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The French Context of Hume's Philosophical Theology

ALAN CHARLES KORS

As a student of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries in France, I am struck by the change of landscape as one moves from commentary upon Cartesians, Malebranchists, Aristotelians, and Thomists to commentary upon Hume. The most striking topographical difference occurs in the adjectives that dominate the scholarly terrain. We say "systematic"; you say "modified." We say "unyielding"; you say "attenuated." We say "absolute"; you say "partial." We say "representative"; you say "a kind of." The adverbs also differ. Above all, we say "obviously"; you say "perhaps." What creatures of our subjects we are!

In *The Orthodox Sources of Disbelief*, volume one of my *Atheism in France, 1650–1729*, Hume receives, in all senses, slight attention. The index refers the reader merely to two pages. Desiring glib rhetorical reinforcement of my main thesis—that the debates of orthodox Catholic French learned culture, in the two generations following Descartes's death, had generated the arguments and motifs of disbelief well before the Enlightenment—I twice made ignoble use of the singular Hume. Thus, concluding a chapter on Cartesian and Malebranchist assaults upon proofs of God from the order, law and purposes of the world, I opined as follows about proof from the sensible world: "It was a powerful current of Christian philosophical theology, however, that, *long before Hume*, sought to vitiate the use of such 'évidence' as a proof of God."¹ This was wholly gratuitous, but it was a positively substantive intellectual reflection upon Hume compared to my second and final reference.

Concluding an analysis of seventeenth century Christian scholastic-Christian Cartesian fratricide in natural theology—the mutual refutations of proofs of the existence and providence of a perfect being by competing camps of Aristotelian, Cartesian and Malebranchist Christian philosophers and theologians—I sought to convey my view that the subversive agency of orthodox debate had been profoundly unappreciated by historians. Here, alas, are my exact words: “Who needed freethinkers? Who needed a few articles in Bayle? Who needed Hume?”² This was disreputable!

My task then, addressing students of Hume rather than students of the French seventeenth century, is to frame the issue of the relationship between the two subjects more usefully than “long before Hume” and “Who needed Hume?” Without arguing, necessarily, for a direct influence of prior French debate about philosophical theology upon David Hume, let me seek to clarify a European, albeit French, context of thinking about philosophical theology against which to view the work of David Hume. One might conclude from this some of the specific ways in which Hume was indeed a man of his intellectual age; at a minimum, one might derive from this a set of other contextual responses to early modern dilemmas in philosophical theology against which to see with more clarity the commonplaces and originality of Hume’s thought. Researchers such as Laird, Popkin, Peter Jones and J. P. Pittion, among others, already have stressed certain French influences upon Hume: the varying effects of his reading of Malebranche and Bayle upon his thinking about knowledge, ideas, the mind-body problem, and causality, and upon his thinking about skepticism, faith, scripture, testimony, miracles, and the judgment of critics. I focus here on the context of French debates concerning demonstrations of the existence of God, a significant context with which Hume certainly appeared familiar, and, given his references and his stay at La Flèche, with which it would be surprising were he not familiar.

There is, of course, a direct set of well-known citations by Hume. In the *Treatise* and other major works, he refers to texts by Arnauld, Nicole, “Malebranche and other Cartesians,” and even to the former rector of the University of Paris, Charles Rollin. Indeed, there are very few direct citations of other authors in the *Treatise*, but so many of those are precisely to the French. Although Pierre-Daniel Huet receives scant attention from most Hume scholars, there is, of course, the reference to “Mons. Huet” in the *Dialogues*, in addition to the more attended references to Malebranche. Huet and Malebranche, however, were not merely participants in Aristotelian-Cartesian contestation about proofs of God, but, in certain essential ways, products of it.

Further, there are the references to and citations from the French learned world in “Hume’s Early Memoranda, 1729–1740,” published by E. C. Mossner in 1948. For anyone versed in philosophical, theological and critical debates of France from the late seventeenth through the early eighteenth centuries,

Hume's readings are more than familiar and more than intriguing. First, there are the multiple references to Bayle's *Dictionnaire Historique et Critique*, which, I have argued elsewhere, was a work explicitly referential to those debates, an agency in the further diffusion of French contestations about proof of God and His attributes, and a source far more reflective of contemporaneous works than it was original. In that learned world, savants and scholars passionately analyzed ancient philosophy to determine the criteria of theistic or atheistic systems. Much discussion focused on the question of whether pre-Socratic or Stoic philosophy posited a first principle distinct from the natural world—on Strato, for example, and the problem of immanence as naturalism implicit in many of Hume's later analyses.³

Further, while French Aristotelian critics of the Cartesians sought to vitiate all *a priori* proof of God and leave only *a posteriori* proofs standing, Cartesian (and Malebranchist) critics of Aristotle's and Aquinas's heirs sought to invalidate all *a posteriori* proof of God, and leave only *a priori* proofs intact. Did such debates touch Hume? Here is Hume in his "Early Memoranda": "Strato's Atheism the most dangerous of the Antient, holding the Origin of the World from Nature, or a Matter endu'd with Activity. Baile thinks that there are none but the Cartesians can refute this." Here again is Hume, in the midst of arguments referred to Bayle: "The Argument *a priori*. That no necessary existent Being can be limited is only conclusive that there is an intelligent Being who antecedently forms the Idea of infinite Perfection and resolves to work up to his Model: Which implys a Contradiction." Again, before he turns from Bayle to King, Hume wrote: "Those, who solve the Difficultys concerning the Origin of Ill by the Apology of general Laws suppose another Motive beside Goodness in the Creation of the World." Again, from Bayle: "Whether a Cause is Necessary? Whether necessary to an eternal Being? Whether necessary in every new Moment of a successive Being? Whether necessary in Motion."⁴ All of these "notes" refer to essential debates that obsessed the French learned world of the late seventeenth century and occupied center stage in contestations about a proper natural philosophy by which to demonstrate and explicate the preambles of Christian faith—above all, the existence of a perfect, transcendent and creative God.

To take another example, few works gained more attention, or, in the wake of extensive and acrimonious commentary, occasioned more controversy than Fénélon's *Démonstration de l'Existence de Dieu*. Among other things, it educed a sharp debate on the relative merits of *a priori* and *a posteriori* proofs of God, and it focused intensely on the issue of the relationship of atheism to theologies of immanence. In Hume's early notes, we find the following three propositions derived from his reading of Fénélon: First, "Some pretend that there can be no Necessity according to the System of Atheism: Because even Matter cannot be determin'd without something Superior to

determine it." Secondly, "Being & Truth & Goodness the same." Thirdly, "Three Proofs for the Existence of a God. 1. something necessarily existent, & what is so is infinitely perfect. 2. The Idea of Infinite must come from an infinite Being. 3. The idea of infinite Perfection implies that of actual Existence."⁵ In France, in response to the *Demonstration* Hume read, the ascendant Jesuits argued that Fénélon had added those last "three proofs" merely to offer *ad hominem* arguments to the poor Cartesians, since no such putative proof was logically compelling; the leading journal of the French Catholic learned world, the *Journal de Trévoux*, equated the "Spinozism" Fénélon attacked with Malebranche's view of God as "Being in general"; and a country priest began a debate with Fénélon in the margins of his copy, which culminated in the atheistic testament of the curé Jean Meslier.⁶ If nothing else, scholars devoted to Hume might be interested in knowing the sorts of dilemmas and theses produced in French intellectual life by the French philosophical theology and criticism with which we know the young Hume was familiar. Perhaps it will allow a few more useful contrasts and comparisons, or a bit of light shed on the conceptual potential of Hume's early readings, or ways of viewing Hume as more fully the product of a certain moment of a broader European intellectual culture.

Two phenomena in seventeenth century French learned life joined to make both the issues of and the crisis in fundamental philosophical theology acute and passionately followed. First, we shall see, by the mid-seventeenth century, it was virtually a dogma of the French Catholic Church that the existence of a perfect God was not an article of the faith, but a preamble of the faith whose easy demonstration fell to natural philosophy. Secondly, there was an intense rivalry among three major schools of such natural philosophy—Aristotelian, Cartesian, and Malebranchist. This was a contestation whose stakes, both spiritual and material, were breathtakingly high: the right to speak philosophically and institutionally for the Church of God on earth. As in all ages, philosophers of such competing schools have known how to go for the jugular without appearing to become *ad hominem*. In seventeenth century France, this took the form of reducing one's opponents to impotence against the hypothetical atheist, to claim, in effect, that rival philosophies were so incoherent and inconsistent that they failed to establish the obvious existence of perfect being against a logical though incredulous disputant. This mutual *reductio ad atheismum* informed almost all orthodox philosophical debate about fundamental claims. Its intent never was to bring the existence of God as perfect being and creator into question, but to demonstrate the absurdity of one's opponents' natural philosophy. Its effect, however, was to circulate, quite widely, astute and ingenious objections to every extant ostensible demonstration of the existence of such a perfect being and creator. By reading Huet, Malebranche, Fénélon and the eclectic and philosophically

gossipy Bayle, who, fideist that he had become, delighted in popularizing such mutual fratricide, Hume would have had full contact with that phenomenon.

The elevation of *preambulae fidei* in French thought from merely an analysis of the logical sequence of philosophical demonstration, which it was for Aquinas, to a precondition of belief provides, perhaps, a striking contrast to the British learned world. As the young Bayle taught in his own philosophy course at Sedan, "If we give faith to Holy Scripture, it is because we believe that it is the word of God. Now, before believing that a thing is the word of God, one must believe that there is a God. The knowledge of divine existence thus precedes the knowledge of this Revelation, and is presupposed by it, from which it follows that it comes from natural light."⁷ For the Jansenist theologian and royal professor of philosophy Louis Ellies Dupin, in his *Traité de la doctrine chrétienne et orthodoxe* (1703), religious truth depended upon the reasonableness of submitting our reason to divine revelation, a submission made reasonable only by the certainty that "God cannot deceive men by revealing falsities as truths," which we knew not by faith, which would be circular, but by "natural reason." To avoid paralogism, we depended upon what was "known by the lights of nature, and provable by reason." As Dupin concluded, it was not only "permissible, [and] useful," but "even necessary to join Reason to Faith in order to establish [Christian doctrines]."⁸

In such argument, semi-Cartesians such as Dupin did not disagree with the leading Aristotelian philosophers of Catholic France. Pierre Barbay, France's foremost Aristotelian philosopher of the second half of the seventeenth century, whose courses at the University of Paris helped shape the thinking of a generation, vigorously rejected the notion that a Christian philosophy should posit the proposition *Deus est* as "a first principle of Metaphysics." Rather, Barbay insisted, the only indisputable first principle of metaphysics was that "it was impossible for something to be and not to be at the same time," from which any demonstration of the existence of God had to follow. Only *after* such demonstration could natural philosophy then address the issue of divine attributes, seeking to derive that divine veracity from which the truth of Revelation logically followed.⁹ Similarly, the Sorbonniste and Aristotelian doctor of theology François Feu termed natural philosophical proof of God the "precondition" of all theology.¹⁰

Such commonplace arguments were stated in yet starker terms when the imagined interlocutor was the skeptic, even framed as the most sincere fideist. Thus, in 1661, Jean de Silhon (*De la certitude des connoissances humaines*) warned that skeptical philosophy and Christian faith were incompatible, since the faith itself could not stand without rational conviction that "there is some Sovereign Being to whom all nature is subject, and who...can neither be deceived Himself in His knowledge nor want to deceive others." Acceptance of the faith required prior certainty of the existence of the God who revealed that

faith and could not deceive, a certainty that must be secured against any possible skeptical philosophy. "Constant and indubitable [natural] truths," Silhon insisted, were essential to Christianity.¹¹

In 1675, faced with the skeptical academic philosophy of canon Simon Foucher, the eminent Benedictine philosopher Dom Robert Desgabets warned that without a natural criterion of certainty, "we would not be assured that there is a real world, a religion, a God." Whatever the sincerity of fideists,

it is not an inconsiderable evil to reverse as much as they do the natural order which requires that one be convinced by reason of the immortality of the soul and of the existence of God *before* one proposes our mysteries.¹²

In 1696, the yet more influential Benedictine philosopher Dom François Lamy put the matter as directly as possible: without metaphysical certainty, there was no way

[to] be persuaded that there is a God, or that there is not; that He is free and intelligent, or that He is not; that He has a providence full of light and wisdom, or that He has not; that He is just, veracious, omnipotent, and the true cause of everything that has being, or that He is not.

In brief, for Lamy, "nothing is more important to man than the knowledge of a [metaphysical] science which alone can give him the means of sorting out the best parts of all that." He concluded:

Religion and the certitude of the faith themselves depend in some fashion on metaphysics, for it is necessary for metaphysical philosophy to prove for them at least that there is a God; that this God is not a deceiver; and that His testimony is infallible.¹³

Lamy's text was published with the approbation of Fénelon himself, and with further approbations from powerful theologians.¹⁴ Ten years later, in his *Premiers éléments des sciences*, Lamy reiterated this view of the role of natural philosophy: reason first must establish the existence of a God incapable of deception before faith in His word can occur; "to believe by faith that God exists would be to accept the word of a being whom you did not yet know to exist, which would be absurd."¹⁵

Indeed, the most influential of all French Catholic philosophers and theologians at the end of the seventeenth century, Nicolas Malebranche himself, unambiguously completed the equation of *preambulae fidei* with essential obligation to prove God by natural philosophy prior to real faith. In his *Conversations chrétiennes*, which enjoyed seven editions, one interlocutor

declared himself "convinced by faith, but...not fully convinced of it by reason." Théodore, Malebranche's voice, replied:

If you say things as you think them, you are convinced of it neither by reason nor by faith. For do you not see that the certitude of the faith comes from the authority of a God who speaks, and who cannot be a deceiver. If you are not convinced by reason that there is a God, how will you be that He has spoken? Can you know that He has spoken, without knowing that He is?¹⁶

Malebranche's bitterest foes, the Jesuits of the *Journal de Trévoux*, did not disagree on this point. As they noted in a review of Sextus Empiricus,

How will I believe that there is a God if I must distrust my reason which tells me it, and the wonders of nature which announce it to me...? If I have no Criterium, no discernment, no rule of truth or certainty, what will assure me thus of the existence of this God?¹⁷

With all sides of Aristotelian, Cartesian and Malebranchist debates agreed that natural proof of God's existence was essential to a coherent Christian theology, the easiest demonstration of the utter intellectual bankruptcy of one's opponents' philosophical systems was to undertake the refutation of *their* alleged demonstrations of a perfect being. That is precisely what two generations of French philosophical theology undertook. They bequeathed to the European learned world an arsenal of powerfully framed, putative refutations long before Hume gave thought to his *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, and, in France, at any rate, they gave rise precisely to the kinds of skepticism the supposed danger of which had provided the rationale for such a mode of rivalry. As Bayle explained in his celebrated discussion of proofs of God in the notes to his article "Zabarella," the faith neither prescribed nor proscribed any particular philosophical route to natural knowledge of God, and Christian philosophers were perfectly free to criticize and reject any proofs of God found wanting. As Bayle observed, the greatest theologians and philosophers often had refuted each other's demonstrations as a means of eliminating specious proofs and of establishing the most solid. He explicitly referred his readers to the arguments of contemporary learned journals in which the most devout theologians of divergent philosophical persuasion could assail each other's proofs of God with great fervor, without ever having their motives called into question.¹⁸

There was an analytic ferocity to the Aristotelian assaults upon Descartes's two celebrated proofs and upon Malebranche's revision of the proof from objective being (a revision that his defenders believed had saved Descartes's first proof, but that Cartesian purists believed had betrayed it). Hume would

have encountered these in both Huet and in Bayle, and in Malebranche's work, where the Oratorian exposed quite fully the arguments made against his and the Cartesians' proofs. For a legion of Aristotelian professors, critics and authors, in countless courses, textbooks, expositions, treatises, censures, polemical brochures, and articles in the learned journals, the two proofs from the *Meditations* so ardently defended by the Cartesians were hopeless paralogisms. With subtle variations, Aristotelian (which included all Jesuit and Thomistic) critics insisted that both Cartesian proofs arbitrarily posited the essence of God in order to prove His existence, thereby assuming precisely what they were required to prove. The Cartesian proofs, they insisted, were proofs from cause, but by the Cartesians' own definitions, God could have no prior cause; the attempt to demonstrate a first cause *a priori* rather than to infer such a cause from known effects was an obvious absurdity. Most evident to the Aristotelians was that Descartes's proof from necessary existence simply presupposed the object of its demonstration, a necessarily existent being. Once known as perfect being from His effects, Aristotelians reasoned, God obviously was a being whose existence was necessary; this did not follow, however, from the mere name or definition of God. Aristotelians frequently denied the innateness of the idea of God, referring readers to a growing travel literature about supposedly atheistic peoples, but even if the idea of God were universal, they insisted, that did not prove that it was not a chimerical idea. As countless Aristotelians adamantly claimed, Descartes merely had demonstrated that "if" a perfect being existed, it would possess necessary existence; that was a logical world apart, they insisted, from demonstration that such a being existed. As Pierre-Daniel Huet phrased it in his *Censure* of Cartesian philosophy, Descartes had clarified an idea, but he had not succeeded in proving something about "beings-in-the-actual world" from his "being-in-the-mind." As for Descartes's proof from the perfection of the "objective being" of the idea of God, Aristotelians criticized it mercilessly as a self-contradictory causal sophistry masquerading as an *a priori* proof. Simply put, by Descartes's own terms, Aristotelians objected, an idea was a modification of a finite human mind, and such a modification obviously could not possess the perfection of God. Being finite, the human idea of God required merely a finite cause. Nothing finite could represent the infinite infinitely; nothing imperfect could represent perfection perfectly. As Huet put it, the supposed proof was a Cartesian "game" that was an object lesson in begging the question, since it presupposed its very conclusion, to wit, that the "object" of this idea was identical with the actual being represented."¹⁹ When Malebranche sought to "improve" the proof of the third Meditation by granting that no finite idea could represent perfection, and, thus, that what we termed "the idea of God" was in actuality direct apprehension of God Himself in God Himself, and, indeed, by arguing that God's infinity entailed precisely that God was "Being in general," Aristotelians (and, indeed, many

Cartesians) insisted that such a "correction" annihilated and atheistically naturalized the Divinity. For his critics, Malebranche, by saying that "God is not a this or a that," had denied the existence of a *particular* perfect and transcendent being and had equated God with whatever truth and nature human minds could perceive.²⁰ Gabriel Daniel, the superior of the Parisian Jesuits, warned Cartesians not to attack *a posteriori* proofs, since "if it were true that the other [Aristotelian] proofs were not more compelling in comparison to these [Cartesian] proofs, one would conclude from this exceptionally wicked consequences against the existence of the First Being."²¹

To say the least, however, Cartesians and Malebranchists did not refrain from two generations of systematic assault upon *a posteriori* proofs of God as perfect being. Given, on the whole, the British preference for variations of the argument from design, Hume devoted far more attention to *a posteriori* than to *a priori* proofs, so let us remain, now, focused upon prior criticism of these. At their most general, such assaults arose not only from standard Cartesian claims that the errant senses could not bring us to certainty, but, indeed, that logically, nothing infinite could be inferred from finite effects, nothing perfect inferred from imperfect effects, an argument obvious to the Cartesians that they reiterated constantly (and an argument, of course, not unfamiliar to readers of the *Dialogues*). Similarly, Cartesians insisted that at their best, *a posteriori* attempts to demonstrate God left one merely with probabilities, not with certainty. Further, Cartesians and Malebranchists insisted, if no human idea could represent perfection to us, as the Aristotelians claimed, then how could *a posteriori* philosophers possibly know if their inferred cause of the effects of the world were perfect or not, infinite or not; indeed, how could they even know what was entailed by such a distinction? The *a posteriori* seekers after knowledge of God might want to claim that the confusedly and partially known finite objects of imperfect human perception had some cause, but how, from such objects of knowledge, could they possibly infer the attributes of perfection in their cause? As Malebranche, whom Hume read, put it, if one could not know infinite perfection as infinite perfection, one could not even know what one was talking about when one said

God.... For otherwise, when you asked me if there is a God, or an infinite being, you would be putting a ridiculous question to me, by means of a proposition whose terms you would not understand. It would be as if you asked me, is there a "Blictri," that is, a something, without knowing what.²²

As the Cartesian metaphysician La Coudraye argued the point, to state that "God exists" as the conclusion of any *a posteriori* demonstration was to posit merely "a being," without knowledge of its essence or attributes; it was precisely that essence and those attributes, however, that constituted Divinity.

One simply could not infer perfection from the imperfections of the world.²³ For Arnauld and Nicole in the *Art de penser*, to which Hume refers in the *Treatise*, if we did not know God as perfect being prior to looking at the world, we had merely “these four letters, D, I, E, U.”²⁴ Opening Part IV of the *Dialogues*, of course, Cleanthes would reply to Demea about our idea of God:

But, if our ideas, so far as they go, be not just and adequate and correspondent to his real nature, I know not what there is in this subject worth insisting on. Is the name, without any meaning, of such mighty importance?

How, Cleanthes asked, could one distinguish such a position from atheism?²⁵

To argue the nullity of sensory knowledge in philosophical theology, Cartesians and Malebranchists insisted, in a multitude of works, that such knowledge could not establish the perfections of God—unity, incorporeality, efficacy as unmoved source of motion, and so on. When a philosophical theologian took both Aristotelian and Cartesian criticisms seriously, the result could be quite striking. Thus, the devout Nicolas L’Herminier, professor of theology at the Sorbonne, in his influential *Summa Theologiae* (1701–03, 2nd ed.), rejected the Cartesian proofs, teaching that the Aristotelians had demonstrated that they presupposed the very object of their conclusion. Turning to Aquinas’s Five Ways, however, he accepted Cartesian refutation of all but the fifth. No one denied, he asserted, that there was a necessary being, a first cause of motion, or a cause that actualized contingencies. Saint Thomas, however, wholly had begged the question of whether or not such entities had to be “a perfect being,” that is, God. (The proof from degrees of perfection, I should add, L’Herminier found question-begging and a projection of human experiences upon the world itself. He argued, as would Philo in Part II, that all “perfection” is relative). The atheist simply attributed such causal status to eternal, blind, necessary matter. Thomas’s first three proofs demonstrated nothing about *the nature* of such a cause. Only the proof from purposes and order, for L’Herminier, was conclusive, since it entailed providence, purpose, intelligence, benevolence, and will, attributes that could not be assigned to blind, corporeal agencies.²⁶ In the *Treatise* (I iv 5) Hume concluded, in a manner very close to L’Herminier, that a first cause of action could be taken possession of by “the atheists,” who would attribute it to “one simple universal substance, which exerts itself from a blind and absolute necessity.”²⁷ In Part iii, Section 14, however, Hume wrote about “the imperfection” of our “ideas of the Deity; but...[t]he order of the universe proves an omnipotent mind,” adding that “[n]othing more is requisite to give a foundation to all the articles of religion” (T 633n).

For the legion of Cartesians, however, it was outrageous to make teleological claims: how could fallen human senses understand the ways of God? The Benedictine philosopher Dom Robert Desgabets argued that claims of teleological knowledge from nature were a hubristic failure to understand even minimally the chasm between imperfect man and the perfection of God. With reference to all nature, he wrote: "We do not know the reasons that God proposed to Himself for acting, and that He keeps hidden in the secret of His Providence."²⁸

The arguments of Cleanthes, in the final analysis, were in the long tradition of classical and Christian proof of a wise and benevolent God from the order, regularity, beauty and purposes of nature. In early modern France, such a demonstration was most closely associated with Aquinas's "Fifth Way," and it indeed was receiving increasing reinforcement from the so-called scientific revolution and the new wave of physical theology. It simply was not the historical case, however, to say the least, that the argument from design or purpose was unchallenged, or that the main source of such a challenge was Epicurus awaiting Hume's Philo. How many of our current courses assume a triumphant natural theology, derived from the apparent data of purposeful natural order, requiring a British revival of skeptical argument for its *sed contra* objections? In fact, for two generations in France, Cartesians and Malebranchists had assailed all forms of the argument from design with verve, acute analysis, and the same emphasis upon the evidence of disorder and the apparent indifference to evil and pain that later would so occupy Philo. For the Cartesians and Malebranchists, it was not only that antifinalism in physics militated against proof *ex gubernatione rerum*, but (and much of the Cartesian-Jansenist affinity lies here) that God's Providence could only be deduced from prior knowledge of His perfection. For the Cartesians and Malebranchists, our sensual experience of the world taught nothing essential about God. Such knowledge only could be made manifest by God Himself, either by the innate idea of Him with which He had endowed us or by His revelation. Putative proof from supposed knowledge of God's order, purposes or contrivances was an intolerable human arrogance.

Malebranche, thus, writing to Leibniz to congratulate him on his *a priori* proof of Providence, cited the abyss of dangers attendant to any attempt to establish Providence *a posteriori*: "we are only too given to judging God by ourselves [our human standards], and to judging the plan of His work, although we know almost nothing of it." In such a state, Malebranche insisted, we drew analogies more appropriate to the relationships among men than to the relationship between perfect being and creature, thus exposing religious belief to all the claims against providence derived from our sad human experience of the world.²⁹ Indeed, in a sustained polemic with a Thomist critic, Malebranche even deduced the automatism of animals from *a priori* knowledge of God's goodness: otherwise, "animals suffer pain, each

more miserable than the other," despite the fact that "they never have sinned." If one had to proceed *a posteriori* from appearances, one would have to conclude that animals experienced pain and that "God is unjust," denying his nature as perfect being.³⁰

For Cartesians and Malebranchists, the easiest means of demonstrating the necessity of their own *a priori* method was to argue that sensory knowledge could not establish the very providence of God which the Aristotelians claimed as their strongest *a posteriori* proof of His existence. To make this argument most forcefully, they often insisted that unless *a priori* reason overpowered induction, the *last* thing one would infer from this sorry world was the intelligence or providence of its cause. Let me cite works that are representative of quite broad tendencies. In 1686, the Cartesian philosopher Pierre Villemandy argued that from the evidence of the world alone, one would *not* infer a *divine* cause of any kind.³¹ In 1696, the Benedictine Dom André Roze wrote that it was scandalous to infer God's perfection from a human judgment of the operations of the world, a world that for all we knew from sensory knowledge could have been infinitely more beautiful and ordered than this one.³² In 1704, the Carthusian monk and Cartesian philosopher, Alexis Gaudin, argued that only *a priori* certainty of God's goodness, power and intelligence could overcome the natural inferences one otherwise would draw from the apparent evils and imperfections of the universe.³³ In 1728, when the abbé Houtteville's *Essai philosophique sur la providence* had catalogued all of the empirically derived objections against the wisdom, intelligence, goodness and power of the cause of the world—dismissing these as irrelevant to the issue since such knowledge was deductible with certainty from the infinite perfection of God, its Jesuit reviewers commented in the *Journal de Trévoux* that "one sees...that the author has read Malebranche," and that he has established Descartes and Malebranche as "his authorities."³⁴ Well, Hume also had read Malebranche.

When, in Part X, Philo and Demea turn to the issue of human misery, suffering and fears, Philo concedes, which the anti-finalist Cartesians never would concede, that it had required "great subtilty" to elude the grasp of purely physical arguments. It was, above all, on the inability to infer the moral attributes of God from the human condition, he proclaimed, that he now felt "at ease" (DNR 202). It was not simply that Bayle had summarized in the *Dictionnaire*, among other places, so many similar arguments circulating in seventeenth century France, well known to readers of such articles as "Pyrrho," "Manicheans," or "Paulicians," for example. It was also that rationalist Cartesians highly critical of Bayle's skepticism had made, were making, and would make such arguments before, during and after Bayle's *flouraison*. In 1714, for example, the Cartesian rationalist Jacques Bernard, a harsh critic of Bayle's fideism, wrote, in his *De l'excellence de la religion*, that our *experience* of the world was one of endless confusion, suffering and

uncertainty. Just as the machines of imperfect and corporeal men "easily break down," so also in the machine of the world open to our gaze, "I see, every day, certain parts...that perish...[and] others that appear to me to leave their appropriate order and place." Bernard explained that "the more lights and knowledge I have, the more examples I see of this disarray." Sunspots made him fear that the sun would be extinguished, and all that he observed "terrifies me...thunder, lightning, storms, winds, tempests, excessive rains, excessive droughts, earthquakes, sterility, plague, war, and the malice of the wicked." "Every creature," he concluded, "can do me harm; how can I be reassured?" Fortunately, he urged, the truth of God's benevolent and wise providential nature did not depend upon our sad *experience* of the world, but followed from logical analysis of the nature of God known *a priori*. To emphasize the importance of such *a priori* certainty of God's nature, Bernard had argued forcefully that one simply could not discern in nature the wisdom, goodness or providence of the cause of the world.³⁵

For Aristotelian Jesuits as for British empiricists, that *a priori* argument seemed a sophistic paralogism that violated all the rules of sound philosophy. In France, thus, the enemies of Cartesians and Malebranchists felt free to label the implications of the rationalists' assaults upon *a posteriori* proofs of God's existence and providence "atheistic," without necessarily impugning the motives of the Christian philosophers and theologians who made them. In that sense, then, Hume might never have met an atheist, as he claimed at d'Holbach's home. Nonetheless, before he wrote the *Treatise*, let alone the *Dialogues*, he certainly had met, from Cleanthes's perspective, many an a-theistic argument.

One survivor of that French philosophical fratricide was Pierre-Daniel Huet, eventually bishop of Avranches. His first philosophical success was his often reprinted *Censura* of Cartesian philosophy, which, among other things, sought to discredit categorically, from the Aristotelian perspectives of the Jesuits to whom he was close, Descartes's proofs of God. He never abandoned that critical stance. In the course of his intellectual life, however, he became convinced by the Cartesians and Malebranchists that St. Thomas's proofs were equally inconclusive. As bishop Huet wrote in his *Traité philosophique de la foiblesse de l'esprit humain*, the work cited by Hume at the outset of the discussion of skepticism in the *Dialogues*, he was "profoundly shocked by these continual disputes of the philosophers," and he had found his peace in philosophical skepticism, and, from recognition of the weakness of the human mind, in faith as the source of all religious belief.³⁶ Surveying Aristotelian critiques of Cartesian *a priorism* and Cartesian critiques of Aristotelian sensationalism and induction, Huet declared the natural faculties incompetent to achieve "any knowledge of God and of things divine."³⁷ At their best, all human proofs were merely probable, and schools of philosophy, by claiming absolute certainty for demonstrations of God and His nature that

were all vulnerable, had done a disservice to the faith. Each school of philosophy, he proclaimed, had succeeded in putting the "first principles" of each other school into doubt. He concluded, however, that "Faith does not depend on first principles, but presupposes them as certain." That was the better route, he advised. Human belief required faith.³⁸

Huet's conclusions arose from the commonplace arguments of early modern French culture, and, whatever the use to which he would put those arguments (and those conclusions)—skeptical, naturalistic, common-sensical, or analytic—David Hume, I think, knew them well. He participated, in an attenuated, mitigated, and partial fashion to be sure, in the continental debates that preceded him.

NOTES

- 1 Alan Charles Kors, *Atheism in France, 1650–1729*, vol. I: *The Orthodox Sources of Disbelief* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 345 (emphasis added).
- 2 Kors, 356.
- 3 Ernest C. Mossner, "Hume's Early Memoranda, 1729–1740: The Complete Text," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 9 (1948): 492–518. See also Kors, 219–62.
- 4 Mossner.
- 5 Mossner.
- 6 Kors, 377–378 (and 377, n.74); Jean Meslier, *Oeuvres complètes de Jean Meslier*, edited by J. Deprun, R. Desné and A. Soboul, 3 vols. (Paris, 1970–1972), III, 207–352.
- 7 Pierre Bayle, *Theses philosophiques*, xii, in Bayle, *Oeuvres diverses*, 4 vols., 2nd ed. (The Hague [Trévoux], 1737), IV, 143.
- 8 Louis Ellies Du Pin, *Traité de la doctrine chrétienne et orthodoxe....* (Paris, 1703), 3–10, 552–56.
- 9 Pierre Barbay, *Commentarius in Aristotelis Metaphysicam*. 2nd ed. rev. (Paris, 1676), 24–29, 361–72.
- 10 François Feu, *Theologici Tractatus ex Sacris Codicibus, et Sanctorum Patrum Monumentis Excerpti*, 2 vols (Paris, 1692–95), I, 2.
- 11 Jean de Silhon, *De la certitude des connoissances humaines* (Paris, 1661), 6–7, 60–68, 546–54.
- 12 Dom Robert Desgabets, O.S.B., *Critique de la Critique de la Recherche de la vérité....Pour servir de réponse à la Lettre d'un académicien* (Paris, 1675), 7–11, 57–71.
- 13 Dom François Lamy, O.S.B., *Le nouvel athéisme renversé, ou réfutation du système de Spinoza....* (Paris, 1696), 5–8.
- 14 Lamy, *Le nouvel athéisme renversé*, following the "Avertissement."
- 15 Lamy, *Les premiers élémens des sciences....* (Paris, 1706), 68–94.
- 16 Nicolas Malebranche, Oratoire, *Conversations chrétiennes* [1677], in *Oeuvres complètes de Malebranche*, edited by André Robinet, 21 vols. (Paris, 1958–1970), IV, 14.
- 17 *Journal de Trévoux* (janvier 1727): 36–62; see especially 53–54.
- 18 Bayle, *Dictionnaire historique et critique*, 4th ed. rev., corr., and aug. 4 vols. (Amsterdam, 1730), "Zabarella," Remarque G.
- 19 Pierre–Daniel Huet, bishop designate, *Censura Philosophiae Cartesianae* (Paris, 1689), 104–36.
- 20 Kors, 359–67.
- 21 Gabriel Daniel, S.J., *Voyage du Monde de Descartes* (Paris, 1691), 174–75.
- 22 Malebranche, *Entretiens sur la métaphysique et sur la religion* [1688], in *Oeuvres complètes*, II, 371–72.
- 23 Denis de Sallo, sieur de La Coudraye, *Traité de métaphysique démontrée selon*

la méthode des géomètres (Paris, 1693), "Préface" [unpaginated: xxii–xxvii].

24 Antoine Arnauld and Pierre Nicole, *La logique, ou l'Art de penser....* critical edition edited by Pierre Clair and François Girbal (Paris, 1965 [based on 5th ed., Paris, 1683]), 41.

25 David Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, edited by Norman Kemp Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1935), Part IV, 158; hereafter cited in the text as DNR.

26 Nicolas L'Herminier, *Summa Theologiae ad usum scholae accommodata*, 3 vols. (Paris, 1701–1703), I, 24–63.

27 David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, edited by L.A. Selby-Bigge, 2nd ed. revised by P.H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon, 1978), 246.

29 Dom Robert Desgabets, O.S.B., "Supplément à la philosophie de M. Descartes," published in Paul Le Maire, *Le Cartésianisme chez les Bénédictins. Dom Robert Desgabets: son système, son influence et son école, d'après plusieurs manuscrits et des documents rares ou inédits* (Paris, 1902), 208.

30 Malebranche, *Oeuvres complètes*, XIX, 813.

31 Malebranche, *Oeuvres complètes*, XVIII pt. 1, 513–18, in the *Défense...contre l'accusation de Monsr. De la Ville...* [1682].

32 Pierre Villemandy, *Traité de l'efficace des causes secondes, contre quelques philosophes modernes...* (Leiden, 1686), 4–5.

33 Dom André Roze, O.S.B., *Nouveau système par pensées sur l'ordre de la nature* (Paris, 1696), "Avertissement" and 20–21.

34 Alexis Gaudin, Carthusian, *La distinction et la nature du bien et du mal...* (Paris, 1704), "Préface" and passim.

35 Abbé Claude-François Houtteville, *Essai philosophique sur la providence* (Paris, 1728), 47–149; *Journal de Trévoux* (août 1728): 1505–30.

37 Jacques Bernard, *De l'excellence de la religion*, 2 vols. (Amsterdam, 1714), I, 94–100.

38 Pierre-Daniel Huet, bishop d'Avranches, *Traité philosophique de la foiblesse de l'esprit humain* (London, 1741 [first published, posthumously, in Latin, Amsterdam, 1723]), 1–10.

39 Huet, passim; the quotation about "things divine" is found on 211.

40 Huet, 275–90.