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# The Argument of the *Natural History*

Mark Webb

In the *Natural History of Religion* Hume claims there are two principal questions concerning religion: one "concerning its foundation in reason," and the other "concerning its origin in human nature." He forthrightly states that his concern here is to determine "[w]hat those principles are, which give rise to the original belief, and what those accidents and causes are, which direct its operation."<sup>1</sup> That is to say, his express intent is, via an empirically based study, to determine and elucidate the causal or natural origin of religion—its beliefs and practices. These are among his first remarks.

Consider now his very last remarks:

The whole is a riddle, an aenigma, an inexplicable mystery. Doubt, uncertainty, suspence 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 a quarrelling; while we ourselves, during their fury and contention, happily make our escape, into the calm, though obscure, regions of philosophy. (NHR 4:363)

These last remarks should strike one as enigmatic: for, given that his purported aim is to offer a naturalistic account of why humans hold religious beliefs, it is strange that he should be content to end in mystery—particularly so since the work itself offers a plausible account of such origins. Still, even if Hume should have felt the project to have failed, what does *that* have to do with "suspence of judgment," "quarrelling superstitions," and especially his "happy escape"? But of course he is up to much more in the *Natural History* than he lets on. Indeed, he offers not only a causal account of religious belief but a moral critique of it as well. Why should he do *both* in the same work? I suggest that the causal account and the moral critique are intimately connected; and that the work is first and foremost a moral critique intended to sever allegiance to "traditional religion"—traditional theism in general, and Christianity in particular. One aim of this paper

is to offer a unified reading of the *Natural History*, while the other is to assess the cogency of Hume's project on this reading.

To this end we should first situate the *Natural History* among Hume's other works. It follows the first *Enquiry* which addresses *inter alia* the credibility of "revealed" religion (particularly section 10, "Of Miracles"), and the second *Enquiry* which advances a naturalistically based morality. It was completed about the time he began the *Dialogues*, the main contention of which is that natural theology offers minimal if any support for most traditional religious claims. In the *Natural History*, then, it is reasonable to suppose he is assuming the cogency of his claims against revealed religion, the viability of a naturalistically based morality, and the utter inability of natural theology to ground either traditional religious tenets or morality. The *Dialogues* in particular illuminate Hume's thought: after concluding that a posteriori arguments offer absolutely no grounds for ascribing the traditional moral attributes to the Deity, Philo goes on to counter Cleanthes' claim—that "[r]eligion, however corrupted, is still better than no religion at all"<sup>2</sup>—by contending that traditional religion simply is unessential and even harmful to the needs of society. Hume advances his causal account because he believes both that traditional religion lacks any basis in reason, and that recourse to a supernatural origin is untenable. And it will become evident in the course of this paper that the *Natural History* is most accurately understood against the backdrop of his moral theory as expounded in the second *Enquiry*—indeed the former is an exercise in applied ethics.

### **The Strategy of the *Natural History***

The sceptical tone of many of its passages should strike one as out of place. For the scepticism is directed not towards providing a causal account of the origin of religious beliefs and practices (the purported aim), but rather towards their plausibility. Yet one might well expect such passages if Hume is assuming that religion has no tenable basis in reason nor for its revelational claims, and that he intends the work to be more than merely a natural history—as indeed he does.

Speaking of polytheism and the ancient sceptic, Hume remarks that "The traditions of different cities and nations were also, on many occasions, directly opposite; and no reason could be assigned for preferring one to the other" (NHR 4:348-49). Now, recalling his critique of revealed religion in the first *Enquiry*, of natural religion in the *Dialogues*, and the sceptical tone of portions of the present work, it is quite reasonable to infer that he considers such to be the case concerning all "popular" religions—polytheistic or monotheistic. The following remarks are especially revealing of this:

## THE ARGUMENT OF THE *NATURAL HISTORY*

The less importunate and assuming any species of superstition appears, the less will it provoke men's spleen and indignation, or engage them into enquiries concerning its foundation and origin. This in the mean time is obvious, that the empire of all religious faith over the understanding is wavering and uncertain, subject to every variety of humour, and dependent on the present incidents, which strike the imagination. The difference is only in the degrees. An ancient will place a stroke of impiety and one of superstition alternately, throughout a whole discourse: A modern often thinks in the same way, though he may be more guarded in his expression.

LUCIAN tells us expressly, that whoever believed not the most ridiculous fables of paganism was deemed by the people profane and impious. To what purpose, indeed, would that agreeable author have employed the whole force of his wit and satire against the national religion, had not that religion been generally believed by his countrymen and contemporaries? (NHR 4:349-50)

As a reading of the *Natural History* will confirm, Hume is following the ancients: employing "the whole force of his wit and satire against the national religion"—Christianity—a "quite importunate and assuming 'superstition' provoking his (and other's) 'spleen and indignation,' and thereby engaging him in 'enquiries concerning its foundation and origin.'" The following comments elucidate to what end this "enquiry" is aimed:

Though [in the past] some parts of the national religion hung loose upon the minds of men, other parts adhered more closely to them: And it was the chief business of the sceptical philosophers to show, that there was no more foundation for one than for the other. This is the artifice of COTTA in the dialogues concerning the *nature of the gods*. He refutes the whole system of mythology by leading the orthodox gradually, from the more momentous stories, which were believed, to the more frivolous, which every one ridiculed: From the gods to the goddesses; from the goddesses to the nymphs; from the nymphs to the fawns and satyrs. (NHR 4:352)

Hume's concluding remarks quoted earlier are quite in line with the chief business of the sceptical philosophers as here reported.

Along with the ancient sceptics Hume is attempting to show (or rather, suggest) that religious practitioners really have no more basis

to believe more "sober" religious claims (or stories) than the more frivolous—the *Natural History* abounding with the latter from both the polytheistic and theistic traditions. Two assumptions are at work here. One is that there is some causal link (or common source) linking "the more momentous stories to the more frivolous," while the other is that because the latter are false, the former too are likely to be. The implicit thought is that having ridiculed the frivolous and being unable to deny the link once it is made evident, the orthodox must forthwith ridicule and repudiate the more momentous. Of course, it is quite plausible that some "momentous" story is true and sober, but that others untrue and of a frivolous nature nonetheless derive from it. So this thought needs some defense, which Hume does not provide. But as we shall see below, he does utilize Cotta's "artifice" in a novel way. The main thrust of his argument lies elsewhere, however.

It is noteworthy that Hume never tackles head-on the truth or falsity of particular religious claims. He instead attempts to *move* or *engage* our *affections* by depicting the claims and practices of so-called "popular" religion as inconsistent, absurd, and particularly conducive to negative effects—in a word, as offensive to a person of common sense and reason. There are two related reasons for this. No doubt one is because he believes reason fails to provide a basis for traditional religious belief. The other main one, offered not in the *Natural History* but suggested in the second *Enquiry*, is this:

DISPUTES with men, pertinaciously obstinate in their principles, are, of all others, the most irksome; except, perhaps, those with persons, entirely disingenuous, who really do not believe the opinions they defend, but engage in the controversy, from affectation, from a spirit of opposition, or from a desire of showing wit and ingenuity, superior to the rest of mankind. The same blind adherence to their own arguments is to be expected in both; the same contempt of their antagonists; and the same passionate vehemence, in enforcing sophistry and falsehood. *And as reasoning is not the source, whence either disputant derives his tenets; it is in vain to expect, that any logic, which speaks not to the affections, will ever engage him to embrace sounder principles.*

... The only way, therefore, of converting an antagonist of this kind, is to leave him to himself. For, finding that no body keeps up the controversy with him, it is probable he will, at last, of himself, from mere weariness, come over to the side of common sense and reason.<sup>3</sup>

## THE ARGUMENT OF THE *NATURAL HISTORY*

Note how much the latter paragraph echoes his concluding remarks in the *Natural History*: "and opposing one species of superstition to another, set them a quarrelling; while we ourselves, during their fury and contention, happily make our escape, into the calm, though obscure, regions of philosophy." More importantly for our purposes, as both the title to the work we are considering and its contents suggest, polytheism and traditional theism have no foundation in reason. So if one is going to engage adherents of either system, one must "engage their affections." This is precisely Hume's strategy via the *Natural History*.

So, while the work purports to be a natural history of religious beliefs and practices, suggesting something of a "scientific" examination of a "natural" phenomenon, that feature of the work clearly is intended by Hume to facilitate his moral critique of traditional religious belief. Consider another of his remarks:

The end of all moral speculations is to teach us our duty; and, by proper representations of the deformity of vice and beauty of virtue, beget correspondent habits, and engage us to avoid the one, and embrace the other. ... What is honourable, what is fair, what is becoming, what is noble, what is generous, takes possession of the heart, and animates us to embrace and maintain it. ...

Extinguish all the warm feelings and prepossessions in favour of virtue, and all disgust or aversion to vice: Render men totally indifferent towards these distinctions; and morality is no longer a practical study, nor has any tendency to regulate our lives. (E 172)

One of the central criticisms of the *Natural History* is that religion either renders its practitioners indifferent or even in opposition to proper moral distinctions on the one hand, or fails to seriously affect moral behaviour in any appropriately positive manner on the other. The above two passages well illuminate his general thrust to engage one's affections via a rather negative moral portrait of traditional religious beliefs and practices. There is thus a strong emotive component to the argument of the *Natural History*. The causal account itself works in tandem with the emotive component in the following way: the former in a preparatory manner indirectly attempts to *disengage* one's affections to traditional religion via an unorthodox and (presumably for that time) ignoble view of the "historical" origins of traditional theism, while the latter more forcefully *bids* one to abandon "popular" religion—and "embrace sounder principles."

The appeal of the *Natural History* is strong. In what remains of the paper I shall make more explicit its underlying strategy, and assess its cogency. I shall argue that while Hume offers a plausible account of the origin of religious belief and practices, it is of no rhetorical consequence. And regarding his moral criticisms: while it indeed seems correct to endeavour to "engage the affections" in this arena, one cannot forgo rigorous argument either; and this I shall argue is lacking. On both counts the strategy of the *Natural History* is enervated.

### The Natural History of Religion

Hume really is advancing two theses in the early chapters of the *Natural History*. One that reflects the title of the work and which I shall consider unproblematic is that individual and/or collective religious belief and practice initially arose in response to "an anxious fear of future events"—to the hopes and fears, the unknown causes and exigencies that impinge on human life. The second, seemingly innocuous but significantly more important one for our purposes is that polytheism was the original religion of mankind. I say "seemingly innocuous" because if we read the *Natural History* as endeavouring to engage the affections, as I urge we do, then this claim bears added significance for his eighteenth century readers.

In providing a causal account of the origin of religion, why would Hume first seek to determine whether theism or polytheism was the original religion, or even that there was an original? No doubt a correct answer to the question would be important methodologically for explaining the natural history of religion. But one should be suspicious of taking this for the entire answer, for at least two reasons. One I have already noted, viz. his (implicit) identification with the sceptical philosophers and their enterprise *vis-à-vis* orthodoxy. The other is that the empirical evidence available to him did not warrant a decision one way or another. For both these reasons I submit that by attempting to establish polytheism as the original religion, he hopes to depict the generally considered more noble and sober theism of his day as the *progeny* of polytheism: as the majority of his audience considered polytheism a corrupt descendent of theism, as well as silly and unworthy of serious belief, by an inverted relation of descent coupled with Cotta's artifice Hume is implicitly suggesting that—once shown *its* true ancestry—traditional theism should *also* be viewed in like manner.<sup>4</sup>

Hume's argument to this end has both an empirical and a non-empirical component to it; it also reflects a rather "unenlightened" view of polytheistic adherents he no doubt expected would strike his more "enlightened" readers. He contends that "if we consider the improvement of human society, from rude beginnings to a state of

## THE ARGUMENT OF THE NATURAL HISTORY

greater perfection, polytheism or idolatry was, and necessarily must have been, the first and most ancient religion of mankind" (NHR 4:310). The available historical evidence constitutes the empirical component of the argument for this claim:

It is a matter of fact incontestable, that about 1700 years ago all mankind were polytheists. ... The farther we mount up into antiquity, the more do we find mankind plunged into polytheism. No marks, no symptoms of any more perfect religion. The most ancient records of human race still present us with that system as the popular and established creed. ... What can be opposed to so full an evidence?

As far as writing or history reaches, mankind, in ancient times, appear universally to have been polytheists. ...

... The savage tribes of AMERICA, AFRICA, and ASIA are all idolaters. Not a single exception to this rule. (NHR 4:310-11)

What *can* be opposed to so full an evidence? Nothing, perhaps, except the "doubtful and sceptical principles of a few philosophers, or the theism, and that too not entirely pure, of *one or two nations*" (emphasis added) he mentions all too briefly. These he claims "form no objection worth regarding" (NHR 4:310).<sup>5</sup> But for an *empirical* study of the nature he presumably is undertaking they *do* form a critically important exception because they militate from the start against not only his account of the origin of polytheism, but especially the *subsequent* derivation of traditional theism. Unless he can explain, rather than ignore, such anomalies—present as far back as his evidence goes—his causal account is not so much false as fundamentally misleading and incomplete: the empirical evidence available to him offers no reason to believe that polytheism was the original religion of mankind.

That there is a second, non-empirical component to the argument suggests Hume is aware of this, however. On the one hand, he contends that

[A] according to the natural progress of human thought, the ignorant multitude must first entertain some groveling and familiar notion of superior powers, before they stretch their conception to that perfect Being, who bestowed order on the whole frame of nature. ... The mind rises gradually, from inferior to superior: ... Nothing could disturb this natural progress of thought, but some obvious and invincible argument [viz. the Design argument], which might

immediately lead the mind into the pure principles of theism,

...

[B] ... But a barbarous, necessitous animal (such as man is on the first origin of society) pressed by such numerous wants and passions, has no leisure to admire the regular face of nature, or make enquiries concerning the cause of those objects, to which, from his infancy, he has been gradually accustomed. On the contrary, the more regular and uniform, ... [it is] the less inclined [is he] to scrutinize and examine it. (NHR 4:311-12)

(A), of course, only amounts to a different formulation of the thesis at issue. (B) is offered as one reason to suppose it in fact is correct. But provided the empirical data, it cannot be used to support (A) without begging the question. Indeed, as he later claims, "[e]ven the contrarities of nature, by discovering themselves every where, become proofs of some consistent plan, and establish one single purpose or intention, however inexplicable and incomprehensible" (NHR 4:361). Early society did not need a Newton to draw their attention to some "consistent plan" in nature.

On the other hand, he argues that

if men were at first led into the belief of one Supreme Being, by reasoning from the frame of nature, they could never possibly leave that belief, in order to embrace polytheism; but the same principles of reason, which at first produced and diffused over mankind, so magnificent an opinion, must be able, with greater facility, to preserve it. The first invention and proof of any doctrine is much more difficult than the supporting and retaining of it.

... Which ever side of this dilemma we take, it must appear impossible, that theism could, from reasoning, have been the primary religion of human race, and have afterwards, by its corruption, given birth to polytheism and to all the various superstitions of the heathen world. Reason, when obvious, prevents these corruptions: When abstruse, it keeps the principles entirely from the knowledge of the vulgar, who are alone liable to corrupt any principle or opinion. (NHR 4:313)

If monotheism were original, polytheism would never have arisen. This is due to the efficacy of reasoning needed in the first place to "diffuse so magnificent an opinion and preserve it."<sup>6</sup> But polytheism is pervasive, so monotheism cannot have been the original religion of mankind. It is important to note that even if this argument is correct,

## THE ARGUMENT OF THE *NATURAL HISTORY*

it fails to establish his thesis about polytheism. This is because the view under discussion in the argument is "pure" theism, not traditional theism. But it is the latter for which he is attempting to provide a natural history. Given this I can think of two alternatives that obviate his argument. One is that possibly theism and polytheism were *co-present* from the start. The empirical evidence available to him in fact suggests this. At this point we—as did Hume and his contemporaries—lack compelling reasons to believe that theism was the progeny of polytheism.

While this objection challenges one part of Hume's strategy, it doesn't challenge the plausibility of the general causal account he offers in terms of "an anxious fear of future events." The following passage from the "General Corollary" suggests why:

The universal propensity to believe in invisible, intelligent power, if not an original instinct, being at least a general attendant of human nature, may be considered as a kind of mark or stamp, which the divine workman has set upon his work; and nothing surely can more dignify mankind, than to be thus selected from all other parts of the creation, and to bear the image or impression of the universal Creator. (NHR 4:362)

This is quite a remarkable claim coming from Hume. And it indicates why his general causal account need not undermine one's confidence in traditionally held religious beliefs—the two are not intrinsically inimical. This in turn suggests the second alternative I just alluded to: this claim coupled with his inability to show that theism was the progeny of polytheism might reasonably be taken by the orthodox of his day to support what they believed all along: that polytheism is in fact a corruption of theism. Nothing about his causal account precludes this possibility; the historical evidence is neutral concerning it; but the remark that mankind bears the image of the universal Creator would, in the minds of the orthodox, legitimate traditional belief about the matter.

Earlier I claimed that the *Natural History* is principally a moral critique aimed at severing allegiance to traditional religion. I also claimed that the natural history forms an important part of Hume's strategy to this end. In the first chapter he is attempting to make credible a claim which he hopes will encourage religious devotees to embrace sounder principles: orthodoxy at the time considered polytheism a corruption of theism, silly and unworthy of serious belief; the causal account inverts that picture and via Cotta's artifice is intended to ridicule, if not silence them. But Hume fails to show that

theism is the progeny of polytheism; and his own comments indicate why a causal account of the origin of religious belief need not be at all odious to orthodoxy.<sup>7</sup> So this part of the strategy falters. Perhaps he can engage the orthodox by offering other reasons to suppose traditional religion is unworthy of serious commitment; but he cannot do so by appeal to its historical origins. As we shall see below, at issue is not the primacy of one or another religion, but the negative consequences he believes society suffers from "popular" religion.

### **The "Moral" Critique of the *Natural History***

The sections following 9 constitute Hume's central critique of traditional theism (or religion). Polytheism proves the better of the two both because of its tendency to be tolerant and its agreeableness—it, unlike theism, he claims, encourages "activity, spirit, courage, magnanimity, love of liberty, and all the virtues which aggrandize a people" (NHR 4:339)—qualities he believes any sensible person will prize. Against traditional religion he levels three general criticisms. One is that it degrades the deity by attributing to it moral characters no one would ascribe even to "a man of sense and virtue" (NHR 4:362). A second is that it has directly negative consequences on social life. And the third is that, if not directly, it nevertheless indirectly affects it by diverting individuals away from the pursuit of the virtuous life. Each criticism should strike a discordant note in the hearts of the pious, for each is a direct challenge to deeply held beliefs. Each criticism is also related to a central claim of his which we shall come to in a moment. To this end, the following passage is suggestive of what bothers him:

It is certain, that, in every religion, however sublime the verbal definition which it gives of its divinity, many of the votaries, perhaps the greatest number, will still seek the divine favour, not by virtue and good morals, which alone can be acceptable to a perfect being,<sup>8</sup> but either by frivolous observances, by intemperate zeal, by rapturous extasies, or by the belief of mysterious and absurd opinions. ...

... He considers not, that the most genuine method of serving the divinity is by promoting the happiness of his creatures. He still looks out for some more immediate service of the supreme Being, in order to allay those terrors, with which he is haunted. ... In restoring a loan, or paying a debt, his divinity is nowise beholden to him; because these acts of justice are what he was bound to perform, and what many would have performed, were there no god in the universe. (NHR 4:357-59)

What really bothers Hume is not so much that practitioners degrade the deity, but the consequent bearing he takes this to have on the mundane matters of life: they cannot see, he claims, that "[i]n short, all virtue, when men are reconciled to it by ever so little practice, is agreeable: All superstition [that is, traditional religion] is for ever odious and burthensome" (NHR 4:358). This is a rather barbed criticism. One immediate question that arises, though, is that if this is the case, why are not more individuals reconciled to "virtue," and away from "superstition"? Another is what, more specifically, lies behind this criticism and what force does it carry? With both his moral assessment and this question in mind, let us turn to the second *Enquiry*, as in the end we must if we are going to accurately understand the *Natural History*.

In the second *Enquiry* Hume undertakes to "discover the true origins of morals." To this end he analyses the notion of "Personal Merit"—that composite of mental qualities that renders every object or act either agreeable and useful, or not. He maintains one need only "enter into his own breast for a moment, and consider whether or not he should desire to have this or that quality ascribed to him, and whether such or such an imputation would proceed from a friend or an enemy" (E 174). Here reason's role is to determine what features are common to "estimable" and "inestimable" qualities; that is, to "[instruct] us in the several tendencies of actions"—whether they are useful or not (E 286). He thereby hopes to reach the "foundation of ethics," and those "universal principles, from which all censure or approbation is ultimately derived" (E 174). As a question of fact, he claims, we can accomplish this only by deducing (à la Newton) general maxims from a comparison of particular instances; thereby founding this system of ethics on fact and observation.

One quick route into Hume's moral thought which also illuminates his problems with religion proceeds via his account of justice, what he calls an "artificial" virtue. Justice and religion are similar in that neither is a primary instinct on his view (in ways that need not detain us); but here the similarity ends. As justice tends to promote public utility and support civil society, but is not an original instinct, he claims, the *sentiment* of justice derives from reflecting on that tendency. The merit of justice lies in its usefulness to society. He goes on to argue that "the *sole* origin of justice" is its public utility; and that "the beneficial consequences of this virtue are the *sole* foundation of its merit" (E 183). The origin of justice lies in its utility; that of religion in ignorance and fear. Finally, he claims that (concerning the artificial virtues) the sole foundation for any duty is the advantage it procures to society. Religion as he depicts it in the *Natural History* (and

elsewhere) clearly proves disadvantageous to society—and thus to be dispensed with.

Since the sole foundation for any moral obligation is the usefulness it renders society, we need to determine what it is for some deed or action to be useful. Hume states that the useful is “what is agreeable and engages our approbation.” What is morally obligatory for him seems to coincide with what is “useful,” where what is useful proves agreeable, thus engaging our attention. The one difference is that in the former case but not the latter there is an additional sentiment of praise or blame that arises as a result of reason’s calculation of the utility or disutility of the character or action in question. In large part then, to say as he does that all virtue is agreeable, but all superstition is forever odious and burthensome, is just to say that the former but not the latter is useful and agreeable to society. It is precisely this feature which motivates the moral critique of the *Natural History*, and pervades its pages. And the implicit moral claim is that one *should* desist from or dispense with “superstition”—that is, traditional religion. I now want to consider what weight Hume’s claim merits given the resources of his moral theory.

I think we can see that it merits little if any weight by examining section 9 of the second *Enquiry*. Here he recapitulates the essential features of his moral theory in a straightforward and helpful manner. He reiterates that personal merit consists entirely in the possession of mental qualities useful or agreeable “either to the *person himself* or to *others*” (E 268). Thus:

[A] as every quality, which is useful or agreeable to ourselves or others, is, in common life, allowed to be a part of personal merit; so [B] no other will ever be received, where men judge of things by their natural, unprejudiced reason, without the delusive glosses of superstition and false religion. [C] Celibacy, fasting, penance, mortification, self-denial, humility, silence, solitude, and the whole train of monkish virtues; for what reason are they every where rejected by men of sense, but because [D] they serve to no manner of purpose; neither advance a man’s fortune in the world, nor render him a more valuable member of society; neither qualify him for the entertainment of company, nor encrease his power of self-enjoyment? ... We justly, ... transfer them to the opposite column, and place them in the catalogue of vices; nor has any superstition force sufficient, among men of the world, to pervert entirely these natural sentiments. (E 270)

## THE ARGUMENT OF THE *NATURAL HISTORY*

This passage contains in a nutshell both his fundamental attitude towards traditional religion and his basis for repudiating it in all its forms. The characters he associates with religion are not only useless but also counterproductive to the well-being and happiness of society as he understands it—any person of sense should recognize this and act accordingly. But as a generalization (D) just seems false, even if we limit the purposes in question to secular ones as he no doubt intends. It is not at all implausible to suppose that, for example, self-denial or silence or solitude might not “advance a man’s fortunes in the world, or render him a more valuable member of society, or increase his self-enjoyment” etc. Indeed the work of the artist, musician, writer, or leader often is enhanced by such “monkish” virtues. (A), (B), and (C) are similarly problematic.

Let us ignore these, though, and consider what motivates and warrants such claims. First, Hume maintains that every individual is in some small degree naturally good. That is, everyone shares a “common humanity,” where what this means is that we are each to some degree concerned for the public good. This concern or sentiment naturally prefers what is useful and serviceable to humanity above what is pernicious and dangerous. He is careful though to distinguish between the common sentiment of humanity, on which morality is founded, and more personal sentiments; and this distinction plays a crucial role in his moral theory. Here I quote him at length, as the argument I am about to give turns on a right reading of this passage:

When a man denominates another his *enemy*, his *rival*, his *antagonist*, his *adversary*, he is understood to speak the language of self-love, and to express sentiments, peculiar to himself, and arising from his particular circumstances and situation. But when he bestows on any man the epithets of *vicious* or *odious* or *depraved* [or *superstitious?*], he then speaks another language, and expresses sentiments, in which, he expects, all his audience are to concur with him. He must here, therefore, depart from his private and particular situation, and must chuse a point of view, common to him with others: He must move some universal principle of the human frame, and touch a string, to which all mankind have an accord and symphony [viz. the public good]. If he means, therefore, to express, that this man possesses qualities, whose tendency is pernicious to society, he has chosen this common point of view, and has touched the principle of humanity, in which every man, in some degree, concurs. While the human heart is compounded of the same elements as at present, it will never be wholly indifferent to the public good, nor entirely

unaffected with the tendency of characters and manners [to affect the public good]. And though this affection of humanity may not generally be esteemed so strong as vanity or ambition, yet, being common to all men, it can alone be the foundation of morals, or of any general system of blame or praise. *One man's ambition is not another's ambition; nor will the same event or object satisfy both: But the humanity of one man is the humanity of every one; and the same object touches this passion in all human creatures* [emphasis added].

But the sentiments, which arise from humanity, are not only the same in all human creatures, and produce the same approbation or censure; but they also comprehend all human creatures; nor is there any one whose conduct or character is not, by their means, an object, to every one, of censure or approbation. (E 272-73)

Hume goes on to state that 'virtue' and 'vice' denote the universal sentiments of approbation and censure "which arise from humanity, or from views of general usefulness and its contrary" (E 274).

So: one man's ambition is not another's; but the humanity of one man is the humanity of every one's, such that the same object touches this passion in all human creatures. Keep this in mind as I now offer what I take to be the argument of (or behind) the *Natural History*, and then a response. The argument (and my response) turns on the distinction he draws between "the common sentiment of humanity" upon which morality is based, and more personal or peculiar ones which have no bearing on morality. And it runs as follows:

- (a) Whatever conduct gains my approbation or disapprobation—by touching my humanity—procures also the applause of all mankind, by affecting the same principle in them: but what serves my avarice or ambition pleases these passions in me alone, and affects not the avarice and ambition of the rest of mankind.
- (b) Traditional religion gains my disapprobation, by touching my humanity.
- (c) Therefore, it should procure the same disapprobation in others.<sup>9</sup>

It seems to me undeniable that something like this argument motivates the *Natural History*. That it does so explains, on the one hand, the generally negative thrust of the work: this is just what one would expect

given (i) Hume's conviction that traditional religion lacks any basis in reason, and (ii) his strong emphasis in the *Enquiry* on the need to engage the affections of adherents to such systems. And assuming I am correct about the unstated aim of the natural history, it renders intelligible the otherwise mysterious presence of the moral critique of traditional religion within a causal account of its development. The *Natural History* is a subtle exercise in applied ethics: given Hume's conviction that traditional religion lacks any basis in reason, and provided his moral theory, what is needed is to depict the "deformity" of traditional religion and individuals should avoid it and embrace sounder principles.

But now add the obvious fact that

- (d) Traditional religion does not procure the same sentiment of disapprobation in all (or most), others.

and we get a reductio of either Hume's claim or his moral theory. More specifically, either (a) or (b) is false. If (b) is true, then (a) is false. For what gains his "disapprobation" does not, as his view requires, procure the same sentiment in all mankind—at least with respect to traditional religion. His moral theory therefore appears untenable. Yet if (a) is the case, that is if we admit the cogency of his moral theory, then by the forgoing reasoning his criticisms in the *Natural History* imply that he is speaking the language of *self-love*—"expressing sentiments, peculiar to himself, and arising from his particular circumstances and situation"—which has no bearing on morality. In either case it evidently appears that the sentiment of disapprobation expressed throughout the *Natural History* toward traditional religion lacks moral moorings.

How might Hume respond? Recall that for him it is the men of sense who, judging "by their natural, unprejudiced reason, without the delusive glosses of superstition and false religion," reject the monkish virtues. So one quite likely response he might make is the contention that his moral theory is cogent and his claim (b) correct, but that those individuals who make (d) the case are in fact defective—in some sense prejudiced by education or upbringing, or some such thing—for which reason they are not counterexamples to either his position or his claims. Now this may be correct; but the claim is problematic. For example given his claims about a "common humanity," to claim that exceptions to his sentiment of disapprobation are defective clearly begs the question unless he can provide reasons to consider them defective *independent* of the fact that they are exceptions. On the other hand, to claim that such exceptions do exist renders dubious his claim that "the humanity of one man is the humanity of every one," and consequently

his claim that a common humanity "can alone be the foundation for morals." And finally, it is not impossible, nor highly unlikely, that one or more individuals might take up "the common point of view" with respect to the public good, and *not* feel disapprobation towards traditional religion. The last response alone is sufficient to rebut the claim that exceptions to Hume's sentiment are defective, so long as one holds steadfast to the claims of the *second Enquiry*.

Hume's sentiment of "disapprobation" towards traditional religion either reflects self-love or is based on an untenable moral theory. I noted at the start of this paper that the *Natural History* was probably written with the conviction that traditional religion lacks any basis in reason; I now submit that the sentiment of disapprobation expressed by the *Natural History* also lacks a basis in reason. This in turn brings to mind an important claim Hume makes early in the *second Enquiry*: "And as reasoning is not the source, whence either disputant derives his tenets; it is in vain to expect, that any logic, which speaks not to the affections, will ever engage him to embrace sounder principles" (E 169).<sup>10</sup> Consonant with this he asks

what philosophical truths can be more advantageous to society, than those here delivered, which represent virtue in all her genuine and most engaging charms, and make us approach her with ease, familiarity, and affection? The dismal dress falls off, with which many divines, ... had covered her; and nothing appears but gentleness, humanity, beneficence, affability; nay even, at proper intervals, play, frolic, and gaiety. She talks not of useless austerities and rigours, suffering and self-denial. ... The sole trouble, which she demands, is that of just calculation, and a steady preference of the greater happiness. And if any austere pretenders approach her, enemies to joy and pleasure, she either rejects them as hypocrites and deceivers; or ... they are ranked, ... among the least favoured of her votaries.

And, indeed, to drop all figurative expression, what hopes can we ever have of engaging mankind to a practice, which we confess full of austerity and rigour? Or what theory of morality can ever serve any useful purpose, unless it can show, by a particular detail, that all the duties, which it recommends, are also the true interest of each individual? (E 279-80)

In favour of his own view he remarks that "The peculiar advantage of the foregoing system, seems to be, that it furnishes proper mediums for that purpose" (E 280).

## THE ARGUMENT OF THE *NATURAL HISTORY*

Adherents to traditional religion can heartily endorse Hume's remarks in the last paragraph of the quoted passage. The crucial test for his own view in the earlier part of this passage is whether the manner in which he has arrayed "virtue" engages others' "affections." Indeed, does it? This I cannot answer on behalf of his contemporaries or those coming afterwards. But especially critical for Hume's enterprise at this point—assuming that "reason is not the source whence *either* disputant derives his tenets"—it remains the case for many, those who are already adherents and those who so become, that many of the claims of traditional religion strike them as profound, and its practices as deeply meaningful. In a word they "stir the heart" in ways his own view evidently does not. For Hume, what can be opposed to so full an evidence? What he must show is that "austerities and rigors, suffering and self-denial," among other features commonly ascribed to traditional religion, are not conducive to the "true" interest of each individual. Hume would dispute this. Yet in light of the preceding discussion he must offer better, more *engaging* reasons than he has for believing that religious adherents are pursuing the wrong end than that that way of life does not engage him.

The aim of the *Natural History* is clear: it bids religious adherents to "embrace sounder principles." To this end Hume employs a two-part strategy that involves a subtle use of the natural history of traditional religion on the one hand and a moral critique of it on the other. The enterprise itself is just what one might expect given the second *Enquiry* and Hume's disdain for traditional religion. While subtle and ingenious, his strategy has nevertheless been shown wanting. The causal account of the origin of religious belief is really quite acceptable to orthodoxy; and his sentiment of disapprobation either reflects self-love or is based on an untenable moral theory. Of course this does not mean that the *Natural History* must fail to engage one's affections. But it does mean that religious adherents can legitimately ignore it. And I suspect this might have deeply troubled Hume—at least for a time!<sup>11</sup>

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1. David Hume, *Natural History of Religion*, in *The Philosophical Works*, ed. T. H. Green and T. H. Grose, 4 vols. (Darmstadt, 1964), 4:310 (hereafter cited as "NHR").
2. David Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, ed. N. Kemp Smith (Indianapolis, 1947), 219 (hereafter cited as "D").

3. David Hume, *Enquiries Concerning the Human Understanding and Concerning the Principles of Morals*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge, 3d ed., rev., ed. P. H. Nidditch (Oxford, 1975), 169-70, emphasis added (hereafter cited as "E").
4. This claim will appear at odds with Hume's latter claim that theism represents an improvement over polytheism. Suffice it to say at this point that he is thinking of "pure" theism and not traditional theism, which he actually considers morally inferior to polytheism and no better (except by accident) rationally speaking.
5. The claim is reminiscent of his response to the anomalous "missing shade of blue."
6. See also the beginning of sec. 2, 4:313. Such a high view of the efficacy of reason complicates the question of who (if any single character) speaks for Hume in the *Dialogues*. It also raises the related questions of whether his views changed between the *Natural History* and the (completed) *Dialogues*; or whether we are to take his claim about the efficacy of reason advanced in the former seriously. If he was not serious about its efficacy, which he iterates several times in the *Natural History*, then my claim, that his thesis about polytheism is primarily a ploy intended to render theism unattractive because (presumably) ignoble, gains considerably more credibility. But if serious, then he evidently underwent a change of heart by the time the *Dialogues* was completed; or else he was having a lot of fun there (or both). Finally in lieu of these considerations one might read Cleanthes as the pre-*Dialogue* Hume, Philo as a latter Hume; and Pamphilus as a young impressionable Hume, or perhaps Hume "out of his study."
7. Cf. the much older, interesting claim made at Eccles. 3:10-11: "He [God] has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity in the hearts of men; yet they cannot fathom what God has done from beginning to end." Among other things, the Hebrew for 'eternity' connotes what is hidden and future, such that the thrust of the passage is that what is hidden and future constitutes a major concern or drive of humanity.
8. In the moral domain and unlike Philo in the *Dialogues*, Hume apparently has no qualms about conceiving the deity after his own fashion.
9. The first premise is taken almost verbatim from E 274; the other two accurately represent his views as stated throughout the *Enquiry* and the *Natural History*. I have read Hume's moral theory as a descriptive rather than a normative one. Thus I use 'should'—understood in a descriptive or predictive sense—rather than 'ought' in premise (c). To read his theory normatively would seem to involve an invalid attempt to derive 'ought' from 'is', which

## THE ARGUMENT OF THE *NATURAL HISTORY*

he denied was possible and is not likely to be what he intended. I am indebted to Phil Quinn for bringing this last point to my attention.

10. Neither here nor in what follows do I think I am misrepresenting Hume. See e.g. E 276-78 where among other things he "falls back into diffidence and scepticism" with respect to the central tenets of his own moral theory; yet doggedly persists in his belief that it is useful and should prove agreeable to society at large.
11. I am indebted to Neil Delaney, David O'Connor, and Philip Quinn for incisive comments on earlier versions of this paper.