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HUME'S EXPLANATION OF RELIGIOUS BELIEF¹

In The Natural History of Religion, David Hume offers a not unsophisticated account of the fact that persons hold religious beliefs. In so doing, he produces an explanatory system analogous to that which occurs concerning causal belief, belief in 'external objects', and belief in an enduring self in the Treatise. The explanation of the occurrence of religious belief is more detailed than the explanation provided in the other cases just mentioned. In the Natural History, Hume devotes a short volume to explaining religious belief, while in the Treatise the causal, external object, and enduring self beliefs merit but long sections.² More important, however, than length of treatment is the fact that the pattern of explanation is identical in each instance. The Natural History could be embedded without categorial clash into the Treatise, perhaps as Book Four with fifteen sections, and each formerly separate volume would shed light on the program and tactics of the other.³ My interest here is in the epistemic features of the explanatory system Hume developed in the Natural History.

Hume forthrightly proclaims that The Natural History Of Religion is in fact an attempt to explain the occurrence of religious belief. He writes:

*What those principles are, which give rise to the original belief, and what those accidents and causes are, which direct its operation, is the subject of our present enquiry.*⁴ (NHR21)

Original belief here does duty for "original religious belief", and as he takes religious belief to be nearly but not altogether universal in scope and astonishingly diverse in object, he supposes the principle, or cause, of such belief to be secondary in the sense that its operation is (so to say) defeasible and its product diversified. Hume's powerful critique of the argument from design in Sections II

through VIII of the Dialogues is not the only reason for doubting that his occasional kind remarks concerning it should be taken as indicating that he supposed it sound and valid. The very fact that Hume wrote a book intended to explain the occurrence of religious belief by identifying as its cause a built-in principle and its eliciting stimuli should give us pause about Hume's apparent acceptance of something like the argument from design. For while in the Natural History he says 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. (NHR21)

He speaks, not of a conclusion having been proved true, but of a belief having been rendered unsuspendable. Further, neither we nor Hume will ordinarily offer a causal account of the fact that a person has a belief unless there is doubt that the person has sufficient reason for holding it. He does not, for example, offer any such explanation of our acceptance of sincere present-tense first person psychological reports, concerning the truth (indeed, the incorrigibility)⁵ of which he in the Treatise confidently affirms:

For since all actions and sensations of the mind are known to us by consciousness, they must necessarily appear in every particular what they are, and be what they appear. Every thing that enters the mind, being in reality perception, 'tis impossible any thing should to feeling appear different. This were to suppose that even where we are most intimately conscious, we might be mistaken. (T190)

Or, even more modestly, and without assuming a causal-account and a sufficient-reason-account of a belief to be competing (or even necessarily different) explanations, we may note that Hume proposes to explain the occurrence of religious belief by reference to principle and eliciting stimuli without making reference to reasons or arguments as items possessing epistemic function or

evidential force, but only as items capable of triggering a built-in response. That this is his tactic I have argued rather fully on another occasion;⁶ here I will focus only on the general pattern of Hume's explanation of religious belief.

Hume endeavors to explain religious belief without supposing it (in any of its forms) to be true as well as without supposing it to be false. His tactic is to expose the propensities relevant to the production of religious belief, together with their eliciting stimuli, and I think the following catalogue roughly covers the resources of Hume's explanatory system. He affirms that persons have certain propensities (or instincts, or principles) which, upon being activated or triggered, produce religious beliefs. Among these are:

1. The propensity to believe in an "invisible, intelligent power" which is the source of order in nature. (NHR97)
2. The propensity to focus attention on, and ascribe the power one believes in to, visible objects. (NHR51)
3. The propensity to conceive intelligence or power as always possessed by a human or else a superhuman being. (NHR40)
4. The propensity to seek and adopt a system that gives rational satisfaction. (NHR40)
5. The propensity to ascribe infinite perfection to the intelligent power, belief in whose existence is caused by a propensity already noted. (NHR86)

Thus Hume suggests that there are what we respectively may call the deistic, empiricist, anthropomorphic, rationalist, and adulationist propensities, each of which often plays its role in the production of religious belief. Further, these propensities operate upon being triggered by such stimuli as recognition of the (at least apparent) order of nature, ignorance of what causes affect human destiny combined with hope and fear as to what may lie ahead, and fear

of pain, disease and death.⁷ The propensities just listed, then, are triggered by various human cognitions and emotions, and as emotions vary in their force and vivacity and combinations, and persons vary in their circumstances, the propensities vary in their degree of efficacy and therefore the belief produced differs from instance to instance. Hume thinks that:

Any of the human affections may lead us into the notion of invisible, intelligent power; hope as well as fear, gratitude as well as affliction: But if we examine our own hearts, or observe what passes around us, we shall find, that men are much oftener thrown on their knees by the melancholy than by the agreeable passions. (NHR31)

Even without further elucidation, the general pattern of Hume's system for the explanation of religious belief should by now have emerged.

There are, of course, other aspects of Hume's system which I have not discussed. One is his challengeable a priori assumption that there is a *natural progress of human thought* in which *the mind rises gradually, from inferior to superior*. (NHR34) Another is his at least equally challengeable assumption that theism and polytheism exhaust the religious possibilities. But neither is essential to the success of the sort of program he is engaged in.

Hume's system is open-ended in that the addition of further propensities of the same sort (or of further triggering stimuli), provided they possess explanatory power, will fortify rather than falsify the system in question - a system for which Hume makes at least no explicit claim of completeness. Further, the system is non-epistemic and causal in that while it traffics with such occurrences as the hopes and fears and reasons and recognitions of individuals, all these factors are treated similarly as items in a causal mix rather than as emotions appropriate (or not) to their objects or as cognitions evidentially supportive (or not) of their intended conclusions. Again, the system

is psychological and individualistic; any role social or economic or socio-psychological or anthropological factors might have, singly or in combination, in the origin or the shape of religious beliefs is ignored. Each person is treated by Hume as an autonomous set of belief-producing propensities, whether it is religious belief or causal belief or external object belief or enduring self belief that is being accounted for. Still further, the 'secondary principle' of the Author's Introduction to the Natural History has obviously become a whole set of propensities. Finally for present purposes, no explicit commitment is made to the truth, or to the falsity, of any religious belief, and indeed even religious experience itself, whether numinous or nirvanic or otherwise, is assigned no role in the production of religious belief. Such experience is not so much treated as epiphenomenal as it is simply ignored.

This last seems clearly a mistake on Hume's part, though not necessarily a serious one. It is not serious if religious experience itself, in each of its varieties, is explicable along the same sort of lines as Hume attempts for religious belief. If the order in nature is, say, propensity-plus-triggering-stimulus produces religious experience which produces religious belief, then Hume has but explained a sequence of the form A-yields-B-yields-C in terms of A's yielding C, as we might explain the light going on by referring to the flicking of the switch without bothering to mention the intervening flow of current. Or if the propensity-plus-triggering-stimulus produces both belief and experience, Hume has but explained a sequence of the form A-yields-both-B-and-C by referring only to A's yielding B, that being what interested him. The questions here (questions beyond the scope of this essay) are whether either of these ways of dealing with religious experience is adequate, and if not whether some other set of propensities-cum-stimuli will explain its occurrence or whether one needs, in explaining the occurrence of at least one

sort of religious experience, to refer to the existence of some transcendent being or the truth of some religious doctrine or the attainability of some transcendent state.

The Humean strategy outlined above seems admirably modest in its epistemic pretensions. Is it successful? Even given the brief description accorded that system here, I think we can see certain problems with it. One such problem is endemic to any attempt at explaining religious belief. It is de facto impossible, it seems to me, to have any legitimate confidence that a particular psychological, or sociological, or anthropological, or economic account, singly, or together with others, is a sufficient explanation of a person's (or a group's) religious beliefs. One reason for this is the sheer complexity of the phenomena and the a priori likelihood in such cases that one will have left out crucial causal factors. The sheer and obvious fact of multiple plausible-sounding competitive explanations reflects this complexity and likelihood.⁸

But another aspect of this problem seems to me more interesting philosophically. Consider the following argument: If God exists, presumably sometimes divine activity is part of the cause of the occurrence of numinous experience.⁹ If so, then to claim to have a sufficient explanation of all numinous experiences without referring to the existence of God is to claim to know, or to have sufficient reason for believing, that God does not exist.¹⁰ Hence the claim that one has elicited the sufficient conditions of a religious experience will raise the question as to whether the truth conditions of any religious belief is among those sufficient conditions or not. If so, one's explanation requires the truth of some religious doctrine; if not, it requires the falsity of some religious doctrine. Either way, religious neutrality -- lack of commitment to the truth or the falsity of any religious claim -- is not sustained. The same result follows if one replaces "religious experience" in this argument by "religious

belief". So it seems clear that Hume has failed.

There is something to be said for, and something to be said against, this critique of Hume. First, the something against. I have tried to make it clear that Hume's strategy in the Natural History is (roughly) to produce an explanation E of the occurrence of religious belief such that E is by itself at least equiplausible with any religious claim R that might, by itself or as a member of a set S of claims such that S does not contain R but is at least as plausible as R itself, explain the occurrence of religious belief. Further, if Hume's hopes are realised, E explains the occurrence of religious belief at least as well as does R (or S). So E is as good an explanation of the occurrence of religious belief as we have. E does not entail any religious belief, or its contradictory. Given E, that religious belief occurs is no evidence that some religious belief is true. Further, exactly the same claims hold for any anti-religious claim not-R as hold for R. So the occurrence of religious belief can be explained without supposing that any religious claim is true and without claiming that any religious belief is false.

Now of course Hume's focus in the Natural History is simply on the belief that God exists. By contrast, the complete Natural History of All Religion would have to cover other religious beliefs, including non-theistic ones. Further, religious experience of various sorts would require explicit attention analogous to that given religious belief. The sort of treatment required can be seen by replacing "religious belief" by "religious experience" in the opening sentences of the preceding paragraph. These matters, however difficult and important they may be, would be extension of an old pattern, not creation of a new one. Given the treacherous difficulties of both natural theology and natural atheology, Hume's program makes excellent sense.

This, or something much like it, is what can be said (so far as I can see) for Hume and against the critique.

What can be said for the critique and against Hume is the following. The judgment that an explanation (i.e. a set of explanatory claims) is equiplausible with regard to a religious claim involves some epistemic assessment of the religious claim.¹¹ As Hume's various writings on issues in the philosophy of religion bear eloquent witness, such assessment can be desperately complex. Hume's strategy requires that the pro-assessment and the con-assessment be, or nearly be, tied; this provides, so to say, the epistemic backdrop to the requisite suspense of judgment in such cases and opens the way for explanations of the sort Hume proposes. The assumption that assessment is only or mainly a matter of discovering presence or absence of valid arguments whose soundness is guaranteed by the premises all being either self-evident or evident to the senses greatly facilitates the conclusion that the pro and the con contentions tie, for it is the absence of such arguments that seems obvious to most observers. Yet Hume himself, whatever his view of his own enterprise, often interestingly argues his own case for his own views (of human nature, of morality, of the philosophic enterprise, and so on) without providing such arguments. So the assumption that renders the postulation of a tie plausible is, to say the least, dubious. Further, the assessment of one religious claim will normally involve assessment of its web of belief. Since such assessment is often a subtle matter, claims of equiplausibility will themselves be debatable. It is an open question whether there is any case in which one can claim that an explanation E (of the sort indicated) of the occurrence of a religious belief is at least equiplausible with any religious claim R which, by itself, or as a member of a set S which is not less plausible than R alone, explains the occurrence of the same belief, where this claim of equiplausibility is neutral with respect to R's truth value. So it is an open question as to whether Hume's pattern or ideal is ever in fact fulfilled (including, of course, whether the

Natural History itself fulfills it). Perhaps it often is; perhaps it never is. Trying to decide that issue is beyond the scope of this paper. For the present, it is enough that the pattern is ingenious, and in any given case worth trying; the epistemic results of failure will be as interesting as the epistemic results of success.

Another sort of issue is raised, not by Hume's explanation of religious belief, but by his evaluation of certain of its varieties. He plainly disapproves of much of religious belief. His grounds for doing so are interesting, and I think that a discussion of those grounds will clarify the view of human nature on which Hume's explanation of religious belief epistemically rests (*i.e.*, which is so related to that explanation that if the view of human nature is false, so also is the explanation of religious belief). Thus it seems appropriate to conclude this essay with an extended exploration of the grounds of Hume's disapproval of certain religious beliefs.

In the Natural History Hume writes:

Examine the religious principles, which have, in fact, prevailed in the world. You will scarcely be persuaded that they are anything but sick men's dreams: Or perhaps (you) will regard them more as the playsome whimsies of monkies in human shape, than the serious, positive, dogmatical asseverations of a being, who dignifies himself with the name of rational. (NHR75)

He also comments, in the same context, that:

As the good, the great, the sublime, the ravishing are found eminently in the genuine principles of theism; it may be expected, from the analogy of nature, that the base, the absurd, the mean, the terrifying will be equally discovered in religious fictions and chimeras. (NHR75)

What, exactly, is Hume approving, and disapproving, in these and similar remarks?

It seems to me to be clear that not all the propensities referred to above are, or are regarded by Hume

as being, pathological, or otherwise objectionable. It is, for example, the activity of the rationalist propensity which presumably (at least in part) led Hume to write the Treatise or Newton the Principia or for that matter led Hume to write a history of England. Indeed, it is not clear to me that Hume regards any of these propensities as pathological.

Nor does it seem that Hume is here disapproving religious institutions, practices, rites, or the like, though he does do this in other places. A careful reading of the text makes it clear, I think, that it is religious beliefs that he disapproves here. He condemns items he describes as *fictions, chimeras, articles, whimsies, principles, and asseverations*. These, in context, do duty for "beliefs"--not in the sense of something that is believed, but in the sense of believing something.

Wherein, exactly, lies the reason for Hume's disapproval? It is notoriously Hume's view that religion perverts morals. He writes:

Men...draw many consequences from the belief of a divine Existence, and suppose that the Deity will inflict punishments on vice, and bestow rewards on virtue...Whether this reasoning of theirs be just or not, is no matter. Its influence on their life and conduct must still be the same. And, those, who attempt to disabuse them of such prejudices, may, for aught I know, be good reasoners, but I cannot allow them to be good citizens and politicians; since they free men from one restraint upon their passions, and make the infringement of the laws of society, in one respect, more easy and secure.¹² (EHU147)

The 'single proposition' into which natural religion may be distilled and which no person of common sense can reject is carefully advertised in Dialogue Twelve as having no moral consequences. Whether or not Hume's own non-religious ethic is tenable, he clearly strove to give morality foundations that rested only in human, and not at all in divine, nature. All this is well known. But it does not

seem to be Hume's main topic, if they are present at all, in the "sick men's dreams" or the "fictions and chimeras" passages quoted just above. Something further seems to be involved. But what?

The answer, I think, is something like this. Hume seems to suppose that non-philosophical religious beliefs are in some manner unnatural, even though they obviously are also in some manner natural if one can (as Hume supposes) explain them by reference to propensities and eliciting experiences. But in what sense, if any, can Hume hold it to be unnatural to have non-philosophical religious beliefs? Is he consistent in holding this, or does he contradict some part of his own views expressed elsewhere?

Unfortunately, Hume considers, explicitly or implicitly, quite a number of senses of "natural." Consider the following (perhaps not exhaustive) inventory.

In discussing justice, Hume distinguishes between these senses of "natural": (1) non-supernatural; (2) usual, or not rare; (3) non-artificial. Regarding sense (1),

not only the distinction betwixt vice and virtue is natural, but also every event, which has ever happen'd in the world, excepting those miracles on which our religion is founded. (T474)

Regarding sense (2), moral sentiments, and of course fears and terrors, are natural. Regarding sense (3), Hume waxes deterministic:

We readily forget, that the designs, and projects, and views of men are principles as necessary in their operation as heat and cold, moist and dry... (T474)

and he takes justice to be non-natural. He says:

To avoid giving offence, I must here observe that when I deny justice to be a natural virtue, I make use of the word, natural, only as opposed to artificial. In another sense of the word; as no principle of the human mind is more natural than a sense of virtue; so no virtue is more natural than justice. Mankind is an inventive species; and where an invention is obvious and absolutely necessary, it may as properly be said

to be natural as anything that proceeds immediately from original principles, without the intervention of thought or reflexion. Tho' the rules of justice be artificial, they are not arbitrary. Nor is the expression improper to call them Laws of Nature; if by natural we understand what is common to any species, or even if we confine it to mean what is inseparable from the species. (T484)

So we have already several senses of "natural" as follows:

- (1) not supernatural (not caused by God)
- (2) not rare (occurs often)
- (3) not artificial (not a human invention)
- (4) proceeds from original principles without the intervention of thought or reflection.

Plainly enough, I think, Hume supposes religious beliefs to be natural in senses (1-3); sense (4) we save for later. To continue the list:

- (5) is an invention but is 'obvious and absolutely necessary' to human life and well-being
- (6) is common to every member of a species
- (7) is common to every member of a species, and also definitive of belonging to the species in question.

For Hume, religious beliefs are not, I think, natural in any of these senses. That they are not natural in sense (6) is what is relevant here, as we shall see.

But our list is not complete. Consider these remarks:

the imagination, according to my own confession, being the ultimate judge of all systems of philosophy...I must distinguish in the imagination betwixt the principles which are permanent, irresistable, and universal; such as the customary transition from causes to effects, and from effects to causes: And the principles, which are changeable, weak, and irregular,...The former are the foundation of all our thoughts and actions, so that upon their removal human nature must immediately perish and go to ruin. The latter are neither

unavoidable to mankind, nor necessary, or so much as useful in the conduct of life; but on the contrary are observ'd only to take place in weak minds, and being opposite to the other principles of custom and reasoning, may easily be subverted by a due contrast and opposition. For this reason the former are received by philosophy, and the latter rejected. (T225)

Correct reasoning is that which is done justly and naturally, even

tho' that [justly and naturally drawn] conclusion be derived from nothing but custom, which infixes and enlivens the idea of a human creature, on account of his usual conjunction with the present impression. (T225)

So apparently the view is that S's belief that P is natural if and only if S's belief that P is produced by principles of S's imagination which are permanent, irresistible, and universal.

Hume admits that

one who is tormented he knows not why, with the apprehension of spectres in the dark, may, perhaps, be said to reason, and to reason naturally too: But then it must be in the same sense, that a malady is said to be natural; as arising from natural causes, tho' it be contrary to health, the most agreeable and most natural situation of man. (T225-26)

Such beliefs are deriv'd from principles which, however common, are neither universal nor unavoidable in human nature. (T226) They are not caused by principles whose dissolution would be tantamount to the dissolution of human nature. So, in one sense, they are unnatural, or against (human) nature.

So we have as an eighth sense of "natural":

- (8) is not caused by secondary principles (i.e., principles not present in every person, or present but not operative in every person).

Religious beliefs are not natural in sense (8).

It is high time to put the pieces together. Religious beliefs are not natural in that they are not collectively common (and so are not distributively essential) to the human species. Hence they are not caused by original principles or propensities without the intervention of thought or reflection. They are unnatural in senses (4), (6), and (7). So they are caused by secondary principles. So they are unnatural in sense (8). For Hume, being unnatural in this fashion, in contrast to sense (3) in which rules of justice are unnatural, is normatively negative, or defective. Hence, Hume's explanation of religious beliefs is simultaneously a negative judgment on them--apparently, even on the otherwise morally innocuous one highlighted in Dialogue Twelve. I have not seen this aspect of Hume's view emphasized, and I have tried to document (though not exhaustively) adequately that Hume does hold it.

There is, of course, a question that all this raises, and I will conclude by simply raising it. Can Hume consistently and successfully deplore what is natural in the sense of naturalistically explicable (and which, in some moods at any rate, he views as inevitable)? Do Hume's ethics, and his ontology and epistemology, plausibly mesh at this point? To answer that question, I would have first to tell what I think the truth is about Hume's ethics--and that is another paper. So I remain content with having noted an important way in which Hume's philosophy of religion, in intent at least, ties in tightly with the remainder of his philosophy.

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1. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the McGill Bicentennial Hume Conference, October 1, 1976, in a symposium with Professors Terence Penelhum and Ninian Smart.

2. The Natural History in the Root edition covers 56 pages; Hume's discussion of necessary causal connection occurs in the Treatise (Selby-Bigge edition), pages 155-172, his main discussion of belief in external objects on pages 187-218, and his main discussion of belief in an enduring self on pages 232-263. References to the Treatise will be to the Selby-Bigge edition, and will appear in brackets following the passage quoted.
3. Analogously "Of Miracles" could move from Section X of An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding to, say, a position between Sections IX and X of the Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion. On Hume on miracles see: Ninian Smart, Philosophers and Religious Truth (SCM Press, 1964, 1969), Chapter Two; Terence Penelhum, Religion and Rationality (Random House, 1971), Chapter 19; and the present author's "Miracles, Epistemology and Hume's Barrier," International Journal for the Philosophy of Religion, Vol. 7, No. 3 (Autumn 1976), p. 391-407.
4. David Hume, The Natural History of Religion, ed. H. E. Root (Stanford U. Press, 1957). Page references will be to this edition and will appear in brackets following the passage quoted.
5. This is not to sanction Hume's position, which is viti-ated by the dispositional nature of most of the states so reported. It is but to note that Hume did take it that there exist cases of true and fully justified belief.
6. In "Hume on Religious Belief," in James T. King and Donald Livingston, eds., Hume: A Re-evaluation (Fordham U. Press, 1976). This paper offers an interpretation of the philosophical interconnections between Dialogues and Natural History.
7. See the Natural History, pages 37-40, 55-58.
8. For discussion of some relevant theories, see Ninian Smart, *op. cit.*, ch. 5 and The Science of Religion and the Sociology of Knowledge (Princeton U. Press, 1975); Michael Argyle, Religious Behavior (Free Press, 1959); E. E. Evans-Pritchard, Theories of Primitive Religion (Oxford U. Press, 1965); William P. Alston, "Psycho-analytic Explanation of Religious Belief," in John Hick, ed., Faith and the Philosophers (St. Martin's Press, 1964), reprinted in K. Yandell, ed., God, Man and Religion (McGraw-Hill, 1973).

9. See George Mavrodes, Belief in God: A Study in the Epistemology of Religion for a discussion of some issues relevant to this matter.
10. A complication arises here. An event A may be such that both (1) if B occurs, A occurs, and (2) if C occurs, A occurs, are true, as are (3) B occurs and (4) C occurs. Then both (1) and (3) and (2) and (4) are sufficient explanation of (5) A occurs. One might describe this as a case in which A was "overcaused." But this is not the place to deal with the complication.
11. Cf. Mavrodes, op. cit., p. 112-114. It should be mentioned that I have given a statement of Hume's strategy only as complex as the present context requires.
12. Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding, Selby-Bigge ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1902), p. 147.