



## **Hume and Spinoza**

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## HUME AND SPINOZA

It is strange that there has been so little interest in comparing two great philosophers, Hume and Spinoza, who were both so important and influential in bringing about the decline of traditional religion. Jessop's bibliography indicates no interest in Hume and Spinoza up to the 1930's.<sup>1</sup> The Hume conferences of 1976, as far as I have been able to determine, avoided the topic.<sup>2</sup> In one of the better new Hume volumes, Livingston and King, Hume, A Re-evaluation, Spinoza is cited twice, and once incorrectly at that.<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, in the massive new Spinoza volume edited by Siegfried Hessing, Speculum Spinozanum 1677-1977, Hume is mentioned four times, but only one of these has any real relevance to Hume's views vis-a-vis Spinoza's.<sup>4</sup>

Some discussion of Hume's comments, usually brief, occurs in the commentators. B. M. Laing, in David Hume, (London 1932), has just three short references to Spinoza.<sup>5</sup> John Laird, in Hume's Philosophy of Human Nature, (London 1932) has a couple of cursory references to Spinoza, plus a bit more extended statement of Pierre Bayle's critique of him.<sup>6</sup> In H. H. Price, Hume's Theory of the External World, (Oxford 1940), there is one paragraph on Hume and Spinoza.<sup>7</sup> In Norman Kemp Smith, The Philosophy of David Hume (London 1941), there are three references to Spinoza.<sup>8</sup> Rachel Kydd, Reason and Conduct in Hume's Treatise (Oxford 1946), has the greatest number of references to Spinoza. She was concerned to compare him with Hume on other matters than are dealt with in this paper, namely Spinoza's theory of reason and the passions.<sup>9</sup> In contrast, André Leroy, David Hume, (Paris 1953), has just one paragraph on Spinoza dealing with the immateriality of the soul,<sup>10</sup> and Ernest C. Mossner, in his monumental Life of David Hume, (Austin 1954), has only one reference to Spinoza - James Beattie's denunciation of Hume, Hobbes, Malebranche, Leibniz and Spinoza.<sup>11</sup> Lastly, in a fairly recent commentary by James Noxon, Spinoza is mentioned

three times, but not for anything in Hume's text. Noxon does point out (p.75) that Spinoza is not mentioned in Hume's correspondence.<sup>12</sup> John H. Randall has offered an explanation for this neglect of Spinoza by Hume scholars, namely that "Hume stands for all time as the antithesis of Spinoza in his thought".<sup>13</sup>

In the England of Hume's day, Spinoza was little known, but still better known at the time than he was in France or England. Spinoza's Tractatus Theologico-Politicus had been twice translated into English anonymously.<sup>14</sup> He had been attacked by Bishop Stillingfleet, by John Evelyn, by Berkeley and several others.<sup>15</sup> But Spinoza was not a major figure, except to the English Deists, and to Hume's early patron, the Chevalier Andrew Michael Ramsay.<sup>16</sup> Most of the information known about Spinoza came from Pierre Bayle's Historical and Critical Dictionary, where the article "Spinoza" is the longest in the Dictionary, about three hundred pages in length.<sup>17</sup>

My suspicion, or hypothesis, is that Hume first became interested in Spinoza through Ramsay, and then learned what he knew about Spinoza from Bayle's article. When the young David Hume went to France to write his A Treatise of Human Nature in 1734, he went first to see the Chevalier Ramsay, who entertained Hume for about two weeks. Ramsay was a leading Scottish Catholic, was the teacher of Bonnie Prince Charlie, a leading Scottish revolutionary, as well as the Grand Master of the Free Masons.<sup>18</sup> With Ramsay's eclectic views it is not odd that he had a serious interest in Spinoza's theory, and that he was composing answers to it. Ramsay advised Hume about his own book, and Hume felt he had to show Ramsay the Treatise before he brought it back to England.<sup>19</sup>

In the Treatise there is a not too well studied section on Spinoza, *Of the immateriality of the soul* (T240-45).<sup>20</sup> In introducing Spinoza into the discussion of

the immateriality of the soul, Hume follows what was common practice in his day, namely to insult Spinoza and his theory before discussing it. First Hume states, *I assert, that the doctrine of the immateriality, simplicity, and indivisibility of a thinking substance is a true atheism, and will serve to justify all those sentiments, for which Spinoza is so universally infamous* (T240). A few lines later Hume went on. *The fundamental principle of the atheism of Spinoza is the doctrine of the simplicity of the universe, and the unity of that substance, in which he supposes both thought and matter to inhere* (T240). After expounding some more of Spinoza's theory, Hume makes the remark for which he is most famous on this subject. *I believe this brief exposition of the principles of that famous atheist will be sufficient for the present purpose, and that without entering farther into these gloomy and obscure regions, I shall be able to shew, that this hideous hypothesis is almost the same with that of the immateriality of the soul, which has become so popular* (T241).

What is important to note in these pages is that Hume does not attack Spinoza, or his *hideous hypothesis*. Instead the force of the point Hume keeps making is that a very popular theological view, that of the immateriality of the soul, is almost the same as Spinoza's view. (The note on p. 243 shows that Hume got his information about Spinoza's position from Bayle's Dictionary). In spite of the concession to the rhetorical denunciation of Spinoza's view, expected of any philosophical author who mentioned him, Hume concentrated on a much more subtle point in which the theologians in general became the Spinozistic villains rather than Spinoza himself. The theologians tried to utilize the doctrine of the indivisible substance, the immaterial substance, to account for the spiritual nature of the soul. This doctrine, Hume insisted in these pages, was almost the same as Spinoza's. If his view [Spinoza's] was the *hideous hypothesis*, what was theirs supposed to be?

Spinoza had claimed that there is only substance in the world. This substance is perfectly simple and indivisible. It exists everywhere, without any local presence. Everything known by sensation or reflection is nothing but a modification of *that one, simple, and necessarily existent being*. There is no separate or distinct existence. *The same substratum, if I may so speak, supports the most different modifications, without any difference in itself; and varies them, without any variation.* Nothing can produce any change in the perfect simplicity and identity of this substratum.<sup>21</sup>

This account, which Hume offered as a brief exposition of the famous atheist's views, will suffice, he claimed, to show that Spinoza's *hideous hypothesis* is almost the same as the popular theological view of the immateriality of the soul. If so, there is obvious guilt by association. If Spinoza's views are hideous or terrible, then what can we say about the theologians' opinion?

Hume's case for the similarity of the theological view and the hideous hypothesis of Spinoza rests on pointing out that Spinoza holds that the universe of objects, the sun, the moon, the stars, the earth, the seas, the plants etc. are only modifications and that they inhere in a simple un-compounded and indivisible subject. The system of the theologians involves another sun, moon and stars, an earth, seas, etc. *in short every thing I can discover or conceive in the first system.* The theologians tell me that *these also are modifications, and modifications of one simple, un-compounded and indivisible substance* (T242). Hume went on to explain his ironic paradox *Immediately upon which I am deafen'd with the noise of a hundred voices, that treat the first hypothesis [that of Spinoza] with detestation and scorn, and the second with applause and veneration* (T242-43). Why should this be? Hume finds no grounds for the partiality in favor of the theological hypothesis. In fact, both hypotheses have the same fault of

being unintelligible, and contain the same absurdities. And, Hume contended, that although this argument *seems evident beyond all doubt and contradiction*, yet to make his case clear we will *see whether all the absurdities, which have been found in the system of Spinoza, may not likewise be discover'd in that of Theologians* (T243).

Taking the interpretation of Spinoza's arguments as they appear in Bayle's Dictionary (which is not the most accurate source, though it may well have been in Hume's day), Hume tries to show basic contradictions in Spinoza's theory. The most important, number three, is that the one simple substance in the universe has to be modified into contradictory attributes, *e.g.* round and square. But Spinoza's problem is the same as that of the theologians with their immaterial soul. Hence,

*It appears, then, that to whatever side we turn, the same difficulties follow us, and that we cannot advance one step towards the establishing the simplicity and immateriality of the soul, without preparing the way for a dangerous and irrecoverable atheism.* (T244)

The passage in the Treatise is the only one in all of Hume's texts that discusses Spinoza overtly or even mentions him by name. It seems odd since Spinoza is given such a powerful role in the Treatise section in undermining the arguments of the theologians. One would have expected Hume to repeat this point in the Enquiry and the Dialogues, or in his letters, but there is no reference at all to it.

If Spinoza disappeared as a character in Hume's writings after the Treatise, the more interesting relation between the two irreligious writers, Hume and Spinoza, is in the comparison of the similarities and differences of their thought on religion. The rest of this paper will deal with this aspect of the relationship of the two, starting with their critique of popular religions, as it appears in Spinoza's Ethics, Book I, Appendix, and Hume's Natural History of Religion. Hume's critique is much more lengthy,

since it is practically his whole book, whereas Spinoza's is just a few pages tacked on to his explanation of the nature of God. (Hume's book, with the bizarre title, the Natural History of Religion, could probably not have been written had Spinoza not paved the way in the Tractatus Theologico-Politicus for the historical and psychological and sociological evaluation of religion. Hume may, however, have gotten his inspiration from some of the English Deists, who in turn got theirs from Spinoza).

Hume begins his book by declaring that

*The whole frame of nature bespeaks an intelligent author; and no rational enquirer can, after serious reflection, suspend his belief a moment with regard to the primary principles of genuine Theism and Religion.*<sup>22</sup>

These principles, enunciated throughout the Natural History of Religion, are that the order observable in nature bespeaks an orderer. All reasonable men presumably recognize this fact. (The book is devoted mainly to dealing with unreasonable religious views). Spinoza beings the Appendix summarizing what a rational person will know about God, if he had studied Book I.

In the foregoing I have explained the nature and properties of God. I have shown that he necessarily exists, that he is one: that he is, and acts solely by the necessity of his own nature; that he is the free cause of all things, and how he is so; that all things are in God, and so depend on him, that without him they could neither exist nor be conceived; lastly that all things are predetermined by God, not through His will or absolute fiat, but from the very nature of God or infinite power.<sup>23</sup>

Although Hume and Spinoza differ radically about what the rational or reasonable person will know about God, there is an amazing similarity in what they think the unreasonable, or uneducated masses will believe about religion. The first matter will be discussed later on. Here we will turn to their joint analysis of popular religion.

Spinoza, at the outset of the Appendix to Book I of the Ethics, discusses the misconceptions many people have

about God, and the bizarre popular religions they construct as a result. The misconceptions, he declares "spring from the notion commonly entertained, that all things in nature act as men themselves act, namely with an end in view." But why should people believe that God acts this way? People are prone to adopt this view, but as Spinoza insists, it is false. Yet in spite of its falsity it has given rise to prejudices "about good and bad, right and wrong, praise and blame, order and confusion" (a point Hume would definitely not agree with), "beauty and ugliness and the like".<sup>24</sup>

People's theories about what is going on start from the fact that all men are born ignorant of the causes of things. Yet everyone has the desire to seek for what is useful to him, and is conscious of such a desire. So men think themselves free, and indeed know nothing of the actual causes. They act teleologically and "thus it comes to pass that they only look for a knowledge of the final causes of events, and when these are learned, they are content, as having no cause for further doubt". They find purposes in everything, the eyes for seeing, the teeth for chewing, herbs and animals for yielding food, the sun for giving light, the sea for breeding fish. People "come to look on the whole of nature as a means for obtaining such conveniences." (Hume, as we shall see, believes this the outlook of the reasonable man in examining nature). Since people did not make these conveniences, they think they have reason for believing that some other being made them for human use.

As they look upon things as means, they cannot believe them to be self-created; but judging from the means which they are accustomed to prepare for themselves, they are bound to believe in some ruler or rulers of the universe endowed with human freedom, who have arranged and adapted everything for human use.

Since they have no data on the subject, they interpret the behavior of such rulers according to human standards, namely that the gods ordained everything for the use of man.<sup>25</sup>

The beginnings of the superstitious nonsense in human belief on this subject starts with the fact that "everyone thought out for himself, according to his abilities, a different way of worshipping God, so that God might love him more than his fellows, and direct the whole course of nature for the satisfaction of his blind cupidity and insatiable avarice." The prejudice developed into superstition. People tried to explain that nature does nothing in vain, nothing that is useless to man. The result of this, according to Spinoza, is that people "only seem to have demonstrated that nature, the gods, and men are all mad together." The madness was the result of trying to explain "some hindrances" such as storms, earthquakes, diseases. People, in popular religion, declared that such things take place "because the gods are angry at some wrong done them by men, or at some fault committed in their worship." But daily experience exhibited "that good and evil fortunes fall to the lot of pious and impious alike." However, people would not give up "their inveterate prejudice, for it was more easy for them to class such contradictions among other unknown things of whose use they were ignorant, and thus to retain their actual and innate condition of ignorance, than to destroy the whole fabric of their reasoning and start afresh."<sup>26</sup> Thus, the popular view became that God's judgments far transcend human understanding.

Spinoza sees this form of the popular view as a great intellectual menace. We have only been saved from its permanent baleful effects by mathematics.

Such a doctrine (of God's unknowability because of his transcendence) might well have sufficed to conceal the truth from the human race for all eternity, if mathematics had not furnished another standard of verity in considering solely the essence and properties of figures without regard to their final causes.<sup>27</sup>

Instead of the understanding of events that can be gained through mathematics, the followers of popular religion "Anxious to display their talent in assigning final

causes, have imported a new method of argument in proof of their theory, namely, a reduction, not to the impossible, but to ignorance, thus showing that they have no other method of exhibiting their doctrine." Spinoza takes the example of a stone falling on someone's head and killing him. The follower of popular religion will demonstrate that the stone fell in order to kill the man, for God must have willed what happened. If one tries to argue that the events could have happened by chance, the way the wind was blowing, etc. they ask then why was the wind blowing this way? And it will all be traced to God's actions that we cannot comprehend. "So they will pursue their questions from cause to cause, till at last you take refuge in the will of God, in other words, the sanctuary of ignorance."<sup>28</sup>

Spinoza went on in his attack on the theory of popular religion by asserting that "anyone who seeks for the true causes of miracles, and strives to understand natural phenomena as an intelligent being, and not to gaze at them [the natural phenomena] like a fool, is set down as an impious heretic by those, whom the masses adore as the interpreters of nature and the gods."<sup>29</sup> The rational man, i.e. the impious heretic, knows that if ignorance were removed, the authority of religious leaders would be removed as well. (Here one feels strongly Spinoza's actual life situation. He was being denounced as an impious heretic for offering his rational answers to religious questions. In 1675 he decided not to publish the Ethics, which had been completed by then, because of all of the flak he anticipated from the ministers.<sup>30</sup> It was only published after he had died in 1677. Hume also suffered from the reaction of bigots when he sought a university position. And partly because he became known as the "great infidel", he delayed publication of his Dialogues until after his death.<sup>31</sup>)

Returning to Spinoza's critique of popular religion, he saw it as introducing a value system in which "Everything which conduces to health and the worship of God they

have called good, everything which hinders the object they have styled bad". People who do not understand the nature of things, and only imagine them "after a fashion", mistake their imagination for understanding, and firmly believe there is an order in things. This belief (which we'll see Hume was a great believer in) is the result, Spinoza claimed, of "being really ignorant both of things and their own nature." Experiences which are easy to remember are called well-ordered, others are ill-ordered or confused. We prefer order to confusion and act "as though there were any order in nature, except in relation to our imagination - and say that God has created all things in order." Thus imagination is attributed to God, unless the popular theory is to be that "God foresaw human imagination, and arranged everything, so that it should be most easily imagined."<sup>32</sup>

People, with such a view, think that some aspects of nature are ugly, some beautiful, some fragrant, some fetid, some noisy, some harmonious, etc. In fact, "there are men lunatic enough to believe, that even God himself takes pleasure in harmony." This seems to show "that everyone judges of things according to the state of his brain, or rather mistakes for things the forms of his imagination. We need no longer wonder that there have arisen all the controversies we have witnessed, and finally scepticism." All of this shows that people differ in their evaluations of what is going on. What seems good to one person seems bad to somebody else. "Men judge of things according to their mental disposition, and rather imagine than understand; for, if they understood phenomena, they would, as mathematics attest, be convinced, if not attracted by what I have urged."<sup>33</sup> For Spinoza the contest between the mathematical-rational understanding of the world and popular religion as imagination and personal belief is always what is at the heart of the controversy about what is true religion.

Spinoza goes on to point out that all of the explanations commonly given of nature (in popular religion) are

more modes of imagining "and do not indicate the true nature of anything." Arguments drawn from this imaginary material are easily rebutted.<sup>34</sup>

Then Spinoza returns to a point he started out on, and which in another form is central in Hume's discussion of popular religion, namely, "If all things follow from a necessity of the absolutely perfect nature of God, why are there so many imperfections in nature? such, for instance, as things corrupt to the point of putridity, loathsome deformity, confusion, evil, sin, etc." In popular religion the interest in and concern with the imperfections in the world, is, as Spinoza said, at the outset, one of the things that excites people's imaginations and makes them believers. This point Hume made central in his analysis of what is wrong with popular religion. Both Hume and Spinoza saw that people were more struck in their imaginations by the deformities in nature than by the order in it. Spinoza's final answer to those who are so impressed by the disorder in the world is,

But these reasoners are, as I have said, easily confuted, for the perfection of things is to be reckoned only from their own nature and power; things are not more or less perfect, according as they delight or offend human senses, or according as they are serviceable or repugnant to mankind.<sup>35</sup>

Spinoza's analysis of popular religion is one of the first to try to expose the poor reasoning and the poor conclusions involved. The contrast for Spinoza was always between a rational analysis of how the world operates, and the role of God in the world (he had just developed his pantheism in Book I of the Ethics). The basic flaw in popular religion was that it did not employ reason to deal with theological topics. And for Spinoza, the foremost critic of popular religion in the 17th century, the employment of reason meant following Spinoza's analysis of God or nature, which in turn meant denying any teleological interpretation of natural events, as a real explanation of what is going on. A teleological interpretation is just the way human

beings look at events, in terms of their own interests, and has nothing to do with what is really happening (which can best be explained mathematically).

From the outset Spinoza raised a point that Hume was to make central, namely that the adherents of popular religion are more impressed by the irregularities in the natural world than by the regularities. Earthquakes, diseases, etc. became the evidence that the gods were angry about some human behaviour and had to be placated. Hume, as we shall see, hammered at the point that the believer in popular religion, the unreasonable man, was more impressed by disorder, like earthquakes, in the world than by the order. The unreasonable man then constructed a religious belief accordingly. On this point, which is crucial in Hume's exposition, he and Spinoza agreed and saw the importance of this effect of disorder on irrational thinking. And they both saw that it was just a case of being overly impressed by disorder, or of being irrational in interpreting events. This basic misconception lay at the heart of constructing false religions.

If the misinterpretation of disorder is so important for both Spinoza and Hume in accounting for false religion, what should replace this misguided view? Here Hume and Spinoza differ greatly. For Spinoza, the misinterpretation leads to the view that "God's judgments far transcend human understanding". This doctrine of ignorance of God's activities would have concealed the genuine truth from the human race for all eternity, if mathematics had not provided another standard of truth. This standard eliminated any final causes or teleology as part of the explanation of God or Nature.

It is here that Hume's analysis differs so greatly from Spinoza's. Before getting into Hume's argument, it is important to remember that it appears in a work entitled The Natural History of Religion, written in 1749-51, the same time as the first draft of the Dialogues Concerning Natural

Religion. The argument is partly historical about how religions develop. To this extent it should perhaps be compared to Spinoza's Tractatus Theologico-Politicus rather than to the Appendix of Book I of the Ethics. We will compare one point with the Tractatus, that of miracles. Otherwise the differences and similarities of Hume's and Spinoza's views come out more clearly I believe by juxtaposing the Appendix of Book I of the Ethics with the Natural History of Religion.

In line with its historical character, Hume sees popular religion as at first the result of barbarous living. A rational being coming into this world would ask *whence this wonderful scene arose*. But the barbarous being *such as a man is on the first origin of society*, has no time to admire the regular face of nature. The more regular and uniform some aspect of nature is, the more familiar he is with it, and the less likely he is to scrutinize and examine it. However, on the other hand, *A monstrous birth excites his curiosity, and is deemed a prodigy* (NHR312). Such an event alarms the barbarous man by its novelty. It immediately makes him tremble, and leads him to the practices of popular religion, sacrificing and praying.

If one tries to get the barbarous man to see the problem of explaining why things happen, ordinary, regular events will just be accepted without analysis. On the other hand, Hume insisted if *men were at first led into the belief of one Supreme Being, by reasoning from the frame of nature*, they could never give up this view in order to embrace the popular one of polytheism (which Hume claims is historically prior to theism as the basic religious outlook. (NHR312)

Polytheism, Hume argues, is the result of concentrating on the nasty events that occur in this world, explaining them through the activities of multiple deities, and ignoring the evidences of universal order that might account for these events. *On the other hand, if, leaving the works of nature, we trace the footsteps of invisible*

*power in the various and contrary events of human life, we are necessarily led into polytheism and to the acknowledgement of several limited and imperfect deities. Stormy and other weather conditions destroy crops. Sickness and pestilence can destroy even a prosperous nation. Wars change the power and status of nations. In short, the conduct of events, or what we call the plan of a particular providence, is so full of variety and uncertainty, that if we suppose it immediately ordered by any intelligent beings, we must acknowledge a contrariety in their designs and intentions. There is a constant combat of opposing powers. As a result each nation has developed its titular deity. Each element in the world is subjected to its own invisible power or agent or god. Each god has a different province that is separate from another. His actions are variable. Sometime he protects us, sometimes he abandons us. Through prayer, sacrifices, rites and ceremonies, and the manner in which they are performed, are the sources of his favour or enmity, and produce all the good or ill fortune, which are to be found amongst mankind (NHR314-315).*

So Hume contends that in all of the countries that embraced polytheism, religion first arose not from the contemplation of the works of nature. Rather it arose from a concern regarding the events in the world, and from the incessant hopes and fears which actuate the human mind. No rational effort was involved in coming to the polytheistic view of life. Rather, people were motivated by the anxious concern for happiness, the dread of future misery, the terror of death, the thirst of revenge, the appetite for food and other necessities. Concerned with hopes and fears of this kind, *men scrutinae, with a trembling curiosity, the course of future causes, and examine the various and contrary events of human life. And in this disordered scene, with eyes still more disordered and astonished, they see the first obscure traces of divinity (NHR315-316).* (I don't want to go into the extremely complex problem of assessing what Hume himself

really believed about his "professed" theist and teleological views. Noxon and Yandell have recently proposed two answers.<sup>36</sup> For the purposes of this paper, I will take Hume's statement of his theism at face value, since what is relevant here is the comparison of Hume's stated views with those of Spinoza).

In section III Hume offers an account of popular religion versus philosophy which is very close to the views we have seen of Spinoza's on this subject. We come into this world *where the true springs and causes of every event are entirely concealed from us*. We hang in constant suspense between life and death, sickness and health, etc., which depend upon these secret and unknown causes. These are made into our constant objects of hope and fear, and into the basis of popular religion, *i.e.* polytheism. However, - and here Hume comes close to Spinoza's analysis,

*Could men anatomize nature, according to the most probable [a category Spinoza would not accept], at least the most intelligible philosophy [which he would gladly accept as describing his own views], they would find, that these causes are nothing but the particular fabric and structure of the minute parts of their own bodies and of external objects; and that, by a regular and constant machinery, all the events are produced, about which they are so much concerned (NHR316).*

But the ignorant multitudes can only think of unknown causes in a general and confused way. They can't understand them, and finally to make some sense of them, they anthropomorphize them, seeing human qualities everywhere in nature. (This is a point Spinoza raised of the using in popular religion of human notions of purpose, and evaluation, rather than understanding the true nature of things through mathematics.) Even philosophers, Hume pointed out, sometimes indulge in this kind of analysis, with theories like nature abhors a vacuum. People make the whole matter absurd by transferring human passions and infirmities to the deity, and

then represent him as jealous and revengeful, capricious and partial, and, in short, a wicked and foolish man, in every respect but his superior power and authority (NHR317). The unknown causes and their influences on human fears are what lead to this conception of the deity. And we find that the more people's lives are governed by accident, the more superstitious people become in their religious beliefs. In a barbarous age superstition prevails everywhere, because people are

*Ignorant of astronomy and the anatomy of plants and animals, and too little curious to observe the admirable adjustment of final causes; they remain still unacquainted with a first and supreme creator, and with that infinitely perfect spirit, who alone, by his almighty will, bestowed order on the whole frame of nature (NHR318).*

Here Hume and Spinoza begin to part company. Spinoza would agree that it is ignorance of the sciences, especially of mathematics, that leads to the nonsensical beliefs of popular religion. But Spinoza would regard with horror Hume's views about the importance of final cause and order in truly understanding the world. Let us remember that according to Spinoza final causes and beliefs in order are man-made views imposed on nature by superstitious people.

Men prefer order to confusion - as though there were any order in nature, except in relation to our imagination - and say that God has created all things in order; thus, without knowing it, attributing imagination to God, unless, indeed, they would have it that God foresaw human imagination, and arranged everything, so that it should be most easily imagined.<sup>37</sup>

Those who do not understand the nature of things "mistake their imagination for understanding, such persons firmly believe there is an order in things, being really ignorant both of things and their own nature".<sup>38</sup> The proper understanding of things would involve only mathematical relations, which would contain no teleological elements. The difference between Hume and Spinoza grows larger as the

Natural History of Religion proceeds. What had started as a fairly close common agreement on the nature of popular religion, developed into a fairly large disagreement concerning the nature of true religion and true understanding of the nature of things.

Hume claimed that the only point of theology on which there is almost universal consent is that there is invisible, intelligent power in the world. However, there is complete disagreement as to the nature of this power, from popular superstitions to a reasonable interpretation. The polytheists were a pretended religious group, but actually were a kind of superstitious atheist, because they admitted *no first principle of mind or thought: No supreme government and administration: No divine contrivance or intention in the fabric of the world* (NHR320), (So the notion of divine purpose again appears as basic, in contrast to Spinoza for whom there is no divine purpose, just God acting freely).

In Section V, considering various forms of polytheism, Hume says he is going to examine the *gross polytheism of the vulgar*, and to trace its source in human nature. Contrary to gross polytheism is the reasonable view of the world. *Whoever learns by argument, the existence of invisible intelligent power, must reason from the admirable contrivance of natural objects, and must suppose the world to be the workmanship of that divine being, the original cause of all things.* The vulgar polytheist, on the other hand, deifies every part of the universe, and makes everything into a divinity. But the deities of the vulgar are hardly superior to men (NHR325). The principles of polytheism are founded in human nature, in terms of the problem of unknown causes of events and how they effect people. The polytheists represent the causes as intelligent voluntary agents, like ourselves.

From the human-like deities of polytheism, Hume passes to the bases of theism. It's not that it is seen as more reasonable. *Even at this day, and in EUROPE, ask any*

*of the vulgar, why he believes in an omnipotent creator of the world; he will never mention the beauty of final causes, of which he is wholly ignorant. He won't appeal to the way the hand is constructed. Rather, he will tell you of somebody's sudden and unexpected death, of somebody's injury, of a drought. All this he ascribes to the immediate operation of providence And such events, as, with good reasoners, are the chief difficulties in admitting a supreme intelligence, are with him the sole arguments for it (NHR328-329).*

Many theists, Hume points out, have denied a particular providence. They have asserted *the Sovereign mind or first principle of all things, having fixed general laws, by which nature is governed, gives free and uninterrupted course to these laws, and disturbs not, at every turn, the settled order of events by particular volitions* - which is almost the same as Spinoza's position. But Hume goes on and the similarity disappears. *From the beautiful connexion, say they, and rigid observance of established rules, we draw the chief argument for theism. Spinoza had insisted that beauty was a human attitude imposed by us on things, when in fact there was nothing objective in beauty as a quality. Hume pointed out that when anyone ascribes all events to natural causes, (as both Hume and Spinoza do), he is apt to be suspected of the grossest infidelity, as both Hume and Spinoza were. But among the followers of popular religion, when they discover that the course of nature is regular and uniform, their whole faith totters, and falls to ruins. For they hold that convulsions in nature, disorders, prodigies, miracles, though the most opposite to the plan of a wise superintendent, impress mankind with the strongest sentiments of religion; the causes of events seeming then the most unknown and unaccountable (NHR329).*

The vulgar in countries that have taken up theism have still managed to construct the view on irrational and superstitious principle. They never come to their theism

by a chain of reasoning, but by a certain train of thinking more suitable to their genius and capacity. However, while they limit themselves to the idea of a perfect being, the creator of the world they coincide, by chance, with the principles of reason and true philosophy; though they are guided to that notion, not by reason, of which they are in a great measure incapable, but by the adulation and fears of the most vulgar superstition (NHR330-331).

However, the vulgar don't want to have too anthropomorphic a deity. They see God as having human characteristics, but they don't want to say that God suffers pains, that He has a beginning and an end. But nonetheless the vulgar still have a poor and frivolous conception of the deity (NHR333). There seems to be flux and reflux in the mind so that people tend to rise from idolatry to theism, and then sink into idolatry again.

*The vulgar, that is, indeed, all mankind, a few excepted, (Hume and Spinoza?), being ignorant and uninstructed, never elevate their contemplation to the heavens, or penetrate by their disquisitions into the secret structure of vegetable or animal bodies; so far as to discover a supreme mind or original providence, which bestowed order on every part of nature (NHR334).*

Here, as we have seen, Spinoza and Hume part company on a very basic point. They agree on the critique of vulgar thought. But Hume's solution of making people aware of the role of order in the world goes contrary to Spinoza's insistence that order, in this teleological sense, is a man-made concept, and has nothing to do with the real nature of God.

Hume goes back to his theory of unknown causes being the basis for vulgar religion. The ordinary man represents them to be sensible, intelligent beings, just like mankind, moved by love and hatred, and by prayers and sacrifices. Hence the origin of religion; And hence the origin of idolatry and polytheism (NHR335). The polytheism is followed by

a theistic interpretation of the deity, who must be all-powerful and perfect. Men being as they are in their limited understanding then create a series of intermediate deities, which become the chief objects of human devotion. As this kind of new polytheism becomes grosser and more vulgar, people turn back to theism. Humans manage to fluctuate in their opinions between gross polytheism, with worship of physical objects, like pictures and statues, and a theism with worship of an omnipotent and spiritual deity.

Where theism becomes the fundamental tenet of popular religion, this is so much in accord with sound reason, that philosophy is likely to join itself with such a system of theology. This can lead to philosophy soon being yoked to the other elements of popular religion, such as accepting the doctrines in a book. (Hume, having less of the polemical spirit than Spinoza, chooses the Koran, rather than the Bible as his example (NHR341). However, Hume, at the end of the essay *Of Miracles* leads an attack on the implausibility of the Biblical account of the world that is definitely worthy of the strongest portions of Spinoza's Tractatus). Philosophy will find herself used to support superstition. And so philosophy has to fight back against popular theism (NHR341-342).

Later on in the Natural History, Hume develops a corollary to this point, namely sec. XIV on the *Bad influence of popular religions on morality*. First Hume pointed out that no matter how pure a conception of religion people may have,

*the greatest number, will still seek the divine favour, not by virtue and good morals, which alone can be acceptable to a perfect being, but either by frivolous observances, by intemperate zeal, by rapturous extasies, or by the belief of mysterious and absurd opinions.* (NHR357).

If we should suppose, what never takes place, namely that a popular religion could be located, in which it was announced that only morality could gain the divine favor,

and if an order of priests were created to inculcate this opinion, people would misunderstand this religion and mistake the value of the ceremonies for those of the religious doctrine (NHR357-358). Hume's conception of the ideal popular religion is practically the same as that set forth in Spinoza's Tractatus, Chap. XV, where he argues that the positive and good function is to insulate morality in those who are unable to follow the unaided guidance of reason.<sup>39</sup> Thus both Hume and Spinoza in spite of their anti-religious views, envisage a moral religion without doctrines as a great, or the greatest boon to mankind. (Spinoza goes as far as declaring that if we did not have the testimony of Scripture, we should doubt of the salvation of nearly all men. And this is said after he argued that the message of Scripture can be reduced to a few moral laws.)

In spite of the possibility of a purely moral religion, Hume points out that it is unfortunately the case that

*the greatest crimes have been found, in many instances, compatible with a superstitious piety and devotion; Hence, it is justly regarded as unsafe to draw any certain inference in favour of man's morals, from the fervour or strictness of his religious exercises, even though he himself believe them sincere (NHR359).*

Ordinary men ascribe every kind of barbarity and caprice to the Supreme Being, and will do anything to appease him. Natural reason and natural morality are abandoned in this effort to get along with the Deity. This kind of madness springs from the essential and universal properties of human nature (NHR361).

With this analysis, Hume ends his story, which has dealt mainly with the origins and character of popular religion. In the closing section he starts off summing up his case.

*Though the stupidity of men, barbarous and uninstructed, be so great, that they may not see a sovereign author in the more obvious works of nature, to which they are so much*

familiarized; yet it scarcely seems possible, that anyone of good standing should reject that idea, when once it is suggested to him. 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 (NHR361).

This being the case we should be able to understand what is going on in the world, namely a divinely designed order, in spite of the contrarieties found in experience, of the mixture of good and evil. The universal creator has put his mark on all of this. An intelligent evaluation would come to such a conclusion. On the other hand, just look at the image of the Creator in popular religion. *How is the deity disfigured in our representations of him! What caprice, absurdity, and immorality are attributed to him! How much is he degraded even below the character, which we should naturally, in common life, ascribe to a man of sense and virtue* (NHR362). If one examines the religious principles that have in fact prevailed in the world,

*You will scarcely be persuaded, that they are any thing but sick men's dreams: or perhaps will regard them more as the playsome whimsies of monkeys in human shape, than the serious positive, dogmatical assertions of a being, who dignifies himself with the name of rational* (NHR362).

Hume pointed out, even after these comments, that ordinary people don't act and live as if they believed their religious tenets. People have adopted any absurdity as a religious belief, and there is no view too absurd but that somebody has believed it.

Having pointed this out, Hume closes his work with the famous sceptical passage,

*The whole is a riddle, an aenigma, an inexplicable mystery. Doubt, uncertainty, suspense of judgment appear the only result of our most accurate scrutiny, concerning this subject. But such is the frailty of human reason, and such the irresistible contagion*

*of opinion, that even this deliberate doubt could scarcely be upheld; did we not enlarge our view, and opposing one species of superstition to another, set them quarrelling; while we ourselves, during their fury and contention, happily make our escape, into the calm, though obscure regions of philosophy (NHR363).*

Spinoza saw scepticism as the unfortunate result of human stupidity and of human contradictions in their opinions about what the world was like.<sup>40</sup> For Hume scepticism seems to be the happy outcome for the intelligent person, since one cannot really straighten out the myriads of conflicts in popular opinions. Perhaps for Spinoza, more than for Hume, it was all important for man to possess an indubitable conception of God or Nature (since every truth followed from this). As I have argued elsewhere, scepticism was anathema to Spinoza, and represented ignorance.<sup>41</sup> As soon as one had a clear and distinct idea of God, scepticism should be impossible to maintain. For Hume scepticism was the only way to avoid dogmatic commitments, and all that they imply.

An aspect of the difference between Hume's views and those of Spinoza emerges from the way they each treat the subject of miracles. In Chapter 6 of the Tractatus, Spinoza comes to grips with the popular belief in miracles, and the claims that one can learn about God's workings through miracles.

What pretension will not people in their folly advance! They have no single sound idea concerning either God or nature, they confound God's decrees with human decrees. I will show -  
1. That nature cannot be contravened, but that she preserves a fixed and immutable order, and at the same time I will explain what is meant by a miracle.<sup>42</sup>

All of God's wishes make eternal necessity. As God understands a thing as it is, He necessarily wills it as it is.

Now, as nothing is necessarily true save only by Divine decree, it is plain that the universal laws of nature are decrees of God

following from the necessity and perfection of the Divine Nature.

Hence anything that happened in nature that contravened nature's laws would also contravene God's decrees. If one claimed that God contravened His laws, he would have to assert that God acts against His own Nature, "an evident absurdity."<sup>43</sup>

From all of this one can conclude that miracles are impossible because "Nothing, then, comes to pass in nature in contravention to her universal laws, nay, everything agrees with them, and follows from them, for whatsoever comes to pass, comes to pass by the will and eternal decrees of God." So nothing can contravene Divine decrees, and hence no miracle is possible. What then constitutes miracles is just a human opinion "and merely means events of which the natural cause cannot be explained" by natural reason as yet.<sup>44</sup>

In contrast to Spinoza's strong claim that miracles are impossible, Hume in *Of Miracles* in the Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding argued for a much more moderate position, namely that the occurrence of miracles was implausible, and that it would always be more probable that a reported miracle had not occurred than that it had. First of all Hume pointed out at the beginning of Part II, there has not been found in all history any miracle attested to by a sufficient number of learned men, with integrity, whose testimony would be accepted beyond question.<sup>45</sup> Second, Hume asserted that it is improbable not to believe that objects of which we have had no experience resemble those of which we have. What we have found most usual is always most probable.

*Upon the whole, then, it appears, that no testimony for any kind of miracle has ever amounted to a probability, much less to a proof... It is experience only, which gives authority to human testimony; and it is the same experience, which assures us of the laws of nature.*

It is then a maxim that no human testimony can have such force as to prove a miracle, and make it a just foundation for any such system of religion (EHU127).

For Spinoza it followed necessarily from the nature of God that Divine decrees could not be contravened, even if we did not know the decrees. Hence, a miracle, a contravention of the laws of nature, is logically impossible. There just cannot be any miracles because of the nature of God.

Spinoza's position is about as strong as one can be, offering a demonstration of the impossibility of miracles. Hume's view, on the other hand, is much more tentative, as most of his views are. And for Hume, the central issue is not the possibility of miracles (he grants they are possible), but the plausibility of belief in miracles. Examining the conditions of human belief, the way people assess evidence, the credence they give to it, etc., there is no claim about a violation of the laws of nature that reasonable people should believe in. Hume's case centers on epistemological issues about human belief, whereas Spinoza's centers on metaphysical issues about the nature of God.

If Hume and Spinoza part company over the role of order in the world, and the reasons for denying or doubting the occurrence of miracles, nonetheless the similarities in their views, especially regarding the foolish nature of popular religion, and the unbelievable status of Biblical miracles, played a great role in making Judeo-Christianity incredible for many rational men of the Enlightenment and the Romantic period. (The great revival of interest in Spinoza in Europe is during the Romantic period. One could almost say that he was the leader of it in Germany). Hume and Spinoza are probably the two most important figures in the development of irreligion in modern times. However, Hume and Spinoza part company over their basic views - Hume an empiricist and a sceptic, Spinoza a rationalist. The modern reader has lost sight of the similarities in their views,

such as between the Tractatus and the Dialogues and the Natural History. (The History is really only writable in a world already infected by Spinoza. For Hume and Spinoza only the history of religion is left to discuss, and it's a very sorry story.)

To conclude this tale, Hume was originally overtly interested in Spinoza. He forged a powerful argument against the theologians from his understanding of Spinoza, filtered through Bayle. Spinoza then disappeared as a character in Hume's writings, but he developed views like Spinoza's to attack popular religion. They differed over metaphysical issues like the role of order, and the proofs against miracles. They agreed, however, in their critique of unenlightened religious belief. In this they both played a monumental role in the decline of traditional religion, especially in the 19th and 20th centuries.

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1. T. E. Jessop's, A Bibliography of David Hume (New York 1960), lists the secondary literature on Hume up to the end of the 1930's. Spinoza is not mentioned at all.
2. Spinoza only comes up in the David Hume, Bicentenary Papers (Edinburgh 1977), in Isaiah Berlin's excellent "Hume and the Sources of German Anti-Rationalism". Spinoza is discussed in terms of his relation to German thought, and not to Hume. Nothing on Spinoza seems to be in the McGill proceeding, and the editor, David Norton, has assured me that this is the case. There is one mention of Spinoza in the Oklahoma volume David Hume Many-sided Genius (Norman, Oklahoma 1973) in my article, "Hume: Philosophical versus Prophetic Historian", p.90.
3. Donald W. Livingston and James T. King, eds., Hume: A Re-evaluation (New York 1976). The reference to Spinoza on p.74 is to a passage in Hume where Spinoza is not mentioned. The other reference, on p.106 n.2, is to Rachel Kydd's discussion of Spinoza.
4. Siegfried Hessing, ed., Speculum Spinozanum, 1677-1977

(London 1978). Only Errol E. Harris comments on p.204 directly relating Hume and Spinoza.

5. B. M. Laing, David Hume (London 1932), pp.68, 156 and 174.
6. John Laird, Hume's Philosophy of Human Nature (London 1932), pp.158, 163 sq. and 283.
7. H. H. Price, Hume's Theory of the External World (Oxford 1940), pp.104-05.
8. Norman Kemp Smith, The Philosophy of David Hume (London 1941), pp.322, 325 and 506 ff.
9. Rachel Kydd, Reason and Conduct in Hume's Treatise (Oxford and London 1946), pp. viii, 7, 26, 38, 116 n.3, 156-62.
10. André Leroy, David Hume (Paris 1953), p.161.
11. E. C. Mossner, The Life of David Hume (Austin 1954), p.578.
12. James Noxon, Hume's Philosophical Development (Oxford 1973), pp.32, 45, 75.
13. John H. Randall, The Career of Philosophy, from the Middle Ages to the Enlightenment (New York 1962), p.630. I should like to thank John W. Davis for bringing this quotation to my attention.
14. [Spinoza], A Treatise Partly Theological, and Partly Political, Containing some few Discourses (London 1689) (a complete translation of the Tractatus); and Jean Colerus, An Account of the Life and Writings of Spinoza. To which is added, An Abstract of his Theological Political Treatises (London 1720).
15. For the general role Spinoza played in English thought, especially in the Deist controversy, from 1680-1740, see the important article of Rosalie L. Colie, "Spinoza and the Early English Deists", Journal of the History of Ideas, XX (1959) pp.23-46. Stillingfleet attacked the Tractatus first in his A Letter to a Deist, written in 1675, and published (London 1677). The Bishop had already heard that the Tractatus was going to be translated into English. In Stillingfleet's unfinished work Origine Sacrae, Spinoza's metaphysics from the Ethics is one of the main targets, and Spinoza is sniped at in many of the Bishop's other works. Evelyn left a manuscript, "Animadversions upon Spinoza",

- listed in Austin Dolson, The Diary of John Evelyn (London 1908), p.47q. He also briefly attacked Spinoza as a heretic (for the Tractatus) in The History of Religion. A Rational Account of the True Religion, Vol. II (London 1850), chap. xi, p.249. Berkeley discussed Spinoza in Alciphron or The Minute Philosopher, The Works of George Berkeley, ed. A. A. Luce and T. E. Jessop, Vol. III (London and Edinburgh 1967), Fourth Dialogues, sec. 16, p.163, and Seventh, sec. 26, p.324.
16. Chevalier Andrew Michael Ramsay's Les Voyages de Cyrus, first published in Paris in 1727, and then reprinted in the 19th century in French and English, contains an attack on Spinoza in the end of the "Discours sur la Mythologie". He is also attacked in Book VI. Ramsay's major philosophical effort, which he was working on when he met Hume, The Philosophical Principles of Natural and Revealed Religion, 2 vols. (Glasgow 1748-49) contains a continuous attack on Spinoza, and an effort to prove that Malebranche and Berkeley are Spinozists. The Journal Britannique, Tome VI (1751) in reviewing Ramsay's book, says that his refutation of Spinoza is very good, p.461.
17. That is, in terms of the size of an ordinary book. Bayle gave no real explanation about why he devoted so much space to Spinoza, or why he offered such strange arguments against him.
18. On Hume and Ramsay, see Mossner, Life of Hume, pp.93-96, and C. D. Henderson, Chevalier Ramsay (London 1952), pp.205-207.
19. Hume's letter to Michael Ramsey, Aug. 26-31, 1737, quoted in R. H. Popkin, "So, Hume did read Berkeley", Journal of Philosophy, Dec. 25, 1964, Vol. LXI, No. 24, pp.774-75.
20. David Hume, A Treatise of Human Nature, Selby-Bigge ed., (Oxford 1951), pp.240-45.
21. The quotations are from (T240-41). The discussion of the Theologians and Spinoza is found in (T240-45).
22. David Hume, The Natural History of Religion, in Hume, The Philosophical Works, ed. T. H. Green and T. H. Grose (London 1882), Vol. 4, p.309. Hereafter NHR.
23. Benedict de Spinoza, The Ethics, in The Chief Works of Benedict de Spinoza, trans. by R. H. M. Elwes, Vol. II (New York 1955), p. 74; and in Spinoza, Opera Quotquet Reperta Sunt, ed. J. van Vloter and J. P. N. Land, Tomus I, pp.66-67.

24. Spinoza, Elwes trans. p. 75; Latin ed; p. 67.
25. Ibid., pp. 75-76; Latin ed., pp. 67-78.
26. Ibid., pp. 76-77; Latin ed., p. 68.
27. Ibid., p.77; Latin ed., p. 69.
28. Ibid., p.78; Latin ed., pp. 69-70.
29. Ibid., p.78; Latin ed., p. 70.
30. See Spinoza's letter to Oldenburg, XIX (LXVIII), in Elwes trans., Vol. II, pp. 296-97.
31. Mossner, Life of Hume, p. 320 and 592 ff.
32. Spinoza, Elwes trans., p. 79; Latin ed., p. 71.
33. Ibid., p.80; Latin ed., pp. 71-72.
34. Ibid., p.80; Latin ed., p. 72.
35. Ibid., p.81; Latin ed., p. 72.
36. Cf. James Noxon, "Hume's Agnosticism," Philosophical Review, LXXIII (1964), pp.248-61; and Keith E. Yandell, "Hume on Religious Belief," in D. W. Livingston and J. T. King, eds., Hume, A Re-evaluation (New York 1976), pp. 109-125.
37. Spinoza, Elwes trans., p. 79; Latin ed., p. 71.
38. Ibid., loc. cit.
39. Spinoza, Elwes trans. Vol. I, pp. 190-99; Latin ed., Tomus II, pp. 250-258.
40. Spinoza, Ethics, Elwes trans., p. 80; Latin ed., p. 71.
41. R. H. Popkin, "Spinoza's Scepticism and Anti-Scepticism," Hebrew Union College Volume on Spinoza, forthcoming.
42. Spinoza, Tractatus, Elwes trans., p. 82; Latin ed., p. 157.
43. Ibid., p. 83; Latin ed., pp. 157-58.
44. Ibid., pp. 83-84; Latin ed., pp. 159-60.
45. David Hume, "Of Miracles," Enquiries concerning the Human Understanding, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge, 2nd ed. (Oxford 1962), p. 116.