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Gerhard Streminger

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A Reply to Ellin

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Professor Ellin's very interesting and stimulating comments may be summarized in the following four points:

1. Hume's opposition to religion is even more far-reaching than I had acknowledged, since there is "no evidence" that any form of 'true religion' is to be found in Hume. According to Ellin, the discussion on 'religion and morality' in the second half of Part XII of the *Dialogues* is "not about true religion at all," since by using the term 'true religion' Philo means nothing but philosophy ("being whatever reason can tell us about the question of the origin of the universe") and morality ("being the set of principles ultimately founded on inclination and the natural motives of justice and benevolence"). Therefore, "there are not four things: philosophy, morality, true religion, and false religion; but only three," and my remarks on 'true religion' are "a distortion of Hume's views, based on a misreading of Hume's text."

I will try to show that there are slightly more things in Hume than 'empirical philosophy, morality and false religion' by collecting some relevant passages in Part XII of the *Dialogues*.¹

Philo: *But in proportion to my veneration for true religion, is my abhorrence of vulgar superstitions.* (D 219)

Cleanthes: *The proper office of religion is to regulate the heart of men, humanize their conduct, infuse the spirit of temperance, order, and obedience; and as its operation is silent, and only enforces the motives of mortality and justice, it is in danger of being overlooked, and confounded with these other motives. When it distinguishes itself, and acts as a separate principle over men, it has departed from its proper sphere, and has become only a cover to faction and ambition.* (D 220)

Philo: *And so will all religion ... except the philosophical and rational kind.* (D 220)

Philo: *the vulgar ... are utterly incapable of so pure a religion as represents the Deity to be pleased with nothing but virtue in human behaviour. The recommendations to the Divinity are generally supposed to be either frivolous observances, or rapturous ecstasies, or a bigoted credulity ... Amongst ourselves,*

some have been guilty of that atrociousness ... of declaiming, in express terms, against morality, and representing it as a sure forfeiture of the divine favour. (D 221-2)

Philo: True religion, I allow, has no such pernicious consequences: But we must treat of religion, as it has commonly [Editor: commonly for always] been found in the world. (D 223)

Cleanthes: Take care, PHILO ... take care: Push not matters too far: Allow not your zeal against false religion to undermine your veneration for the true ... The most agreeable reflection, which it is possible for human imagination to suggest, is that of genuine theism, which represents us as the workmanship of a Being perfectly good, wise, and powerful. (D 224)

Philo: These appearances ... are most engaging and alluring; and with regard to the true philosopher, they are more than appearances. (D 224)

Philo: These fine models of religion are the mere product of philosophy. (D 225)

Philo: It is an absurdity to believe that the Deity has human passions, and one of the lowest of human passions, a restless appetite for applause. It is an inconsistency to believe, that, since the Deity has this human passion, he has not others also; and, in particular, a disregard to the opinions of creatures so much inferior. (D 226)

Philo: To know God, says Seneca, is to worship him. All other worship is indeed absurd, superstitious, and even impious ... Yet is this impiety the smallest of which superstition is guilty. Commonly, it depresses the Deity far below the condition of mankind; and represents him as a capricious Dæmon, who exercises his power without reason and without humanity! [But] philosophical theists ... entertain, or rather indeed endeavour to entertain, suitable notions of his divine perfections. (D 226-7)

I believe that these passages reveal a semi-serious discussion between Philo and Cleanthes on 'true religion' (after Demea, the orthodox, is gone), and if one adds to this collection other passages in Hume's work,² it seems to be probable that there is a form of religion Hume considered to be worthy of being called 'true' (although he did

not adhere to it). With some reservations, 'true religion' may be characterized in the following way: It consists in the private worship of the Creator, without superstitious beliefs, but in the spirits of tolerance and open-mindedness; it enhances development of moral sentiments.

But why didn't Hume say more about 'true religion' if it played an important role in his analysis? The answer is, I think, that he took it to be extremely rare, since even true religion, if organized, turns into a threat to morality. I deduce this from a passage already quoted in my paper:

Even if a popular religion were found, in which it was expressly declared, that nothing but morality could gain the divine favour; if an order of priests were instituted to inculcate this opinion, in daily sermons, and with all the arts of persuasion; yet so inveterate are the people's prejudices, that, for want of some other superstition, they would make the very attendance on these sermons the essentials of religion, rather than place them in virtue and good morals. (NHR 4:357-8)

There is a tendency in human nature that turns even true religion, if organized, into a religion with rites and ceremonies, and, consequently, leads to a behaviour that contradicts socially useful, that is, moral behaviour. (To worship HIM becomes more important than to reduce human and non-human suffering.) In other words: According to Hume, no religion organized by man can in the long run guarantee moral behaviour.

2. Ellin's second point may be summarized in the following question: How can 'true religion' support morality? "Could we not imagine, that contemplation of the Infinite Mind might give rise to attitudes not especially commendable, for example to an inward-focused self-centredness and indifference towards others? If so, religion of the philosophical and spiritualizing kind might weaken, or at any rate not support, the natural moral sentiments of justice and benevolence."

This point may be put even stronger: Why should true religion support morality, since morality is, according to Hume, natural and rational? What is the connection between the unadorned worship of the Infinite Mind and the purification of the heart? Why should something that is natural be supported through the worship of an infinite mind? Would it not be more Humean to hold that morality can account for itself, and that the function of religion is to induce a different emotion, a sentiment believers have called reverence, meaningfulness, and inter-connectedness? I do not think that Hume gives any hint as to how to answer these questions, but a possible answer may be this: The Infinite Mind is the creator of human nature, and the worship of the

creator of human nature supports the acceptance of human nature; and since moral life is in accordance with human nature, the acceptance of human nature supports morality; therefore, the worship of the Infinite Mind supports morality. This idea, however, may be ruled out by the arguments of the *Dialogues*.³ Nevertheless, it is striking that Hume did not direct the **battery** of his arguments against the idea that there is a supernatural design in human nature, but against the idea that there is a supernatural design in non-human nature.

3. Ellin's third comment is that I did not make it clear "just what it is about religion which, in Hume's view, constitutes [that threat]. There is a legitimate question as to just what ... is Hume's real target. Is it superstitious incredulity? The organization of worship? Priests? Doctrine? Monotheism? Or perhaps the unhappy misalliance of superstition, meaningless ritual, crafty and dishonest clergy, and dogmatically held doctrine?" The briefest answer may be this: According to Hume, the 'unity of subject' (as the belief in one God) demands the unity of rites and ceremonies; therefore, different rites and ceremonies are considered as being absurd or wrong or even devilish. If people see that their fellow creatures worship in a 'wrong' way, and if they are convinced that their own God is the true source of morality (as they usually are), the lowest instincts in human nature are often activated: *When the interests of religion are concerned, no morality can be forcible enough to bind the enthusiastic zealot. The sacredness of the cause sanctifies every measure which can be made use of to promote it* (D 222).⁴

4. Ellin's fourth comment is that Hume "failed to foresee" the ability of religion "to make peace with the growth of scientific knowledge," that he "exaggerated its reliance on superstitious fear and terror," that he "tendentiously accused it of trading in ignorance and conniving at the suppression of liberty," and that he "underestimated its ability to purify itself of the moral failings he attributes to it." Hume "missed the significance of its communal function as a source of social unity, and seems only dimly to have grasped its spiritual message." Religion "can be an uplifting, moderating, humanizing force."

It is obvious that we must ask whether Hume's account of religion is a fair one or not, but as long as the more attractive side of religion is not specified (for example, what is meant by "spiritual message"?), it is impossible to see whether there are blind spots in Hume's analysis or not.⁵ On the other hand, it is certainly correct that Hume did not emphasize the function of religion as a source of social unity. But didn't he put forward some excellent reasons why religion is commonly the seed of zeal and fanaticism and oppression? And isn't his analysis correct, if one recalls what happens today, in Iran or Northern Ireland (and elsewhere), or what happened a few decades ago in Europe's Christian countries? Nevertheless, it may be short-sighted not to see

the changes that had occurred within the walls of some of the churches of monotheistic religion. But what is the reason? Are these changes due to an inner development of religion or are they due to the movement of light, led by people like David Hume?

University of Graz, Austria

1. David Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, ed. Norman Kemp Smith (Indianapolis, 1947). Further references ("D") will be given in parentheses within the body of the text.
2. See, in addition to those already quoted in my paper, David Hume, *The Philosophical Works*, ed. T. H. Green and T. H. Grose, 4 vols. (Darmstadt, 1964), 3:144, 4:338ff., 357, 359, 406; and David Hume, *The New Letters of David Hume*, ed. J. Y. T. Grieg, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1932), 225.
3. See, in particular, the following passage: *The human species, whose chief excellency is reason and sagacity, is of all others the most necessitous, and the most deficient in bodily advantages; without clothes, without arms, without food, without lodging, without any convenience of life, except what they owe to their own skill and industry. In short, nature seems to have formed an exact calculation of the necessities of her creatures; and like a rigid master, has afforded them little more powers or endowments, than what are strictly sufficient to supply those necessities. An indulgent parent would have bestowed a large stock, in order to guard against accidents, and secure the happiness and welfare of the creature, in the most unfortunate concurrence of circumstances* (D 207-8).
4. Compare this, for example, with 2 Pet. 2:12.
5. My impression is that Hume was well aware of many aspects of religion — just remember his experiences as a young man in an orthodox surrounding. That he was very religious indeed, involved in long and very serious struggles with religion, is obvious from his "Letter to a Physician," a point missed by Mossner in his highly-acclaimed description of Hume's life.