

Hume on the Divine and Philosophic Barbarism

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An essay on Hume's conception of the Divine might seem absurd, rather like hearing about an essay on A. J. Ayer's conception of the Divine. Ayer's logical positivism taught that neither he nor anyone has or could have a *concept* of the Divine because all metaphysical utterances are cognitively meaningless. Until about three decades ago it was common to think of Hume as a precursor of logical positivism, a view held by the positivists themselves. The manifesto of the Vienna Circle mentions only two philosophers as having a foundational influence on the movement: Hume and Mach. Few today would think of Hume as a precursor of logical positivism, both because we have a deeper understanding of Hume's philosophy and because logical positivism is no longer fashionable. But Hume's writings on religion are still treated in a positivist fashion. The affirmation of theism in *The Natural History of Religion* and in the *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* are viewed by many as something Hume could not have taken seriously. Hume's critique of natural theology, it is thought, leaves the concept of God with so little content as to be virtually empty and practically indistinguishable from atheism.

But are Hume's theistic remarks simply an ironic mask which hides a closet atheism? Or to put the matter another way, if Hume is a theist what difference could theism make in ordinary life? If it makes no difference, it is an empty notion and of a piece with atheism.¹ A number of Hume's remarks suggest such a view, but a more careful look will show, I think, that Hume's theism does make a difference in how one thinks and acts in the world. It makes a difference

because Hume's theism is an antidote to a certain kind of *philosophical* error. This error is more prevalent in our time and culture than in Hume's. Consequently, the significance of Hume's theism stands out more clearly today than it did in the eighteenth century. I turn now to examine the character of Hume's theism and the philosophical error from which it helps to free us.

It cannot be denied that Hume *claims* to be a theist. In a number of places he defends what he variously calls "philosophical theism," "genuine theism," and "true religion." He does this in the *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* through the character of Philo who is usually taken to speak for Hume. But his most dramatic affirmations are in *The Natural History of Religion*, given in his own name. What does he mean by these expressions, and how would the life of a philosophical theist be different from that of a philosophical atheist? Philosophical theism has its source in reason, but not reason conceived as the application of the ordinary rules of *a priori* and empirical reasoning. Hume is very clear in the *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* and in Sections X and XI of *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* that theistic belief cannot be established by the application of these rules. But he is equally clear that the application of such rules cannot establish our universally held "natural beliefs"—beliefs in a public world, causal connections, and a continuous self.

There is a deeper and non-rational source of rationality—what he calls a "wonderful and unintelligible instinct in our souls."² This is the disposition of the imagination to form metaphorical identities which become the source of our deepest metaphysical beliefs. For instance, repeated experience of constant conjunctions (which analysis shows to be distinct and separable) spontaneously generates the belief that the conjuncts are necessarily connected, even though the belief cannot be certified by logical or empirical reasoning. Or, again, analysis shows that the perception of a thing is broken into resembling but numerically distinct fleeting and perishing existences. The imagination, nevertheless, unites these into the metaphorical belief that our resembling numerically distinct perceptions are the same. Logical analysis may demonstrate that the metaphors internal to our most fundamental natural beliefs are incoherent, but such a reflection does not seriously weaken the belief.

Care must be taken not to misread Hume on this point. The positivists interpreted Hume as a phenomenalist.³ On this reading a causal

connection is nothing but an experienced constant conjunction. But that is not Hume's teaching. He holds instead that the experience of constant conjunctions triggers the belief that the conjuncts are necessarily connected by a secret power productive of the conjunction. The conjuncts are the *occasion* for the belief in the power, but the belief is not *about* the conjunctions; it is about the power. We never see what Hume calls the "secret connexion," nor can we picture to ourselves what it is, but we nevertheless believe it exists and that it is productive of phenomena. Once we have causal beliefs, they can be tested to see whether the conjunctions hold in altered conditions. Having gained some practice in correcting them, we can form models and abstract ideals and rules for empirical reasoning to render the system of causal beliefs more coherent, until finally a system such as Newtonian physics is achieved. But abstract rules of reflection without the *force* of belief (constituted by the metaphorical imagination) are impotent to establish any belief whatsoever. It is humbling for human reason to have to acknowledge that its most advanced scientific thinking is rooted in a non-rational source: the primordial metaphors—or what Hume sometimes calls—the "fictions" of the imagination.

Hume calls this story of how belief originates a "sceptical solution" to doubts raised by universal application of the ordinary rules of a priori and empirical reasoning. Through it we come to understand the source of our foundational natural beliefs: a causally ordered world, a continuous self, and society. To these we should add a fourth foundational belief: theism. The strategy for explaining this belief is the same "sceptical solution" employed in explaining the other foundational beliefs and is more clearly stated in *The Natural History of Religion* than in the *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*. The account runs briefly as follows. Once mankind establishes the habit of making and correcting causal judgments and ordering them into *systems*, the imagination spontaneously generates the belief that the world is a systematic whole; that it is the result of purposive intelligence; and that this intelligence is single and undivided. Hume says: "A purpose, an intention, a design is evident in every thing; and when our comprehension is so far enlarged as to contemplate the first rise of this visible system, we must adopt, with the strongest conviction, the idea of some intelligent cause or author." And he adds that the "uniform maxims . . . which prevail thro' the whole frame of the universe, naturally, if not necessarily lead us to conceive this intelligence as single and individual."⁴

Philosophical theism is a natural belief like the other foundational beliefs in that it occurs spontaneously under certain conditions. But it is unlike them in that a historical development of a certain kind of practice is required before the belief can emerge. And further, the practice requires the cultivation of a certain kind of character, namely, a philosophic character. Hume says that no one of “good understanding” could reject philosophical theism, and he seriously doubted whether there were any true atheists—though he acknowledged there were those who professed to be such. He mentions the atheism of Galen, whose scientific research, nevertheless, presupposed that the parts of the body were ordered according to purposive intelligence, and who consequently exhibited in practice a belief which he disowned in speech (NHR, 25–26; D, 142, 214–18).

Some commentators have denied that Hume thinks of theism as a natural belief; that he thinks of it as an artifice of convention from which a philosopher by mere reflection can free himself. But this is a cavil about a word. A comparison of theism with Hume’s notion of justice might be helpful. He distinguishes justice as an *artificial* virtue from the natural virtues on the ground that the latter spontaneously occur everywhere and at all times, whereas the former require a certain scale and complexity of society before they emerge. But once mankind has moved beyond small-scale tribal units and a more complex society is in place, justice emerges spontaneously (that is naturally). If we understand this, Hume says, it is a matter of indifference whether we describe justice as natural or artificial. And he regularly refers to the rules of justice in Book III of the *Treatise of Human Nature* as “the laws of nature.”

That justice is an “artificial” virtue does not mean that philosophers, by mere reflection, can reject the rules of justice without incoherence. Such rules are so deeply embedded in society and in the philosopher’s own character as a *participant* in society that he will be found to acknowledge the authority of the practice—especially when his own interests are involved—which philosophical theory has caused him to reject. Similarly, to say that theism is an artificial belief and not a natural one because it does not occur everywhere and at all times, is not to lessen its authority for those practices in which it is naturally embedded—in this case, the critical practice of making causal judgments about reality and ordering them into systems.

Hume was ridiculed in Paris by d'Holbach and his circle for his theism. Years later Hume could recall how Lord Marischal and Helvetius "used to laugh at me for my narrow way of thinking in these particulars." And Sir James McDonald, writing from Paris to a friend in England, could speak of "poor Hume who on your side of the water was thought to have too little religion, is here thought to have too much."⁵ The French *philosophe* and atheist Naigeon was astonished to find, after a careful reading of the *Dialogues*, that it contained no declaration that God does not exist, even though it was published posthumously, and Hume had nothing to fear from a speech from the tomb. He concluded with disgust that "Hume, with respect to the most fundamental of all *theological truths*, never advanced beyond scepticism. . . ."⁶

Theistic belief is internal to the practice of scientific inquiry; it is also internal to the most noble sort of human character. Hume writes: "The good, the great, the sublime, the ravishing are found eminently in the genuine principles of theism" (NHR, 93). And he recommended Shaftesbury to his readers for a sense of the sublime.⁷ Philosophical theism strengthens what is good and noble in man, but it should not be confused with morality. Moral sentiments arise from contemplating the motives of particular acts. As Hume says, they "stain and color" those acts, producing a new reality. The sentiments of philosophical theism spontaneously arise upon contemplating the "visible system" as a systematic whole, which is then viewed as the work of purposive activity. The sentiments that supervene upon theistic contemplation stain and color not a particular act, as do moral sentiments, but the *whole of experience*.

Theoretical and moral engagements take on a different meaning for one who has achieved philosophically grounded theistic sentiments. To understand more clearly what this difference is, it will be helpful to contrast the character of the Humean theist with two characters incompatible with it: vulgar theism and philosophical atheism.

Hume's theism, or what he sometimes calls "true religion," is a religion available only to a *philosophic* character. So it is a peculiar sort of religion and quite different from what he calls "vulgar religion." In the *Natural History of Religion*, he teaches that vulgar religion is largely a strategy for placating the gods in a terrifying world of unknown causes. Favor is gained through praise of the gods. A servile competition ensues among the devotees in praise of their

respective gods. Eventually one god is singled out as having no limits and nothing but superlative qualities. From this source the god of vulgar theism emerges.

But philosophy has an entirely different origin and character from vulgar religion. Philosophy has its source not in ignorance and fear but in “curiosity” or “love of truth.” Consequently, it necessarily appears later in history, after mankind have learned to build cities and have achieved a measure of security. Instead of seeking particular favors from the Deity, the philosophical theist admires the marvelous order of creation as something good, and he views himself as participating in the Divine order of a general providence. His response to creation is not that of fear, but of confidence, awe, and gratitude. Hume writes in the *Natural History of Religion*: “What a noble privilege is it of human reason to attain the knowledge of the supreme being; and from the visible work of nature, be enabled to infer so sublime a principle as its supreme Creator” (NHR, 92–93). The idea of God, Hume says, is to be regarded as “a kind of mark or stamp which the divine workman has set upon his work” (NHR, 93).

Hume describes true religion as “that speculative tenet of theism, which . . . is a species of philosophy.” It is religion of the “philosophical and rational kind.”⁸ As a disposition of philosophy it is extremely rare, and Hume says it is unlikely that it could ever issue in a popular religion (NHR, 87–88). But most importantly philosophical theism is an endowment only of a certain kind of philosopher, for Hume makes a distinction between what he calls “true philosophy” and “false philosophy.” Philosophical theism is a disposition of the true philosopher, not the false.

This fundamental distinction can be briefly explained as follows.⁹ Philosophy is not just any kind of critical activity. It is an attempt to grasp the whole truth of reality, and is guided in doing so by a radical conception of the autonomy of reason. No thought about the real can be considered true unless certified by the philosopher’s own autonomous reason. Philosophy cannot (without ceasing to be philosophy) defer to any standard outside the circle of its own thought. The authority of priests, poets, founding fathers, custom, and tradition are and must be rejected as original sources of authority. But what Hume discovered is that this radically autonomous conception of reason, if consistently pursued (and false philosophers do not and cannot *consistently* pursue it) ends in total skepticism and the end of all inquiry.

In the despair of total skepticism, the true philosopher recognizes for the first time the magnificent authority of pre-reflective common life to command judgment. In doing so he is compelled to acknowledge an authority independent of his own autonomous reason. With this insight, inquiry into the real is restored, but with a fundamentally revised conception of reason. The false philosopher assumes that all custom is suspect unless shown to be otherwise. The true philosopher assumes that custom is to be viewed as innocent unless shown to be otherwise—and where to show otherwise is to show that a practice or belief is either self-subverting or, in some way, incoherent with common life as a whole. The task of true philosophy, Hume says, is to “methodize and correct” the customs and traditions through which beliefs about the real are established.¹⁰ The true philosopher is *true* because he has complete self-knowledge about what philosophical inquiry is and ought to be. The false philosopher is *false* because he lacks such self-knowledge. He is stuck in the hubris of radical philosophical autonomy and is condemned, unknowingly, to pass off his favorite pre-reflective prejudices as the work of an autonomous reason entirely emancipated from the pre-reflective.

Just as Hume taught that the only antidote to the corruptions of vulgar religion is philosophy, so the only antidote to the corruptions of false philosophy is true philosophy. But true philosophy is extremely rare because the primordial disposition of philosophy is to its corrupt forms. And it is just here that we can begin to see the importance of Hume’s philosophical theism. The true philosopher and the philosophical theist are the same. The sentiments of philosophical theism strengthen the true philosopher’s ability to resist the corruptions of false philosophy—corruptions to which philosophy is always inclined. The true philosopher (and the philosophical theist) is not disposed to philosophical alchemy, that is, to transmuting the part into the whole. And he has a keen eye for this error in other philosophers.

The hubris of false philosophy appears at the very beginning of the philosophical tradition in what Hume calls the “atheism” of the first philosophers. In the *Natural History of Religion*, Hume sketches out an account of the origin of philosophy in human nature. And he goes out of his way to argue that “Thales, Anaximander, and the early philosophers . . . were atheists.” They were atheists not because they denied the existence of a single author of the universe, but because, as pagans, the thought never occurred to them. They had no

idea of a “being, that corresponds to our idea of a deity. No first principle of mind or thought: No supreme government and administration: No divine contrivance or intention in the fabric of the world” (NHR, 38). Atheism was internal to the practice of first philosophers just as theism is internal to the practice of modern science.

As pagans, the first philosophical atheists “readily assented to the grossest theory, and admitted the joint origin of gods and men from night and chaos; from fire, water, air, or whatever they established to be the ruling element” (NHR, 44). Hume calls these the “blind, unguided powers of nature.” He traces the origin of philosophical theism to Anaxagoras, and observes that theism was cultivated by Socrates, Xenophon, Plato, Aristotle, and the Stoics. But these early conceptions were disfigured by being mingled with polytheistic superstition. “For my part,” he said, “I can scarce allow the principles even of Marcus Aurelius, Plutarch, and some other Stoics and Academics . . . to be worthy of the honourable denomination of theism” (NHR, 45).

Turning to modern philosophical theists, Hume observes “I maintain, that Newton, Locke, Clarke, etc. being Arians or Socinians, were very sincere in the creed they profest: And I always oppose this argument to some libertines, who will needs have it, that it was impossible, but that these great philosophers must have been hypocrites” (NHR, 79). These, we might suppose, are the same sort of “libertines” who today would deny that Hume could be serious about his own professed belief in theism. For instance, those influenced by the teachings of Leo Strauss are inclined to interpret great philosophers as atheistic, whatever they might have said. Nor is this merely a quirk of Straussian hermeneutics. For, as Hume himself suggests, atheism is intimated in the radical autonomy of philosophy itself, as revealed in the first philosophers. Philosophical autonomy first appears as absolute: the philosopher can acknowledge no authority beyond his own reason. Only after passing through the dialectic of true and false philosophy can the much chastened true philosopher recognize an authority outside himself.

Hume thinks that philosophical theism is rationally superior to the atheism of the first philosophers. Why is this? In the essay “The Sceptic” Hume puts his finger on the fundamental error of all false philosophy: “There is one mistake, to which they seem liable, almost without exception; they confine too much their principles, and

make no account of that vast variety, which nature has so much affected in all her operations. When a philosopher has once laid hold of a favourite principle, which perhaps accounts for many natural effects, he extends the same principle over the whole creation, and reduces to it every phenomenon, though by the most violent and absurd reasoning" (E, 159). In speculations about the real, the false philosopher becomes obsessed with one aspect of experience which, through an act of philosophical alchemy, is transmuted into the inner essence of the whole. Hume calls this act of transmutation "philosophical chymistry," by which he means "alchemy," and compares it to a kind of secular "magic" and "witchcraft" (E, 161).¹¹

Thales spiritualized the whole of experience into water; Berkeley said that to be is to be perceived; Hobbes that benevolence is really self-love; Proudhon that property is really theft; Marx that all history is the story of class struggle. The true philosopher recognizes this act of philosophical alchemy as a permanent feature of philosophical speculation, and one in need of constant correction. The false philosopher is lost in the seamless whole of his own obsession. Unexamined philosophical autonomy demands that the self-legislation of the philosopher be the measure of the whole of reality.

All criticism presupposes transcendence, a distance between the thing evaluated and the standard of evaluation. Philosophical theism presents thought with a conception of transcendence superior to that presented by the first philosophical atheists. The first philosophers worked with a compacted and horizontal notion of transcendence. Thales opened up a distance *within* the world between a favorite part which was declared reality and the rest which was declared appearance. Such immanent transcendence is arbitrary and distorts experience. The world is not really water; history is not really the story of class struggle; benevolence is not really self-love, anymore than all colors are really red.

By contrast, transcendence in philosophical theism is vertical and radical, being the distance between common life *as a whole* and the mind of God as its author. The world of experience is viewed as an intelligible system, and the work of a general providence. Theistic transcendence opens up an ideal of endless self-correcting inquiry which, because the thinker is human, can never be brought to completion. Atheistic transcendence is a distance opened up *within* the world where inquiry can come to rest with finality and certainty—but only

at the price of superstitiously transforming a part of experience into the whole.

Many who have recognized that Hume does accept some form of theism, have nonetheless concluded that it is empty, and so virtually the same as atheism. This view is plausible only if we take, as Hume's final view, Philo's argument in the *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, that by the ordinary rules of a priori and empirical reasoning, the idea of God is indeterminate and can license no inference to common life. But this skeptical argument is nothing other than the familiar Humean argument that *no foundational belief* can be established by the application of abstract rules of inference. Indeed the successful application of such rules—and Hume thinks their importance is highly overrated—*presupposes* foundational beliefs such as a causal connections, a continuous self, society, and, in the case of true philosophers, theism.

Philo's confession of faith in the last pages of Part XII of the *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* has perplexed many. How, it is asked, can Philo confess belief in the God of theism after having deployed the withering arguments he does against natural theology? The answer is that Philo's confession of faith follows the same method as Hume's confession of belief in necessary connection and personal identity after having deployed skeptical arguments that subvert those beliefs. Both are instances of his "sceptical solution" to doubts raised by the natural—but misguided—attempt to establish these beliefs by ordinary rules of reason.

There are many ways to picture and theorize the natural belief in necessary connections. We may picture them as Cartesian vortexes, Newtonian forces, as nuclear energy, as unconscious motives, as market forces, etc. The defense of any particular image is that it is more coherent with common life than its rivals. Likewise there can be different images of the purposive intelligence of theism. Hume's own belief appears to be limited to that of a general though mysterious providence that we can discern only through experience and the "calm passion" of true philosophy. It rules out any notion of a personal god who reveals himself in the world in a miraculous way. Consequently, Hume rejected revealed tradition as an avenue to filling out our understanding of the nature of the Deity. But although Hume's own philosophic disposition could not admit such a belief, his conception of philosophy does not rule it out. Fideism is compatible with Hume's

conception of true philosophy and his underdetermined philosophical theism. Hume himself did not take this path, but there is no reason why a Humean philosopher could not participate in a revealed religious tradition.

Philo points the way to this option in his confession of faith in Section XII of the *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*. Having cleared the way to belief in theism, he observes that most people—including the philosopher himself—will not be satisfied with the general providence of the philosopher's belief. This sort of philosopher will desire to have a personal relation with the Deity and will be frustrated with reason which can lead him up to belief in a general providence but no further. Philo then says that a "well disposed mind" will fly to "revealed religion" which alone can give a personal content to the idea of the Deity. The key expression here is "well disposed mind." The false philosopher's mind is not well disposed, the true philosopher's mind is. The true philosopher in the *Dialogues* has rigorously examined and rejected all attempts to establish propositions about the Deity on the basis of the ordinary canons of reason. He nevertheless (speaking through Philo) acknowledges a theistic belief that supervenes spontaneously upon a thoughtful contemplation of the "visible system."

What this belief contains has its source in human nature, and can no more be inferred from the visible system itself than necessary connection can be inferred from experienced constant conjunctions. Philo finds the idea to contain only the notion that the cause of order in the universe probably bears some "remote analogy to human intelligence," and that it is proper to describe God as "MIND or THOUGHT." But it does not contain the idea of personality or moral attributes, and so would not appear to have any relevance to human life. *Philosophical* contemplation, even of the true sort, can carry us just so far in understanding the nature of the Deity. But then this is true of all the arguments for God's existence deployed in natural theology. Even if the design and cosmological and ontological arguments were sound, one could still wonder what relevance their conclusions would have for common life. The Deity cannot enter the flow of human life except through sacred stories in a tradition of revelation. And so Philo concludes that "to be a philosophical sceptic is, in a man of letters, the first and most essential step towards being a sound, believing Christian" (D, 228). And Philo even suggests that Cleanthes educate his pupil Pamphilius in a revealed tradition.

Is this incompatible with Hume's famous argument against miracles in Section X of *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, an argument that would presumably rule out any form of revelation? It is not, because the argument only shows that the ordinary canons of evaluating testimony cannot be used to prove the existence of a miracle that could serve *alone* as the foundation of a religious system. A consistent application of the causal principle would either deny that the event occurred, or if it is admitted that it had occurred would seek a naturalistic explanation. If one, nevertheless, believes in a miracle the source of that belief cannot be an application of the ordinary canons of empirical reasoning. Its source must lie elsewhere. And so Hume playfully concludes that belief in a miracle is itself a miracle in that it subverts the ordinary canons of empirical reasoning—a miracle being defined as a violation of the ordinary course of nature. This is just Hume's mischievous way of saying that belief in miracles cannot be established by ordinary empirical canons. But then neither can any other foundational belief. The "sceptical solution" to this doubt about miracles (if there is one) can come only from participation in a revealed tradition.

This move to a revealed tradition is natural to the imagination, as Hume explains in *The Natural History of Religion* in his account of the relation between polytheism and theism. Polytheism was the first attempt by mankind to make the world intelligible. The gods of mythology are works of the imagination, and he calls polytheism "a true poetical religion." Hume is sympathetic to polytheism. The stories of the gods please the imagination, and move easily into the stream of common life: "Where is the difficulty of conceiving, that the same powers or principles, whatever they were, which formed this visible world . . . produced also a species of intelligent creatures, of more refined substance and greater authority than the rest? That these creatures may be capricious, revengeful, passionate, voluptuous, is easily conceived" (NHR, 64). And Hume goes so far as to conclude that "the whole mythological system is so natural, that, in the vast variety of planets and worlds . . . it seems more than probable, that, somewhere or other, it is really carried into execution" (NHR, 64). Vulgar theism, as distinct from philosophical theism, emerges out of polytheism. Devotees compete in praising their gods. In time one god is elevated out of the world and reduced to abstract perfections. The imagination, however, cannot conduct itself in the vacuum

of abstraction. The vulgar theist then focuses attention on intermediate beings such as angels, prophets, etc. Eventually these threaten to take on the attributes of the Deity itself as theism reverts back in the direction of primordial polytheism: “The virgin Mary, ere checkt by the reformation, had proceeded, from being merely a good woman to usurp many attributes of the Almighty” (NHR, 52–53).

So the inclination to a “poetical religion,” in Hume’s view, is quite natural. But even primordial natural beliefs must be “methodized and corrected” by critical reflection. An experienced constant conjunction generates a natural belief in a causal power, but it is not Newtonian science. To have scientific merit the belief must fit coherently with other beliefs in a system of thought. A true philosopher could participate in a revealed religion only by making it coherent with established moral and scientific beliefs. A true philosopher participating in a revealed tradition would be a calm, humanizing influence in the often disordered scene of vulgar theism which Hume presents as having a pathological origin. The “proper office” of philosophical theism is “to regulate the heart of men, humanize their conduct, infuse the spirit of temperance, order, and obedience” (D, 220). One thinks here of Hume’s philosophically reflective friends, the “moderate” clergy of Edinburgh whom he called his “Protestant pastors,” namely, Hugh Blair, Adam Ferguson, John Home, and William Robertson. These clergymen were true Humean philosophers participating in a revealed religious tradition. Hume dedicated *The Natural History of Religion* to one of them, John Home.

In one of his early essays Hume went out of his way to pay his respects to the character of clergymen, distinguishing them sharply from priests who were the stock objects of demonization by the Enlightenment and by Protestants: “By *Priests* I understand only the Pretenders to Power and Dominion, and to a superior Sanctity of Character, distinct from Virtue and good Morals. These are very different from Clergymen, who are set apart to the care of sacred Matters, and the conducting of our public Devotions with greater Decency and Order. There is no Rank of Men more to be respected than the latter” (E, 617n). Hume was considered sufficiently religious to be put forth by clergymen for teaching posts, one in moral philosophy at the University of Edinburgh in 1745, and the other at the University of Glasgow in 1752. Had he received either position he would have had to sign the Westminster Confession, attend Church, and in

Glasgow lead students in prayer. Hume failed to receive either position, and it is generally thought that he failed because of impiety. But Roger Emerson, who has made an extensive study of both episodes has concluded that, behind the philosophical and religious arguments, there was a battle for patronage and that Hume's friends did not have sufficient political influence. He suggests that Hume could have been genuinely surprised by the charges of impiety.¹²

He was certainly angered. An anonymous writer published "A Short but Impartial Account of the Life and Character of the Late David Hume" shortly after his death August 25, 1776 in Edinburgh's *Weekly Magazine*. The author declares that Hume's philosophical and historical work has placed him "on equality with the most celebrated names either in antient or modern story." He goes out of his way to insist that though Hume's philosophy is skeptical, it is a skepticism compatible with religion, and that the anticlerical force of his thought was a reaction to the defamation of his character that followed his failure to be appointed to the chair in moral philosophy at Edinburgh in 1745. "It was from this period," the author continues, "that he declared open and irreconcilable war, not only against the presbytery of Edinburgh, but against the whole body of the clergy."

The opening salvo of this war first appears in the *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* published three years after Hume's rejection by the Edinburgh authorities. In the *Treatise* Hume had been charitable to religion, saying that although his philosophy adds nothing to the arguments of religion, "it takes nothing from them," but leaves everything as before (T, 250–51). The tone of the *Enquiry* is quite different. In the first pages, Hume declares his intention of "carrying the war into the most secret recesses of the enemy," and on the last page he consigns the books of religious philosophers to the flames. In the *Enquiry* Hume has an Epicurean defend himself against the Athenians on the charge of impiety. The *Enquiry* is a reenactment of Socrates' apology before the Athenians, but with this difference. Socrates was a philosopher charged with impiety by a pre-philosophic polytheistic authority; Hume was a philosopher charged with impiety for holding false doctrines by religious *philosophers*.

The Epicurean makes a distinction between sacred tradition and philosophical theory. His reason willingly submits to the former but not to the latter: "When priests and poets, supported by your authority, O Athenians, talk of a golden or silver age, which preceded the

present state of vice and misery, I hear them with attention and with reverence. But when philosophers, who pretend to neglect authority, and to cultivate reason, hold the same discourse, I pay them not, I own, the same obsequious submission and pious deference” (EU, 138). The Epicurean’s (and Hume’s) battle is with “the religious philosophers,” not “the tradition of your forefathers, and doctrine of your priests (in which I willingly acquiesce)” (EU, 135). Hume’s willingness to sign the Westminster Confession and to lead students in prayer is just such a submission to sacred tradition.

In Section XI of the *Enquiry*, Hume observes that philosophy suffers greater persecution in modern times than in ancient, the “banishment of Protagoras” and “the death of Socrates” being exceptions. The pagan civil magistrates allowed philosophy to flourish as long as it did not subvert sacred tradition. Philosophers were even allowed to officiate in sacred matters: “Epicureans were even admitted to receive the sacerdotal character, and to officiate at the alter, in the most sacred rites of the established religion. . . .” And Hume takes a parting shot at the Edinburgh authorities, condemning them for not emulating the reasonable tolerance of their pagan ancestors: “And the public encouragement of pensions and salaries was afforded equally, by the wisest of all the Roman emperors, to the professors of every sect of philosophy” (EU, 132–33).

I conclude that fideism is a path made possible by Hume’s conception of true philosophy and philosophical theism. Neither Philo, who points out the rational constraints that any philosophically acceptable fideism must satisfy, nor Hume took this path, but it is one made available by Humean philosophy. Hume said he took his virtues from Cicero’s *Offices*, not from the popular Christian work *The Whole Duty of Man*. This would be true also of his theology. Hume says of his reconstruction of the Ciceronian sage that his character contains “whatever can distinguish human nature, or elevate mortal man to a resemblance with the divinity” (E, 153).

What difference then does Hume’s philosophical theism make in life? It strengthens moral dispositions by viewing them as part of a general providence, but that is not what is peculiar about theism, for Hume teaches that one can be moral without theistic belief. Philosophical theism disposes one against another kind of disorder, namely, the world-inverting disorders of *false philosophy*. These disorders appear in the atheism of the first philosophers who work with a compacted

notion of transcendence: a part of experience becomes an obsession, and is spiritualized into the whole of reality by an act of philosophical alchemy. This disorder is an act of hubris where the philosopher's own autonomous reason is taken to be the measure of the real, "the voice of Pride not of Nature" (E, 140). Philosophical theism is an antidote to the primordial atheism of false philosophy.

The significance of Hume's theism could not be appreciated in his own time where religion was the dominant form of culture. Today, however, philosophical consciousness is the dominant form of culture, and religion is subordinate. Hume witnessed this change in his own lifetime. Religion had come under the influence of Enlightenment and had sought to legitimate itself by philosophical autonomy, which Hume thought was absurd. The project of trying to "establish religion upon the principles of reason" merely excites rather than satisfies "the doubts, which naturally arise from a diligent and scrupulous inquiry" (EU, 135). And in the *Dialogues*, Philo inveighs against "the haughty dogmatist, persuaded that he can erect a complete system of theology by the mere help of philosophy" (D, 227). Hume has no objection to religious tradition as such as long as it can be coherently integrated into the whole of common life. Polytheistic religious tradition, he thought, was more coherently integrated into the common life of ancient society than vulgar theistic traditions are in modern society. The reason Hume gave for this is extraordinary and subtle, and separates him from the Enlightenment theory of a conspiracy by the priests. In Hume's view the problem is not with religious tradition as such but with the corrupt *philosophical* consciousness internal to the Christian tradition.

How did philosophy come to be intertwined with Christianity? In the ancient world religion consisted of "traditional tales and fictions, which may be different in every sect, without being contrary to each other; and even when they are contrary, every one adheres to the tradition of his own sect, without much reasoning or disputation. But as philosophy was widely spread over the world, at the time when Christianity arose, the teachers of the new sect were obliged to form a system of speculative opinions; to divide, with some accuracy, their articles of faith; and to explain, comment, confute, and defend with all the subtilty of argument and science. Hence naturally arose keenness in dispute, when the Christian religion came to be split into new divisions and heresies: And this keenness assisted

the priests in their policy, of begetting a mutual hatred and antipathy among their deluded followers” (E, 62–63).

The result has been that the hubris of philosophical autonomy has ever since been intertwined with Christian tradition in the form of *theology*, producing a form of thought having all the bad traits of false philosophy combined with those of vulgar theism. Hume observes that “Sects of philosophy, in the ancient world, were more zealous than parties of religion; but in modern times, parties of religion are more furious and enraged than the most cruel factions that ever arose from interest and ambition” (E, 63). The reason, however, is that polytheism was not philosophic, whereas “modern religion” is structured by philosophical theorizing. It is the *false philosophy* internal to Christianity and not the Biblical tradition itself, nor the usual errors of vulgar theism, that has made Christendom a scene of religious wars and fanaticism. Protestantism, Hume says, “being chiefly spiritual, resembles more a system of metaphysics: than a religion.”¹³ And he declares that modern religion generally “is nothing but a species of philosophy” (EU, 146). The enemy of Humean true philosophy is not religion as such but false philosophy whether it appears in secular or sacred form.

Hume gives a masterful critique of the Puritan character in the *History of England*. The errors of Puritanism, however, are just those of false philosophy in its religious aspect. And the lessons to be learned from the world inversions of the Puritan revolution that ended in the tyranny of Cromwell and the murder of Charles I are philosophic. The “gloomy enthusiasm, which prevailed among the parliamentary party, is surely the most curious spectacle presented by any history; and the most instructive, as well as entertaining, to a philosophical mind” (H, 6:142).

The union of philosophy and sacred tradition in Christendom was an unstable compound, and we may characterize Hume’s conception of the Enlightenment as the time when philosophy finally broke free of its theistic guardian and appeared in the world with an even more virulent form of its primordial atheistic hubris. In Descartes’ conception of reason we find a form of autonomy even more radical than that of the first philosophers. Hume encountered it in the atheism of d’Holbach’s circle and in the new aggressive libertinism popping up all over Europe: “There is a Set of Men lately sprung up amongst us, who endeavour to distinguish themselves by ridiculing every Thing,

that has hitherto appear'd sacred and venerable in the Eyes of Mankind. Reason, Sobriety, Honour, Friendship, Marriage, are the perpetual Subjects of their insipid Raillery: And even public Spirit, and a Regard to our Country, are treated as chimerical and romantic" (E, 538). And an even more radical form of autonomy would appear in the atheism of Nietzsche and Sartre.

Hume began his career as an Enlightenment thinker with something of a Manichean division between religion as darkness and the autonomy of philosophy as light. In his first work *A Treatise of Human Nature*, he observed that "Generally speaking, the errors in religion are dangerous; those in philosophy only ridiculous" (T, 272). But even in the *Treatise*, Hume allowed that philosophy could be as dangerous as religion, and, as we have just seen, he acknowledged that philosophical sects were more fanatical in the ancient world than religious sects. They were, however, not dangerous because the pagan civil magistrate, though tolerant of philosophy, had confined it to the margins of society. The home of philosophy in the ancient world was the private sect. Pagan non-philosophic religion dominated the public sphere. In modern Christendom it was entirely different. The religion that dominated public life was a compound of vulgar theism and pagan philosophy.

All Europeans had a grasp of theology and, hence, a rudimentary philosophical consciousness. When, in the eighteenth century, philosophy broke free from its theological guardian, the mass of Europeans greeted her as something with which they had been, in some way, long familiar. Theology, which had governed public life, was now challenged by philosophy. The philosophical consciousness, which had long been intimated in Christendom, was raised to self-consciousness by the new vulgar philosophers (the "Set of Men lately sprung up amongst us") that Hume complains about in the passage just quoted. Because philosophy had become popular, a character such as Rousseau could become an object of astonishment throughout Europe. He became the first *philosophic personality* and was both courted and hated by kings and the public. George III gave him a pension. Thomas Paine peddled Hobbesism for the people, and his *Common Sense* was the first philosophic bestseller. In the ancient world a philosophic consciousness was the province of a few. In the modern world, the philosophic act of thought would, for the first time in history, become a mass phenomenon.

As his career developed Hume recognized that the secular philosophic act had replaced religion as the dominant form of culture. In the mid-eighteenth century Hume noted that a great change had occurred in the thinking of people in Britain: “Most people, in this island, have divested themselves of all superstitious reverence to names and authority: The clergy have much lost their credit: Their pretensions and doctrines have been ridiculed; and even religion can scarcely support itself in the world” (E, 51). The new mass philosophic consciousness seized upon *politics* as its obsession—something the ancient philosophers were not permitted to do. Near the end of his career Hume observed that “[political] factious prejudices are more prevalent in England than religious ones.”¹⁴ And in the “Of the Original Contract” he observed that “As no party in the present age, can well support itself, without a philosophical or speculative system of principles, annexed to its political or practical one; we accordingly find, that each of the factions, into which this nation is divided, has reared up a fabric of the former kind, in order to protect and cover that scheme of actions, which it pursues.”

Hume sketched a sardonic portrait of what we should expect from this new mass philosophical consciousness: “The people being commonly very rude builders, especially in this speculative way, and more especially still, when actuated by party-zeal; it is natural to imagine, that their workmanship must be a little unshapely, and discover evident marks of that violence and hurry, in which it was raised” (E, 466). A new kind of political party had suddenly appeared in the world for which there was no precedent in history: “Parties from *principle*, especially abstract speculative principle, are known only to modern times, and are, perhaps, the most extraordinary and unaccountable *phenomenon*, that has yet appeared in human affairs” (E, 60). These new parties would quarrel not over goods, policies, resources, and taxes, but over these things viewed in the light of some theory of the ultimate foundation of moral and political order. What had been conflicts over empirically discernable interests in a common moral tradition would be transmuted by the alchemy of false philosophy into world-inverting ontological issues, about which there would necessarily be implacable and non-negotiable conflict as each philosopher acted out his own autonomous vision of the real.

Hume described his own age diffidently as “this philosophic age” (EM, 197n). It was in fact the *first* philosophic age—an age in which

philosophic consciousness had become a mass phenomenon. And he appropriately described Rousseau as the “Philosopher of this Age” (L, 2:13). Hume taught that the tendency of philosophy is to its corrupt forms. In the first philosophic age the corrupt forms would dominate and inform the consciousness of the new vulgar philosophers. And where there is false philosophy, there is intimated the primordial atheism of the first philosophers.

Nietzsche was perhaps the first to really understand this. In the *Genealogy of Morals*, he says: “atheism and a kind of second innocence belong together.”¹⁵ Nietzsche’s doctrine of the will to power is Humean false philosophy writ large. For unlike the first philosophical atheists, who took a favorite part of experience—water, fire, air—and spiritualized it into the whole of reality, including the gods, Nietzsche teaches that what has been called *reality* is something we construct and impose on others. This was also Sartre’s teaching and in one form or another has become the stock-in-trade of postmodernism. If it was hubristic of the first philosophical atheists to think they could account for the gods themselves out of water or fire on the grounds of nothing but their own autonomy, it is absolute hubris to think that reality itself is a construct imposed by the philosopher’s autonomy. The first philosophical atheists thought there was a reality to which thought should defer. Postmodern philosophical atheism recognizes no order to which thought must defer.

What had been conceived of as inquiry into reality could now be transmuted by philosophical alchemy into a construct of the will to power to be unmasked by genealogical inquiry. Though the idea of reality would be rejected, a corrupted form of the idea would remain. The postmodern false philosopher would still be an alchemist transmuting a part of experience into the whole, with this difference: that there would be no claim to a foundation for the transmutation. Philosophy in the postmodern idiom would settle down to a clash of wills to power. Whatever a corrupt philosophical consciousness might seize upon as the object of its obsession would be spiritualized into the whole: class struggle, race struggle, gender struggle, etc. There would be no need to argue the point, for there is no reality to which thought must orient itself. Argument is transmuted into an instrument of power. One must, as Nietzsche said, learn to philosophize with a hammer. And Foucault described the postmodern world as a

reenactment of the Hobbesian world of all against all: “Who fights against whom? We all fight each other.”¹⁶

If we can think of the Divine as being, at the very least, that order to which thought must orient itself, then the first philosophers—though not theists—presupposed the idea of the Divine because they thought of philosophy as inquiry into the nature of reality. Postmodern thinkers understand that rejection of Divinity and rational inquiry entail each other. Nietzsche wrote in *The Twilight of the Idols*: “I fear we are not getting rid of God because we still believe in grammar.” The theism that would necessarily vanish with the elimination of grammar is precisely the philosophical theism defended by Hume. His “sceptical solution” to doubt was designed to reconcile speculative thought to belief, not only in the grammar of language, but in the grammar of much else besides: morals, politics, aesthetics, religion, and science.

In his dissertation, Marx used as his motto the cry of Prometheus: “I hate all the gods.” The concept of the Divine disappears entirely from Marx’s work. And Rorty has said that an “enlightened” truly “liberal society . . . would be one in which no trace of divinity remained.” By contrast, Hume sketched out the ideal of a liberal society in “Idea of a Perfect Commonwealth.” In it there is an established church and a ministry to oversee the church and the universities (E, 518–20). It never occurred to Hume that society would seek to purge itself entirely of all traces of divinity in the radical manner carried out by Nietzsche, and by secular ideologies such as Marxism, Communism, Fascism, Nazism, and the American bourgeois liberalism of Rorty. We do not know what Hume would have said about such efforts, but it is not unreasonable to suggest that he would have viewed them as reversions back to the hubristic compacted transcendence of the first philosophical atheists. Bacon, who argued that knowledge is power, also sought a return to the pre-Socratics, as did Heidegger, whose never-repudiated National Socialism is structured by the compacted transcendence of the first philosophers.

Hume’s philosophical theism is not vacuous. Nor is it atheism by another name. It is the most developed form of what he calls “true philosophy.” True philosophy is the antidote to the hubris of false philosophy which is necessarily atheistic. The enemy of true philosophy is not religion as such—as the more radical Enlightenment thinkers taught—but the philosophical atheism which Hume viewed

as an infantile state of philosophy's origin. He doubted that any mature theorist of the real, in his own time, could doubt the tenets of philosophical theism, whatever they might say in words. A century later, not only would many deny these tenets and reenact the atheism of the first philosophers, but with the elimination of theism, inquiry into the real would be demonized as just another mask of power.

In this world the character of the true philosopher (rare in any case) would be difficult to sustain. Hume described this character as the true "sage and patriot." The sage grasps the lineaments of a general providence in respect to moral, social, and political order; and the patriot endeavors to put these into practice. This character is endowed with the qualities of theoretical wisdom and the moral qualities of greatness of mind and extensive benevolence—the very qualities, Hume said in *The Natural History of Religion*, that are strengthened by the sentiments that supervene upon true theistic contemplation (NHR, 92–94). This character, Hume says, contains "whatever can distinguish human nature, or elevate mortal man to a resemblance with the divinity" (E, 153). Hume meant what he said here, as he does elsewhere when he uses the language of the Divine and of a general providence. When he speaks of "the divine beauties of Virgil," he is using a language that is no longer available to most contemporary philosophers. Rorty and Foucault could not and do not speak this way. Beauty for Hume is not a social construct, nor an act of the will to power but something discovered in human experience by a well-ordered mind, and understood to be part of the structure of a general, though mysterious, providence.

The history of philosophy is Whiggish. That is, there is a disposition to read our own views and questions into those philosophers we admire. What we cannot take seriously, they could not have taken seriously. The contemporary world of ritualistic post-Nietzschean atheism is inclined to see itself reflected in Hume. This is a historical hallucination. The language of divinity and of a general providence is internal to Hume's conception of true philosophy. Hume and Nietzsche understood, in their different ways, that the moral, political, and theoretical implications of eliminating this language would not be trivial.

NOTES

1. The best discussion of the nature of religious belief in Hume is Terence Penelhum, *Themes in Hume: The Self, the Will, Religion* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000), esp. chaps. 9–13.

2. David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. L. A. Selby Bigge, 2d ed. with text revised and variant readings by P. H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), 179. Hereafter abbreviated as ‘T’.

3. See my *Hume’s Philosophy of Common Life* for a systematic critique of the phenomenalist interpretation.

4. David Hume, *The Natural History of Religion and Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, ed. A. Wayne Colver and John Vladimir Price (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976), 92, 30. Hereafter abbreviated as ‘NHR’.

5. E. C. Mossner, *The Life of David Hume* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970), 483–86.

6. Quoted in Laurence Bongie, *David Hume, Prophet of the Counter Revolution* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, Inc., 2000), p. 31n.

7. David Hume, *Essays: Moral, Political, and Literary*, ed. Eugene Miller (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, Inc., 1985), 179. Hereafter abbreviated as ‘E’.

8. David Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, ed. Norman Kemp Smith (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1947), 220, 223, 225.

9. For a systematic study of Hume’s conception of true and false philosophy, see my *Philosophical Melancholy and Delirium: Hume’s Pathology of Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), esp. chaps. 1–3.

10. David Hume, *Enquiries Concerning Human Understanding and Concerning the Principles of Morals*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge, 3d ed. revised, ed. P. H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), 162. Hereafter *Enquiry* on understanding abbreviated as ‘EU’.

11. David Hume, *Enquiries Concerning Human Understanding and Concerning the Principles of Morals*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge, 3d. ed. revised, ed. P. H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), 296–97. Hereafter *Enquiry* on morals abbreviated as ‘EM’.

12. Roger Emerson, “The ‘affair’ at Edinburgh and the ‘project’ at Glasgow: The politics of Hume’s attempt to become a professor,” in *Hume and Hume’s Connexions*, ed. M. A. Stewart and John Wright (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1994), 16. For a discussion of the religious and philosophical issues involved in denying Hume a professorship, see R. B. Sher, “Professors of Virtue,” in *Studies in the Philosophy of the Scottish Enlightenment*, ed. M. A. Stewart (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), 105–14; and J. Moore, “Hume and Hutcheson,” in *Hume’s Connexions*, ed. Stewart and Wright, 23–57.

13. David Hume, *The History of England, From the Invasion of Julius Caesar to The Revolution of 1688*, with the author's last corrections and improvements, 6 vols. (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, Inc., 1983), 4: 14. Hereafter abbreviated as 'H'.

14. *The Letters of David Hume*, ed. J. Y. T. Greig, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969), 2: 233. Hereafter abbreviated as 'L'.

15. Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage Books, 1967), 91.

16. Foucault's reply to Jacques Alain Miller is quoted in Alasdair MacIntyre, *Three Rival Forms of Moral Enquiry* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990), 67.