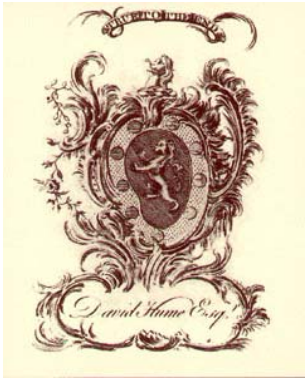

**‘Atheism' and the Title-Page of Hume's Treatise**
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# 'ATHEISM' AND THE TITLE-PAGE OF HUME'S TREATISE*

> It may be necessary, as well now as heretofore, for wise men to speak in parables, and with a double meaning, that the enemy may be amused, and they only who have ears to hear may hear.
>
> - Earl of Shaftesbury (Characteristics: II,1,2)

In this paper I will describe certain significant features of the title-page of Hume's Treatise[1] which have gone largely unnoticed. My discussion will focus on two features of the title-page. First, Hume's Treatise shares its title with a relevant and well-known work by Hobbes. Second, the epigram of the title-page, which is taken from Tacitus, also serves as the title for the final chapter of Spinoza's Tractatus Theologico-Politicus. In the seventeenth and early-eighteenth centuries Hobbes and Spinoza were infamous as the two most influential representatives of 'atheistic' or anti-Christian philosophy. The significance of these features of the title-page of the Treatise, therefore, is that in this important context Hume unambiguously alludes to these philosophers and their 'atheistic' doctrines. This, I will argue, accords well with a proper understanding of the nature of Hume's own anti-Christian intentions in the Treatise.

According to many Hume scholars the most significant feature of the title-page of Hume's Treatise is the subtitle: "An Attempt to introduce the experimental Method of Reasoning into MORAL SUBJECTS." More specifically, several commentators have suggested that we should interpret the significance of this subtitle in terms of Hume's ambition "to become the Newton of the Human Mind."[2] Let me open my discussion by making one or two brief

points about this claim. In order to assess this claim it is essential that we clearly distinguish between Hume's project of a "science of MAN" (T xiv) and the method by which that project was carried out. These two aspects of Hume's thought are, as John Wright has noted, often confused by commentators -- though Hume was clear on this matter.[3] The subtitle of the Treatise, it may be granted, does indicate the important role that Newton's method plays in this work.[4] Nevertheless, in itself, this does not establish that the subtitle indicates the project of the Treatise was "inspired by Newton."[5] On the contrary, as I will suggest below, the inspiration for Hume's project lies elsewhere; and if we exaggerate or inflate the significance of the subtitle in this context (i.e., the subtitle indicates Hume's ambition to "become the Newton of the Human Mind") then we are liable to distort the overall significance of the title-page itself.

There are, in my view, at least two other highly significant features of the title-page of the Treatise which have been overlooked by commentators. Moreover, these features of the title-page provide us with evidence for a rather different interpretation of the nature of Hume's intentions in the Treatise. In order to account for these further significant features it is necessary to note two general points of interpretation which are relevant to my discussion. (In this context I will simply note these points; I will not discuss or defend them in any detail.)

(1) The project of Hume's Treatise -- that is, a 'science of man' -- is modelled or 'planned' after Hobbes's very similar project in The Elements of Law and the first two parts of Leviathan.[6] Hume, following Hobbes, believes that moral and political

philosophy must proceed upon the same methodology as that which is appropriate to the natural sciences (although they disagree about the nature of that methodology). Further, Hobbes and Hume are agreed that this scientific investigation of morals must begin with an examination of human thought and motivation (it being assumed by both thinkers that the minds of men "are similar in their feelings and operations"). We find, accordingly, that the structural parallels which hold between Hobbes's works and Hume's Treatise are indicative of the fundamental similarity of their projects. Hume, like Hobbes before him, begins with a study of human understanding (i.e., sensation, imagination, knowledge, etc.), proceeds to a study of human passions (i.e., emotion, action, other minds, etc.), and finally, on the basis of these investigations, he develops his account of moral and political philosophy. The immediate significance of this similarity between the Treatise and Hobbes's works is that it reveals the unity of the project of the Treatise and casts serious doubt on the historical foundations of various established interpretations.

(2) A close examination of Hume's writings and their historical context will reveal that one of the principal targets of the sceptical arguments of the Treatise was Samuel Clarke, the most eminent Newtonian philosopher in early eighteenth-century Britain, and a severe critic of Hobbes.[7] In his celebrated Boyle Lectures of 1704-5 (published as A Discourse Concerning the Being and Attributes of God) Clarke sought to demolish Hobbes's 'atheistic' philosophy, and, following Locke, he endeavoured to introduce demonstrative reasoning into the spheres of metaphysics and morals with a view to defending the Christian religion.[8] In general, it was Hobbes's

secular perspective and his extension of scientific naturalism to the study of man that Clarke and other Christian critics regarded as particularly threatening to religion and morals.[9] In this way, it seems clear that there exists a close relationship between, on the one hand, Hume's destructive, sceptical attack on Clarke's Christian rationalism and, on the other hand, Hume's own Hobbist intentions in the Treatise. Given the Hobbist nature of Hume's basic project of a 'science of man' it was quite essental that he formulate an answer to Hobbes's eminent and influential Newtonian critic. That is, in order to defend and articulate an essentially Hobbist philosophical project Hume found it necessary to undertake a sceptical attack against the leading light of the opposing Newtonian tradition.

On the basis of these general observations regarding the nature of Hume's objectives and concerns in the Treatise we may interpret Hume's fundamental intentions in the Treatise as being essentially 'atheistic' or anti-Christian in nature. It may be argued that throughout the Treatise Hume is primarily concerned: (a) to refute the claims of Christian metaphysics and ethics; and (b) to construct a secular moral and political outlook. It is in light of these general observations, I suggest, that we must consider the significance of the title-page of Hume's Treatise.

The features of Hume's title-page on which I want to focus attention are: (a) the title -- "A Treatise of Human Nature"; and (b) the epigram, which is a citation from Tacitus. The significance of the title can be accounted for very briefly. Hume's Treatise, I have suggested, is modelled or planned after Hobbes's The Elements of Law. When the latter work was published in 1650 it appeared in the form of

two treatises: the first entitled Human Nature and the second entitled De Corpore Politico. Hume would have been familiar with Hobbes's work in the format of the two treatises. In several passages of De Corpore Politico Hobbes explicitly refers to the accompanying work as his "Treatise of Human Nature."[10] Clearly, therefore, Hume's Treatise is not only modelled or planned after Hobbes' works, it also shares its very title with a relevant work by Hobbes. This, in itself, may be read as a signal of the nature of Hume's intentions in the Treatise.

What, then, is the significance of Hume's citation of Tacitus in this context? Does it have any bearing on Hume's Hobbist intentions in the Treatise? The epigram reads: "Rara temporum felicitas, ubi sentire, quae velis; & quae sentias, dicere licet." We may translate this as: "Seldom are men blessed with times in which they may think what they like, and say what they think."[11] On the face of it the immediate significance of the epigram must lie with its content or substance. That is to say, the epigram clearly signals Hume's intention to express unorthodox and controversial doctrines. Beyond this, the epigram may also be taken to signal to the reader that Hume has exercised some degree of caution or 'prudence' when presenting his views. In this way, it seems evident, even at first glance, that the epigram is not without significance. At the very least, it serves to notify the reader of Hume's unorthodox intentions in the Treatise. Moreover, this interpretation accords well with the Hobbist nature of Hume's title. In my view, however, these observations fail to capture the full significance of Hume's epigram in this context.[12]

By the end of the seventeenth century Spinoza was widely regarded as an atheistic disciple of

Hobbes.[13] At this time the best-known work of Spinoza -- and one that was particularly influential among the radical freethinkers -- was the Tractatus Theologico-Politicus.[14] Spinoza's subtitle for this work states that it is his intention to establish "that freedom of thought and speech not only may, without prejudice to piety and the public peace, be granted; but also may not, without danger to piety and the public peace, be withheld."[15] The title of the final chapter of the Tractatus Theologico-Politicus sums up a central theme of this work.[16] It reads: "Ostenditur, in Libera Republica unicuique & sentire, quae velit, & quae sentiat, dicere licere." Following Elwes we may translate this as: "That in a free state every man may think what he likes, and say what he thinks" (my emphasis). Given the historical context, it seems clear that the epigram on the title-page of Hume's Treatise constitutes a direct and unambiguous reaffirmation of a major theme of Spinoza's Tractatus Theologico-Politicus.[17]

In light of these considerations it is hardly surprising to find that the significance of this epigram did not escape the notice of Hume's contemporaries. In May 1739, shortly after the first two books of the Treatise were published, a brief notice of Hume's work appeared in the German journal Neuen Zeitungen. The notice reads:

> A new free-thinker has published an exhaustive Treatise of Human Nature, 2 volumes, octavo. In it he attempts to introduce the correct method of philosophising into moral matters, examining and explaining, first of all, the characteristics of the human understanding and then the effects. The author's evil intentions are sufficiently betrayed in the sub-title of the work, taken from Tacitus: Rara temporum felicitas, ubi

> sentire, quae velis, & quae sentias, dicere, licet.[18]

Given the historical circumstances it seems perfectly reasonable to suppose that the reviewer in question recognized Hume's allusion to Spinoza and (correctly) interpreted it as being pregnant with significance for a proper understanding of the nature of Hume's intentions in the Treatise.

One further point should be noted in this context. I have suggested that one of Hume's principal sceptical objectives in the Treatise was to undermine Samuel Clarke's effort to use demonstrative reason in defence of the Christian religion. It should be noted, therefore, that the subtitle of Clarke's Demonstration of the Being and Attributes of God (his first series of Boyle Lectures) states that this work is an "answer to Mr. Hobbs, Spinoza and their Followers" (i.e., other deniers of natural and revealed religion).[19] In light of this observation it seems evident that Hume's allusion to both Hobbes and Spinoza is far from fortuitous. Hume, I suggest, is simply concerned to declare (discreetly) his fundamental allegiances. That is to say, in this context Hume covertly identifies himself with the tradition of "Hobbes, Spinoza and their Followers" in opposition to Clarke, the Newtonians, and other apologists for the Christian religion. So interpreted, the title-page of the Treatise constitutes a bold assertion of Hume's 'atheistic' or anti-Christian intentions.

In light of these claims it is necessary to consider whether or not Hume was directly familiar with Spinoza's writings. My claim that Hume's citation of Tacitus makes covert reference to Spinoza will, no doubt, be greeted by many commentators with some degree of scepticism. Commentators generally

accept the often repeated -- though thinly, if at all, defended -- claim that Hume was not directly familiar with Spinoza's writings. This supposition can be traced back at least as far as T.H. Grose's introduction to Hume's Essays.[20]

> It might, perhaps, have been expected that Hume's residence in France would have exercised a perceptible influence upon the reasoning of the Treatise. Yet it is not too much to say, that, with a few unimportant exceptions, there is no trace of it. The writer was little acquainted with, and is little interested in, any foreign school of philosophy. His knowledge of Spinoza was derived from Bayle's dictionary [my emphasis, cf. T 243].... There is no trace of a direct knowledge of Des Cartes.... In short, the Treatise from beginning to end is the work of a solitary Scotchman, who has devoted himself to the critical study of Locke and Berkeley (Essays, Vol. I, p. 40).

The work of subsequent generations of Hume scholars has thoroughly discredited most of these claims. Nevertheless, Grose's claim that Hume lacked any direct knowledge of Spinoza remains the standard view.[21] To my knowledge, however, the only commentator who has made any effort to substantiate this claim is John Laird.[22] It is important to note, therefore, that the points which Laird presents touch only on Hume's familiarity with Spinoza's Ethics. In other words, the (inconclusive) evidence to which Laird refers provides us with no evidence to suggest that Hume was unfamiliar with Spinoza's Tractatus Theologico-Politicus.

In what follows I will briefly state a number of historical points which strongly suggest that it is very unlikely Hume would not have ('carefully') read Spinoza's Tractatus Theologico-Politicus. (I

will leave it to others to draw their own conclusions about Hume's familiarity with Spinoza's Ethics.)

(1) As has been noted, it does not follow from the fact that Hume was unfamiliar with Spinoza's Ethics that he was therefore unfamiliar with the Tractatus Theologico-Politicus.

(2) In the century following Spinoza's death the Tractatus Theologico-Politicus was a better known work than the Ethics. In 1689 the former work was translated into English and it received considerable attention and comment in British philosophical circles -- particularly from those who were already engaged in the battle against Hobbes's 'atheism' (e.g., More, Cudworth, Boyle, Bentley, Clarke, etc.).

(3) While writing the Treatise Hume was in close personal contact with Chevalier Andrew Ramsay -- a cousin of Hume's boyhood friend Michael Ramsay.[23] Ramsay's biographer Henderson states that Spinoza was Ramsay's "particular aversion" and that he regarded Spinoza as "the very worst of atheists."[24] In both his Les Voyages de Cyrus (1727) and in his Philosophical Principles of Natural and Revealed Religion (1748-49) Ramsay sets out to refute Spinoza's doctrines (especially his necessitarianism). Thus, while Hume was at work on the Treatise he was in close personal contact with at least one philosopher who had a deep interest in Spinoza's writings, and he would almost certainly have had easy access to these writings. Moreover, given Hume's interests it hardly seems credible that he would, in these circumstances, have failed to examine Spinoza's writings for himself.

(4) In his Discourse Clarke describes Spinoza as "the most celebrated Patron of Atheism in our Time" (I, prop. iii). In light of Hume's deep interest in Clarke's philosophy it is, again, hardly

credible that Hume would have regarded Spinoza as anything other than a major thinker in this context whose work required careful examination.

(5) In the late-seventeenth and early-eighteenth centuries Spinoza's doctrines generated vigorous controversy in Holland.[25] At this time many Scottish lawyers -- a social group that played a particularly prominent role in the foundations of the Scottish Enlightenment -- were receiving their legal training in Holland.[26] Indeed, the number of Scottish lawyers training in Holland reached its peak at the same time that the controversy over Spinoza's philosophy was raging in Holland (i.e., the late-seventeenth century). It seems very likely that the controversy generated by Spinoza's philosophy would have filtered back to Scotland through this route. It may well be, therefore, that this controversy over Spinoza's doctrines had an even greater impact in Scotland than it did in England. The remarks of Professor Halyburton lend further support to this conjecture. In an influential work published in the early-eighteenth century Halyburton speaks of the "great vogue among our young Gentry and Students" of Hobbes, Spinoza and others.[27] These considerations suggest that Hume's allusion to Spinoza (and Hobbes) is not so surprising or unusual.

(6) One of the more detailed responses to Hume's Treatise in the period immediately following its publication is to be found in the Reverend William Wishart's series of 'accusations' as presented in A Letter from a Gentleman.[28] In essence, Wishart is concerned to accuse Hume of "atheism" and "universal scepticism." In presenting his accusations Wishart mentions the names of Hobbes and Spinoza (i.e., two infamous 'atheists'). No other philosopher is named. Given the historical

context, the significance of Wishart's references to Hobbes and Spinoza would, I suggest, have been quite obvious to his audience. Moreover, the nature and tone of Wishart's accusations suggest that he perceives Hume to be a radical freethinker in the tradition of "Hobbes, Spinoza and their Followers."

(7) Finally, Hume's hostile references to Spinoza in the Treatise are plainly laced with sarcasm and irony (T 240-244). Indeed, in this context Hume appeals to Spinoza's "hideous hypothesis" only in order to show that the principles of immaterialism lead to atheism! The fact that Hume superficially presents himself as being hostile to Spinoza's 'atheism' is simply indicative of a modicum of 'prudence' on Hume's part.

Taken together the above points strongly suggest that it is very unlikely Hume was not familiar with Spinoza's writings. More specifically, in the absence of any concrete evidence to the contrary we have every reason to conclude that at the very least Hume would have been familiar with the central doctrines of Spinoza's Tractatus Theologico-Politicus and he would, therefore, have been well aware of the significance of his epigram.

By way of conclusion, let me summarize the salient points that I have been concerned to establish in this paper. There are, I have argued, two highly significant features of the title-page of Hume's Treatise which have gone largely unnoticed by commentators. First, the title of the Treatise makes allusion to the work of Thomas Hobbes. Second, the epigram on the title-page of the Treatise makes allusion to a central theme of Spinoza's Tractatus Theologico-Politicus. In the early-eighteenth century Hobbes and Spinoza were infamous as the two most influential representatives of 'atheistic' or

anti-Christian philosophy. Considered independently of one another these two features of Hume's title-page are of some significance in their own right. Taken together, there can be little doubt that these features tell us a great deal about the nature of Hume's intentions. Placed in their appropriate historical context these features of Hume's title-page constitute a bold and unambiguous proclamation of Hume's allegiances. We find that on the title-page of the Treatise Hume is concerned to identify himself (discreetly) as a philosopher in the 'atheistic' or anti-Christian tradition of "Hobbes, Spinoza and their Followers." In short, these observations provide us with independent support for an 'atheistic' or anti-Christian interpretation of Hume's fundamental intentions in the Treatise -- an interpretation that I have argued for elsewhere.[29]

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1. David Hume, A Treatise of Human Nature, edited by L.A. Selby-Bigge, 2nd ed., revised by P.H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978). Page references will be cited as 'T' followed by the relevant page number(s).

2. John Laird, Hume's Philosophy of Human Nature (London: 1932), p. 20.

3. John Wright, The Sceptical Realism of David Hume (Manchester: 1983), p. 188.

4. Arguably, however, even this limited claim requires some qualification. See, for example,

Wright, The Sceptical Realism of David Hume, pp. 196-7.

5. A particularly 'strong' interpretation of the significance of Newton in shaping Hume's fundamental intentions in the Treatise can be found in Nicholas Capaldi, David Hume: The Newtonian Philosophy (Boston: 1975).

6. A detailed defence of this claim is presented in my "Hume's Treatise and Hobbes's The Elements of Law," Journal of the History of Ideas, 46 (1985), pp. 51-63.

7. On this see my "Scepticism and Natural Religion in Hume's Treatise," Journal of the History of Ideas (forthcoming).

8. An illuminating historical account of Clarke's influence, in particular, and of Newtonianism in general, may be found in Margaret Jacob, The Newtonians and the English Revolution 1689-1720 (Hassocks, Sussex: 1976), esp. chaps. 4 and 5. Useful background material on the Newtonian theology of the Boyle Lecturers is provided by Robert H. Hurlbutt, Hume, Newton and the Design Argument (Lincoln, Neb.: 1965), Pt. I.

9. On the reaction of Hobbes's contemporaries to his ('atheistic') philosophy see Samuel Mintz, The Hunting of Leviathan (Cambridge, Eng.: 1962).

10. The English Works of Thomas Hobbes, edited by Sir William Molesworth, 11 Vols. (London: 1839-45), Vol. IV, pp. 81, 94, 117, 125. For further relevant details regarding the publishing history of Hobbes's works see my "Hume's Treatise and Hobbes's The Elements of Law," pp. 53-54.

11. This translation is taken from E.C. Mossner's edition of Hume's Treatise (Harmondsworth, Middx.: 1969), p. 32. The citation itself is from Tacitus, The Historians, Bk. I, sect. 1.

12. Hume's remarks in the first Enquiry seem to suggest that Tacitus enjoyed a reputation as something of a freethinker. In the famous section on miracles Hume describes Tacitus as a writer "noted for his candour and veracity ... and so free from any tendency to credulity that he even lies under the contrary imputation of

atheism and profaneness" (Selby-Bigge edition: p. 123).

13. A useful account of Spinoza's influence and reputation in Britain at this time can be found in Rosalie Colie, "Spinoza in England, 1665-1730," Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society, 107 (June, 1963). See also Jacob, The Newtonians, pp. 169-171. (Note also that Spinoza's affinities with Hobbes are particularly apparent in the Tractatus Theologico-Politicus.)

14. "The Tractatus Theologico-Politicus was certainly the one book of Spinoza's that had many readers in England in the eighteenth century...." Sir Frederick Pollock, Spinoza (London: 1935), p. 123. See also Margaret Jacob, The Radical Enlightenment: Pantheists, Freemasons and Republicans (London: 1981), pp. 48-53.

15. Here I follow R.H.M. Elwes's translation: The Chief Works of Benedict De Spinoza (New York: 1951), 2 Vols. See Vol. I, p. 1.

16. "The main thesis of the Tractatus Theologico-Politicus as summed up by the author is that 'in a free commonwealth it should be lawful for every man to think what he will and speak what he thinks'...." Pollock, Spinoza, p. 94. Note that Spinoza repeats this pungent epigram in another important context: namely, at the end of his summary of his argument in the Preface to the Tractatus Theologico-Politicus. (Elwes, I, p. 11).

17. Note that in the first Enquiry (Sect. XI) Hume presents a lengthy discussion of this issue (i.e., liberty of thought and speech). In the preceding section of the Enquiry Hume discusses miracles; a subject that is also discussed in the important sixth chapter of Spinoza's Tractatus Theologico-Politicus (also entitled "Of Miracles"). On both these topics Hume takes up positions that generally accord with those of Spinoza. It is, therefore, particularly interesting to note that Hume's discussion of miracles, and quite possibly his discussion of freedom of thought, originally appeared in the Treatise. On the advice of his friends Hume decided to exercise caution and removed this discussion from the Treatise.

18. Quoted in Ernest C. Mossner, The Life of David Hume, 2nd ed. (Oxford: 1980), p. 120.

19. The subtitle of Clarke's Discourse (i.e., both series of Boyle Lectures) states that this work is an "answer to Mr. Hobbs, Spinoza ... and other Deniers of Natural and Revealed Religion."

20. David Hume, Essays: Moral, Political, and Literary, T.H. Green and T.H. Grose, eds. (London: 1875).

21. See, e.g., Norman Kemp Smith, The Philosophy of David Hume (London: 1941), p. 325: "Hume had, it is evident, no knowledge of Spinoza's teaching, save what he derived from Bayle." (See also Kemp Smith's discussion of Hume's use of Bayle's article on Spinoza: p. 506f.) The same view has been stated more recently by Richard Popkin: "Hume and Spinoza," Hume Studies, 5 (1979), pp. 65-93. Popkin claims that Hume "learned what he knew about Spinoza from Bayle's [Historical and Critical Dictionary] article" (p. 66; see also p. 90). Popkin's claim is particularly surprising in light of the fact that (a) Popkin refers to a considerable amount of evidence that tells against this claim; and (b) Popkin provides us with no reason for supposing that the claim is true. (I note that Popkin makes no reference to the importance of Hobbes in this context.)

22. Laird, Hume's Philosophy of Human Nature, pp. 163-164.

23. On the relationship between Hume and Andrew Ramsay see Mossner, Life, pp. 93-96, 104-105, 626-627.

24. G.D. Henderson, Chevalier Ramsay (Edinburgh: 1952), p. 215.

25. On this see, e.g., Sir Frederick Pollock, Spinoza: His Life and Philosophy (London: 1899), p. 349: "The first effect of [Spinoza's] writings in Holland was to raise a storm of controversial indignation, chiefly against the Tractatus Theologico-Politicus...."

26. On this see John Clive, "The Social Background of the Scottish Renaissance," in R. Mitchison and N. Phillipson, eds., Scotland in the Age of Improvement (Edinburgh: 1970), pp. 228-244.

27. Natural Religion Insufficient (Edinburgh: 1714), p. 31. Cited in J.M. Robertson, A History of Freethought, 2 Vols. (London: 1936), II, p. 742.

28. A Letter from a Gentleman to his friend in Edinburgh (1745), E.C. Mossner and J.V. Price, eds. (Edinburgh: 1967). The first half of the 'letter' is simply a direct quotation of Wishart's 'accusation.'

29. See notes 6 and 7.