allowed, what surely, without the greatest absurdity, cannot be disputed, that there is some benevolence, however small, infused into our bosom; some spark of friendship for human kind; some particle of the dove, kneaded into our frame, along with the elements of the wolf and serpent. Let these generous sentiments be supposed ever so weak; let them be insufficient to move even a hand or finger of our body; they must still direct the determinations of our mind, and where every thing else is equal, produce a cool preference of what is useful and serviceable to mankind, above what is pernicious and dangerous.” *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, 271.

them in the catalogue of vices; nor has any superstition force sufficient among men of the world, to pervert entirely these natural sentiments. A gloomy, hair-brained enthusiast, after his death, may have a place in the calendar; but will scarcely ever be admitted, when alive, into intimacy and society, except by those who are as delirious and dismal as himself.⁶⁶

Instead of enlarging the sympathies of a person and directing them outwards towards some social good, religious devotions cripple the believer, drawing him or her away from the humanizing, tolerant influence of society, and into a concern with personal sinfulness and righteousness.

The Cases of More and Becket

In the *History*, Hume provides us with many illustrations of pathological belief – instances of individuals who, “though neither cruel nor bigoted in their natural disposition,”⁶⁷ nevertheless indulge in extreme violence and persecution while under the influence of religion. In this section, I will pay special attention to Hume’s presentation of Thomas More and Thomas à Becket, arguably England’s most famous and revered martyrs of religion.⁶⁸ We shall see that in commenting on these two men, Hume departs slightly from the normal narrative flow of his *History* and pauses to consider them as anti-types of sorts. By virtue of their submission to religion, they become didactic examples of what we (his readers) should not become: focused on a personal vision of righteousness at the expense of the good of society as a whole.

When Hume addresses Thomas More’s role in English history, he cannot help but

⁶⁶ *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, 270.

⁶⁷ *History of England*, 4:151.

⁶⁸ I have chosen More and Becket because of their particular fame in English history, but they are by no means the only subjects of Hume’s criticism. His lengthy descriptions of Joan of Arc and Martin Luther are especially scathing, for precisely the same reasons which we will consider below with regard to More and Becket. For a thoughtful analysis of Hume’s treatment of Joan and Luther, see Christopher Bernard’s “Hume and the

wince at the greatness of a man whose remarkable potential was allegedly corrupted by the influence of religious education. He writes,

Sir Thomas More, who succeeded Wholes as Chancellor, is at once an object deserving our compassion, and an instance of the usual progress of men's sentiments during that age. This man, whose elegant genius and familiar acquaintance with the noble spirit of antiquity, had given him very enlarged sentiments, and who had in his early years advanced principles, which even at present would be deemed somewhat too free, had, in the course of events, been so irritated by polemics, and thrown into such a superstitious attachment to the ancient faith, that few inquisitors have been guilty of greater violence in their prosecution of heresy. Though adorned with the gentlest manners, as well as the purest integrity, he carried to the utmost height his aversion to heterodoxy; and James Bainham, in particular, a gentleman of the Temple, experienced from him the greatest severity. Bainham, accused of favouring the new opinions, was carried to More's house; and having refused to discover his accomplices, the chancellor ordered him to be whipped in his presence, and afterwards sent him to the Tower, where he himself saw him put to the torture. The unhappy gentleman, overcome by all these severities, abjured his opinions; but feeling afterwards the deepest compunction for his apostacy, he openly returned to his former tenets, and even courted the crown of martyrdom. He was condemned as an obstinate and relapsed heretic, and was burned in Smithfield.⁶⁹

According to Hume, although he stands accused of awful, inhumane acts, More is curiously to be regarded as an object of compassion. Why? Because he was born too early, at a time when a person of "enlarged sentiments" could not hope to free himself from the twin influences of religious superstition and enthusiasm that dominated society.⁷⁰ Instead of enjoying the genteel, learned life that suited his natural disposition, More allowed both his understanding and his sentiments to be dominated by the incoherent frenzy of party faction. In such a blinded state, even those with the greatest potential for good are transformed into the worst of the

Madness of Religion" in *Hume and Hume's Connexions*, eds. M.A. Stewart and John Wright (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1994), ch. 11.

⁶⁹ *History of England*, 3:215.

⁷⁰ 'Superstition' and 'enthusiasm' are actually somewhat technical terms in Hume's writings. For the most part, by superstition Hume means Catholicism (with its emphasis on mystery and submission to authority), and by enthusiasm he means Protestantism (with its emphasis on individual inspiration, which to Hume's mind is often dangerously unchecked). For a full treatment of the distinction see John Passmore, "Enthusiasm, Fanaticism and David Hume" in *The Science of Man in the Scottish Enlightenment*, ed. Peter Jones (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1989).

inquisitors. Hume's moral admonition here could hardly be clearer: viz., this is what becomes of great men who spoil their natural gifts by submitting to violent and intellectually empty religious groups.

As with Thomas More, Hume introduces Becket as a man of extraordinary character, who "by his complaisance and good humor" gradually rose through the civil ranks due to the patronage of Henry II, and as a result of his faithful service eventually attained the position of archbishop. According to Hume, however, no sooner had Becket acquired the mitre than he totally altered his naturally pleasant demeanor and conduct. Instead of attending to the well-being of his flock, Becket turned inward and became absorbed with his own private sanctity, a sanctity founded on mortifications such as wearing vermin-ridden vestments and drinking water laced with bitter herbs – and like the lunatic in the asylum, he began muttering incoherently to himself, apparently in prayer.⁷¹ So earnest, in fact, was Becket's religious enthusiasm that Hume hesitates to call it hypocrisy; Hume, rather, believes that Becket's obsession ran so deep that he differed from other clerics who cultivate the faith and submissiveness of the laity only to increase their own prestige. When Hume describes Becket's dramatic end, he therefore credits him with sincerity (though of the most perverse kind):

This was the tragical end of Thomas a Becket, a prelate of the most lofty, intrepid, and inflexible spirit, who was able to cover, to the world and probably to himself, the enterprizes of pride and ambition, under the disguise of sanctity and of zeal for the interests of religion: An extraordinary personage, surely, had he been allowed to remain in his first station, and had directed the vehemence of his character to the support of law and justice; instead of being engaged, by the prejudices of the times, to sacrifice all private duties and public connexions to tyes, which he imagined, or represented, as superior to every civil and political consideration.⁷²

Here again we see Hume using history as the setting for a cautionary moral tale. Like

⁷¹ *History of England*, 1:329.

⁷² *History of England*, 1:332.

More, Becket is characterized as a man of exceptional talents who had the ability to serve the public good, but who instead turned against his better nature and became a votary of violence and superstition. Yet Hume's final appraisal of Becket is once more sympathetic, esteeming him more a victim of his time than an intentionally corrupt man.

But no man, who enters into the genius of that age, can reasonably doubt of this prelate's sincerity. The spirit of superstition was so prevalent, that it infallibly caught every careless reasoner, much more every one whose interest, and honour, and ambition, were engaged to support it. All the wretched literature of the times was enlisted on that side: Some faint glimmerings of common sense might sometimes pierce through the thick cloud of ignorance, or what was worse, the illusions of perverted science, which had blotted out the sun, and enveloped the face of nature: But those who preserved themselves untainted by the general contagion, proceeded on no principles which they could pretend to justify: They were more indebted to their total want of instruction, than to their knowledge, if they still retained some share of understanding: Folly was possessed of all the schools as well as all the churches; and her votaries assumed the garb of philosophers together with the ensigns of spiritual dignities.... The spirit of revenge, violence, and ambition, which accompanied their conduct, instead of forming a presumption of hypocrisy, are the surest pledges of their sincere attachment to a cause, which so much flattered these domineering passions.⁷³

Hence, no matter what Becket's potential, science and the experimental method in general (as promoted by men such as Bacon and Newton) had not yet appeared on the scene. All that was left was faction and a kind of instinctive, paranoid zeal to defend the group identity one had learned since birth. Truth and goodness, the natural objects of our desire, were obscured by the "thick cloud of ignorance" which dominated those ages.

⁷³ *History of England*, 1:335.

Chapter IV The Relationship between Common Life and Philosophy

The preceding case studies, as well as the other examples of religiously motivated violence we have seen Hume recount in his historical writings, provide us with sufficient evidence to be able to consider more general questions about the nature of his philosophical method, which in turn will allow us better to understand Hume's religious critique. Perhaps the most basic question is this: How does Hume conceive of the relationship between reason (or, as he sometimes says, "philosophy") and common life? Would it be true to say that one of these categories is more basic than the other? As we recall, the Logical Positivists believed that reason was the most basic category for Hume, while later Naturalist and Common Life interpreters noted that for Hume reason is unable to justify itself in isolation – that it depends, rather, on either natural beliefs and sentiments or the time-honored customs of common life. Reason can do no more than accept and attempt to implement these desires; it is, therefore, strictly instrumental.

According to this view, especially as promoted by Danford, Hume is obliged to safeguard and prize religion along with the other venerated institutions of common life. Indeed, to follow Danford's interpretation of Hume's common life principle, religion would be the most highly prized of all the aspects of common life, because it underwrites the morality of the state, as in the classical world, where religious and political duties were closely joined. "Hume thus seems to suggest that a politically responsible *theology* would foster, or make us look up to, a manly, steady virtue, and a calm reasonableness. That is, it would support and encourage the human virtues as we recognize them in common life."⁷⁴

But from what we have seen, this can hardly be the case. For Hume, there is no such

thing as a politically responsible theology. Quite to the contrary, Hume believes that throughout history, and almost by definition, religious groups have thwarted the peaceful existence of society – for all the reasons we described above, but primarily because theological parties can only survive and persist by encouraging faction and stimulating violent emotions. What, then, should one who accepts the importance of Hume’s doctrine of common life do? Where is the intermediate ground between those who maintain that the normative principle in Hume’s work is reason and those who believe it to be common life?

I propose that Hume perceives this crucial relationship as follows. The conventions of common life are normative, but reason always examines these conventions in order to point out inconsistencies and contradictions – both internal inconsistencies (when the convention itself is somehow incoherent) and external inconsistencies (when the convention flatly contradicts either the experience of history or the external world). Thus the relationship between reason and common life is not one of exclusivity, but rather one of priority; although both are necessary for the individual and society to function well, common life takes practical precedence. The priority of common life is expressed most effectively in *The Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*.

A correct Judgment observes a contrary method, and avoiding all distant and high enquiries, confines itself to common life, and to such subjects as fall under daily practice and experience; leaving the more sublime topics to the embellishment of poets and orators, or to the arts of priests and politicians. To bring us to so salutary a determination, nothing can be more serviceable, than to be once thoroughly convinced of the force of the Pyrrhonian doubt, and of the impossibility, that any thing, but the strong power of natural instinct, could free us from it. Those who have a propensity to philosophy, will still continue their researches; because they reflect, that, besides the immediate pleasure, attending such an occupation, philosophical decisions are nothing but the reflections of common life, methodized and corrected.⁷⁵

⁷⁴ Danford, 183.

⁷⁵ *Enquiry Concerning the Human Understanding*, 133.

This last maxim in particular – “philosophical decisions are nothing but the reflections of common life, methodized and corrected” – explains in the most direct manner possible Hume’s view of the relationship between philosophy (or reason) and common life. Yet while common life clearly has the normative role here, one cannot ignore the essential and powerful contribution of reason. Though common life provides the raw materials of belief and action, as it were, reason always follows with its pruning shears, cutting away those conventions and rituals which do not accurately reflect the data of our experience or no longer enhance the well-being of society. As Hume says, reason “corrects.” It is by no means passive.

With this in mind, we see that Hume’s critique of religion is much more compatible with his common life convictions than one might first think. In other words, the mere fact that a certain set of principles is widely believed or practiced, that it has a presence in common life, is not enough to ensure the truth of these principles. In the following rather densely constructed letter to his friend Gilbert Meno, Hume explores this relationship more fully (yet tactfully, as Meno was a believer). Meno must have argued in a previous (unavailable) letter that religious belief deserves a place as a natural sentiment, as an inescapable element of common life; Hume, however, disagrees, making an important distinction between sentiment and education, and arguing that religious belief is more a function of the latter. Hume writes,

Your Notion of correcting Subtlety of Sentiment is certainly very just with regard to Morals, which depend upon Sentiment; & in Politics & natural Philosophy, whatever Conclusion is contrary to certain Matter of Fact must certainly be wrong, and there must some Error lie somewhere in the Argument, whether we be able to show it or not. But in Metaphysics or Theology, I cannot see how either of these plain & obvious Standards of Truth can have place. Nothing there can correct bad Reasoning but good Reasoning: and Sophistry must be oppos'd by Syllogism... [Hume discusses in some detail a controversy between Catholics and Protestants regarding the source of theological certainty, with the Catholics arguing for authority]... The Comparison of these controversial Writings begot an Idea in some, that it was neither by Reasoning nor Authority we learn our Religion, but by Sentiment. And certainly this were a very

convenient Way, and what a Philosopher wou'd be very well pleas'd to comply with, if he could distinguish Sentiment from Education. But to all Appearance the Sentiment of Stockholm, Geneva, Rome antient & modern, Athens, & Memphis, have the same Characters. And no thinking man can implicitly assent to any of them; but from the general Principle, that as the Truth in these Subjects is beyond human Capacity, & that as for one's own Ease he must adopt some Tenets, there is more Satisfaction & Convenience in holding to the Catechism we have been first taught. Now this I have nothing to say against. I would only observe, that such a Conduct is founded on the most universal & determin'd Scepticism, join'd to a little Indolence. For more Curiosity & Research gives a direct opposite Turn from the same Principles.⁷⁶

In this letter, Hume denounces anyone who would try to make a case for religion as integral to common life, a universal component of every society on record, and hence a healthy natural belief or sentiment. Let us call this argument a variety of *naïve conservatism*. That is, if a given belief or ritual system has existed for generations, and moreover if it has molded common life for generations, it would be exceedingly harmful to uproot it or tamper with it. But as this letter emphasizes, Hume was not a naïve conservative – based on the previously mentioned maxim that reason (or philosophy) always corrects the given belief system of common life, and corrects it according to its ability to interpret the world effectively and contribute to the good of society. Thus Hume here objects to those who would simply accept on blind faith the belief system which they have inherited, following their conviction that reason cannot conclusively demonstrate the truth of one system over and against another, “& that as for one's own Ease he must adopt some Tenets,” he might as well adopt the beliefs which were first piously presented to him in his crib.

Hume, however, argues that this degree of skepticism is both lamentable and lazy. Although reason cannot act autonomously or create its own first principles, it does not follow that reason has no place at all in belief systems. Indeed, it is important to keep in mind that Hume argues for a *mitigated* skepticism, in which the extravagant pretensions of reason are

⁷⁶ David Hume, *The Letters of David Hume*, ed. J. Y. T. Greig (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1932), 150.

chastened (especially with regard to metaphysical speculation), but in which reason retains an indispensable role. Thus, against those who would react to the chastening of reason with a sort of 'fideism' whereby all traditions are equally worthy of belief because none can conclusively demonstrate its own truth, Hume says this is simply "indolence." A bit of "curiosity and research," especially historical investigation, quickly shows us that while some traditions contribute to the benevolence and prosperity of society, others (viz., religions) promote violence and break society into factions.

V. Conclusion

If nothing else, one thing should by now be thoroughly clear: Hume was no believer, certainly not in any providential God, or in a God who revealed himself in history and continues to inspire the faithful in truth. More bluntly, then, he was not a Christian. But exposing Hume's unbelief is only a by-product of our main subject: viz., the question of why Hume thinks religious claims are unworthy of acceptance. More specifically, we were interested in whether Hume pursues his critique on rational or historical grounds – or on both. Does religion fail because it is rationally meaningless, as the Logical Positivists argued; or does it fail because history teaches us that religious groups have been uniformly violent and bigoted, and are therefore undeserving of a place within the common life institutions of society?

We have gathered evidence to prove that, for Hume, religion fails on both counts, and further that, according to the principles of his own system, Hume's historical critique should be considered the more basic of the two. This thesis is important for two reasons. First, from a scholarly point of view it is important to understand that Hume's critique of religion is not as one-sided as we have traditionally been led to believe. Second, and more significantly for the theologian, my thesis helps to answer the crucial question of *why* Hume thinks that religious claims are ultimately unwarranted. For if Hume truly holds that religion stands or falls according to its ability to prove its claims rationally, and if the theologian considers Hume's objections weighty, then it is necessary for the theologian to demonstrate the soundness of these proofs. But we have shown that Hume does not believe that religion is so utterly dependent on rational proof. Rather, he recognizes that according to his own claims about the importance of common life, religion might very well defend itself by appealing to its influential role in the daily lives of men and women throughout history. In response to such a defense, he

has to diversify his attack; he has to find a way to argue that religion has acted within common life as an overwhelmingly negative influence.

I have attempted to demonstrate that Hume makes this point by showcasing the historical failings of religious groups, especially as these groups have soured both the peace of society and the natural, benevolent, and *external* orientation of men and women towards their fellow human beings. Such a claim, I have argued, can only be made historically, by observing that this destructive behavior is not isolated, but is in fact the uniform (according to Hume) influence of religion upon the affairs of society.

The logic of my argument, then, is essentially very simple. To repeat, Hume's critique of religion can be divided into rational and historical parts. But Hume privileges other faculties of belief, especially common life beliefs, above reason, so while the rational critique is important it is not decisive within Hume's system. Therefore, to be effective the historical critique must demonstrate that religious beliefs corrupt the naturally benevolent tendencies of groups and individuals, that they poison common life. And this, I have shown, he sets out to do with a passion in his *History of England*. If we are convinced that Hume has proven his point then it follows that religious groups should be excluded from society; they should be treated with as much respect as the human body treats a potentially lethal disease.

The believer could respond to Hume's historical critique in one of two ways. First, he or she could deny Hume's crucial premise that other belief mechanisms (such as common life practices) should be privileged above reason, thereby moving the context of the debate back to arguments over the rational merit of proofs for the existence of God. Or second, he or she could accept Hume's claims about the primacy of these other belief mechanisms, but nevertheless insist that, despite their occasional abuses, religious groups are charged with

cultivating, rather than destroying, the very principles of common life that Hume holds so dear.

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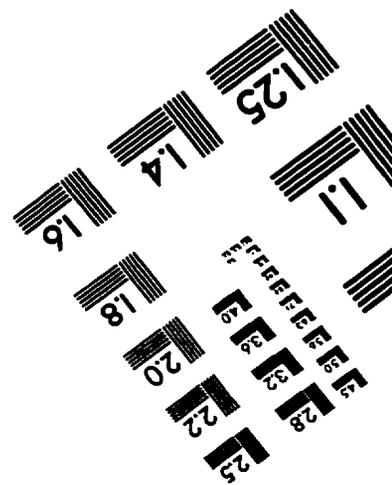
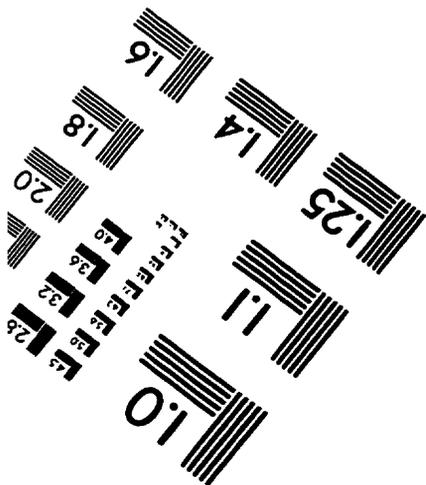
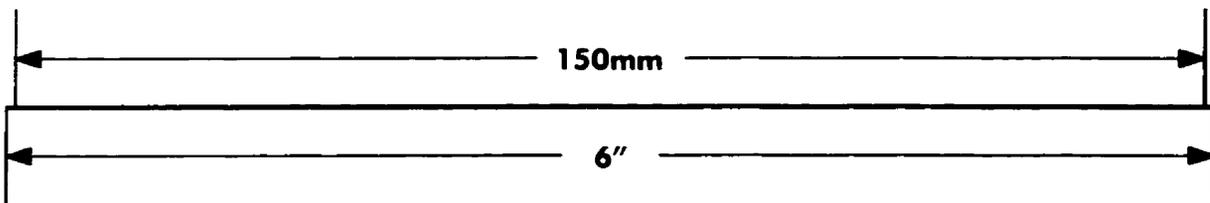
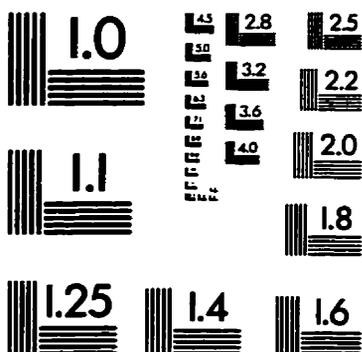
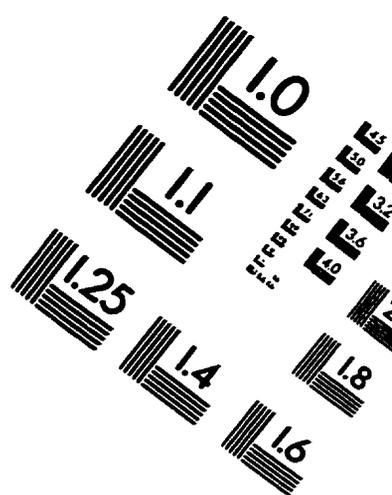
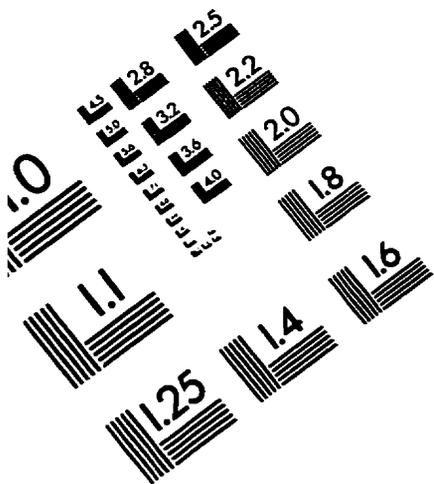
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